



Closure

S. H. Allan



A LOVE HAS NO BOUNDARIES NOVELLA

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Love Has No Boundaries

An M/M Romance series

CLOSURE

By S. H. Allan

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 nude men sit on the floor. The larger one has his arms and knees around the other, his cheek pressed to the side of the other man's head. The smaller man's face is buried against the first man's chest. He's curled into a ball, shoulders hunched like he's hurting badly. One hand touches the larger man's side, as if he's trying to grasp hold but can't pull away from the pain that fills him.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

“It's okay.” He whispered to me, his words were said from the heart but they did little to ease my racing heart and mind. God I love this man so much and one of the few people who didn't understand is gone now, we'll never get to settle the argument that pushed us apart.

“No, it's not okay. He was one of the most understanding people in my life and yet he couldn't understand... couldn't approve of us, he's no longer here and yet he's still making me second guess everything I feel for you.”

If possible he held me closer and the warmth and comfort I received from his embrace was immeasurable and his voice when he spoke held more than just understanding it held love, “that doesn't mean you shouldn't say goodbye to him, I know you don't believe it but he loved you Derrick and I'm certain he wanted you to be happy. Tell him what you couldn't before I know he'll hear you and he'll understand trust me, know right now Derrick that I'll be with you every step of the way I'll always be here for you.

I rested my head against his chest and let the tears flow, what he said rang true but how can I make peace with who almost cost me the one I love the most?

I hope after this difficult moment in Derrick's life that there will be a HEA or HFN, a little flashback describing the difficult event that leads to this comforting moment would be nice if it's not too problematic to handle and also I wouldn't mind a couple of steamy yet romantic scenes between Derrick and his understanding and sweet lover.

I also wouldn't mind a few scenes here and there that go into how this wonderful couple came to be as strong and close as they seem to be in this photo. Oh and a few notes, contemporary romance please, no BDSM the photo doesn't really convey this to me anyway, and the guy on the right should be Derrick the one dealing the upsetting issue oh and he doesn't have to be Derrick I just liked the name and it popped into my head while I was writing the prompt.

There's a beautiful story waiting to be told here and I know someone in this wonderful group can do it justice.

Thanks so much!

Warm regards,

Gabrielle

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: law enforcement (corrections), dogs, grief, hurt/comfort, interracial, switch or versatile, occasional humor amid a lot of crying, PTSD

Content warnings: explicit sex

Word count: 56,856

Dedication

To S. H., who was so much greater than he ever believed. I wish he could see the beautiful mark he left on me and the world. And to C. C. whose dedication and contributions toward improving the lives of children in foster care in Washington state touched so many lives. Both of you were incredible people—your legacies will live on—and I am privileged to have known you.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to Allison, my beta reader, and my sister Renee, for keeping me from internally combusting. This story would never have been published if it weren't for you. I'm grateful to Gabrielle for creating this wonderful prompt. And of course, thank you to the M/M Romance group for giving me this opportunity, and the crew that worked so hard on the LHNB project. I couldn't be more appreciative.

Author's Note

The huge flag described in this story really existed. It hung on the side of [Prince of Peace Lutheran Church](#) in Shoreline, Washington for at least a year. Although I apparently grossly exaggerated it in my mind, it was still impressive at around ten feet high, and driving down that very busy road, impossible to miss.

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CHAPTER 1

Now: Nigel

Nigel walks into the condo in good spirits. His day has gone well; all but two of the latest group of young adults finished the program, and he's had another success story—a young woman who started the program two years ago just started her first semester of college. Derrick is sitting at the kitchen table, staring at the phone in his hand, most likely texting another kid on his caseload. Nigel grins and deposits his things in a nearby chair before kissing his boyfriend on the top of his head.

“Today was so fantastic, I want to celebrate by taking you out to dinner, anywhere you want to go.” Nigel grabs a glass from a cabinet and fills it with ice and cold water from the dispenser in the refrigerator door. “Mercedes finished her second week at the UW and got a three point nine on her first test. We both knew she was smart and had it in her. Damn, Dare, you got through to another kid. I think they're going to have to put you in some kind of hall of fame. The program is great but getting the kids to participate and finish? I swear you're a freaking miracle worker.”

He takes a big drink from his glass. Derrick hasn't said anything yet, and Nigel mentally whacks himself in the head. “I am such an ass, I didn't even ask about your day. How was your meeting with Dante? Did he show up this time?”

Derrick remains silent and still.

“Sorry, rough day?” Nigel walks over, puts his hands on his lover's shoulders, and leans down to kiss him. He realizes Derrick is shaking. “Dare? What's wrong?” He moves to the side and leans around so he can see his boyfriend's face. “Derrick? Talk to me. What happened?” Derrick's face is blank. His eyes stare at the table, not acknowledging Nigel. “Oh my God,

what's going on?" Worried, Nigel tries to pull his boyfriend into a hug but is met with resistance. Derrick hands him the phone, otherwise not moving.

Nigel takes the device, and after another glance at Derrick's face, looks at the screen where there is a text from Derrick's foster sister, Marisol. "*DAD'S DEAD!!! STOP BEING A DICK AND GET YOUR ASS HOME NOW!!!!*" Nigel looks back at his boyfriend in horror. Not again, oh fuck, not again. "Oh, God, I'm so sorry!" He reaches for Derrick but his lover evades him and stands.

Derrick heads for the living room and Nigel quickly follows. "He's dead, Nigh. He's dead. I killed him." Derrick's voice is flat.

Nigel's chest constricts. How could Derrick think that? He reaches for his lover again. "No Dare, no. It's been over a year. However he died, it's not your fault."

Derrick's face is still stony. He moves stiffly but still eludes Nigel's grasp and walks toward the fireplace where he stares at a picture of his family that sits on the mantel. He repeats, "He's dead. I killed him."

At the words, Nigel's heart stutters. It's painful to see his love hurting. He moves closer and this time is able to grab Derrick's arms. He's still trembling. Nigel envelops him with his arms and holds tightly. "No. No you didn't. You did nothing wrong." He wants to take away the pain and sorrow but is helpless. "I'm so sorry. How can I help?" Derrick continues to shiver, otherwise not moving. The shaking is worsening.

Nigel is worried that Derrick isn't showing any emotion. He rocks his boyfriend as he rubs his back and shoulders. "Dare? It isn't your fault. We'll get through this."

Derrick's teeth are starting to chatter and his breathing is fast and shallow. Nigel realizes his boyfriend is in shock, and his first aid training kicks in. Thank Congress for the laws that require just about anyone working with kids in Washington state to have a valid First Aid and CPR card. "Dare, I need you to lie down." Derrick doesn't resist as he is lowered to the couch. Nigel swings his lover's legs up and puts a thick cushion underneath his feet. He covers Derrick with a warm lap blanket he retrieves from a chest near the window,

then leans down and brushes the hair out of his boyfriend's oblivious eyes. "Wait here. Try to take deep breaths, okay?"

Nigel doesn't wait for an answer, instead hurrying into the bathroom where he runs steaming hot water into the oversize tub, a feature that contributed to his decision to buy the condo. He pours some scented oil in, hoping the soothing aroma will help Derrick relax. After setting out a couple of soft towels, he lets the tub fill and returns to the sofa in the living room. He crouches beside it and tenderly brushes Derrick's cheek. His face is cold and clammy but his teeth have stopped chattering.

"Dare, please look at me." There's no reaction. It's as if his lover is in a trance. "Dare, I need you to look at me." No response. Derrick suffers from PTSD—many who grow up in foster care do—and Nigel has no idea how that's affected by shock. He hardens his voice and raises it a little bit. "Derrick. You're scaring me. I need you to look at me or I'm going to call 911." At first there's no response, but then Derrick's dull eyes slowly move until he's looking at Nigel. There's very little recognition, but it's there nevertheless. Nigel lets out the breath he's been holding. He strokes Derrick's cheek. It's killing him to see his lover like this.

"Dare, please stay with me, all right? I know this is hard, but I'm here. It's just us; you don't have to worry about anything or anyone." Nigel leans in and gently touches his lips to Derrick's. "I love you. You're alive and I love you, and that's all that matters right now, okay?" The emotion when it comes, breaks Nigel's heart. Grief and regret pour into Derrick's features and his face crumples. The sorrow etched there cuts Nigel to his core. He pulls Derrick into his arms. "We'll get through this. Together," he whispers into his ear. Nigel doesn't say it's going to be okay because it won't, not really, certainly not for a very long time. The assertion would sound hollow now anyway. Instead, he again kisses this man he adores before leaving to check the bathwater.

The tub is over half full, and the water just under scalding. Nigel moves back to the living area and pulls the blankets off Derrick, who is stoic and emotionless once more. "Come on, I've run a bath." He helps his lover to his feet. There isn't any resistance when Nigel leads Derrick to the tub and removes their clothes; his boyfriend just stands numbly, seemingly oblivious

to his surroundings. Nigel carefully helps him into the water and lowers himself in behind his lover.

He wraps his arms around Derrick and leans back as the displaced water rises and submerses them. He turns off the tap with his toes. The scent of jasmine and sandalwood fills the steamy air. In his arms, Derrick's shivering slows as he warms up, and he soon stills. Nigel gently rubs his lover's chest, shoulders, arms, belly. Silky black hair tickles his nose as he nuzzles Derrick's neck and leaves a trail of kisses along his jaw. Slowly Derrick's body relaxes in his arms. Internally he is clearly still struggling, so Nigel doesn't try to talk; he just lets calm wash over them both. Derrick will get through this. Nigel will do everything he can to help the love of his life, and together, they will get through this.

Then: Nigel

Nigel leaned out of his office doorway. "Danica, I can't find any packets. Do we have any left?"

The young woman poked her head out of the cubicle outside his door. "You're just checking now? The kid's supposed to be here any minute."

"I know, I know. Just, are there any left?"

She sighed. "There's a stack of them on the bookshelf right next to you."

He looked over his shoulder at the stack of blue folders. "Oh. Whoops. Do you have the girl's application?"

Danica sighed again and looked at him. "Have you even read it?"

"Well, I meant to... Kidding!" Her look of horror had him ending the joke earlier than planned. "Yes, I read it yesterday, but I can't find it."

His assistant shook her head and stood up, bumping him purposely as she pushed past him. "Have you looked in the inbox on your desk?"

"That's the first place I tried." He was embarrassed that he'd lost the file and fought the urge to grouch.

The two spent a couple of minutes searching his office again until Danica called, “Aha!” holding the file above her head.

Relief flooded him; he would have been mortified to not have it fresh in his mind at the meeting. “Where was it?”

“Wedged between the couch arm and the cushion.” She looked annoyed. He winced.

“Sorry. I read it over there and must have forgotten to put it back on my desk.”

His assistant just shook her head and headed for the door.

“What am I going to do without you?”

“I haven’t gotten the job yet.”

Nigel laughed. “You think my sister won’t jump at the chance to steal you from me? She’s not stupid.”

Worry lines creased Danica’s face when she turned. “Program Manager is quite a step up from Program Assistant. I’m skipping the Program Specialist level entirely.”

Nigel smiled affectionately. “I brag about you practically every time we have a ‘power lunch’. She already knows you’re amazing. Besides, sibling rivalry and all.” He grinned.

“You two adore each other. You’re all one big happy annoying family and it makes me sick. You all irritate the hell out of me.” She was trying to hide a smile.

He smirked. “You wanted to work here. ‘Family foundation’ means a family runs it. I can’t help it if we’re all irresistible.”

Danica rolled her eyes. “You’re something all right.” The intercom on Nigel’s phone buzzed. “They’re here. I’ll go get them.” He thanked her retreating back.

A few minutes later, there was a knock on the door jamb. He looked up from the desk, which he’d been leaning on while updating himself on the girl’s file, and almost gasped. Standing there was the most gorgeous man he’d ever

seen. Bright blue-green hazel eyes and a cocky smile lit up a face of mixed heritage. The man was fairly short and small framed, well proportioned, and he looked to be toned and fit. A stylish but businesslike jacket paired with fitted jeans gave him a rakish look.

Nigel forced himself to stop staring and tried to regain his composure. “Come in, come in!” He finally noticed the teenager by the guy’s side. “You must be Mercedes.”

The girl looked unimpressed. “Uh huh. Who are you?”

Fair question. Usually he offered his name first. The hot guy was seriously affecting his cool. Cool was critical when working with teens. “I’m Gelly. Gelly Rutherford.”

The girl’s eyebrows rose and she blinked. Then she pursed her lips and looked skeptical. “Jelly? Seriously?” He nodded. She moved her head to one side and looked him up and down. “Damn white people and their stupid names.” Nigel laughed.

The handsome man laughed, too. “I’m Derrick Cole, Mercedes’s probation officer. Jelly? Really?” When Nigel nodded again, he said, “I’m so not calling you that.” Nigel felt his brows lift in surprise. “That’s mashed up fruit.”

Nigel considered it to be rather appropriate, actually, even if the spelling was wrong. Some days he did feel “mashed up,” and he certainly was a fruit. He smiled inwardly.

“What’s it short for?” Derrick continued.

“Nigel.”

“I’m not calling you that, either.” Derrick’s grin was infectious, and Nigel found it impossible to be offended, especially when he continued, “You are way too cool for that name.”

He thinks I’m cool? Nigel felt his heart skip a beat. Something sparked in him that he hadn’t felt in a long time. It was like he was in middle school and having his first big crush. Despite his embarrassment, he found himself smiling. “Well, what do you propose?”

Derrick narrowed his beautiful eyes and examined Nigel appraisingly, tapping his finger against his lips—his full, soft, incredibly kissable lips.

Mercedes impatiently stepped in. “Call him by his last name. Rutherford, you said, right? Old guys use last names like first names so he’s Rutherford. Hey, isn’t that the name of this place? What are you, like, the owner?”

Very observant of her, although he wasn’t old yet and wanted to protest that point. “Rutherford is right, but I’m not the owner. The foundation belongs to my parents.”

“So you’re rich.” Her disgust was apparent on her face. Damn, he was losing her already. She, for one, didn’t think he was cool. He had to get his head back on straight and stop drooling over the very hot guy standing only a few feet away.

“Well, my parents are.” He had to steer this conversation away from their differences. “Here, let’s sit down.” He gestured toward the sitting area. He sank into one of the armchairs and the other two sat on the sofa. Nigel had placed the packet folders on the coffee table and handed one to each of them now.

Mercedes took it carelessly and tossed it back on the table. Nigel studied her. According to her application, she was sixteen and had been in and out of juvenile detention several times now, with a string of convictions in her file. She was usually arrested for solicitation or petty theft, but so far, she had never tested positive for drugs at booking. With the lifestyle she led, though, it was almost inevitable that drug abuse would eventually become an issue.

Nigel felt a familiar roiling in his gut picturing this fresh faced, sharp girl ruined by a life on the streets. Kids like her were why he created this program, and why he wanted it to work. The foundation was established to fight poverty, homelessness, and hunger as much through prevention and education as possible. His focus was on stopping youth from continuing on a downward spiral and help them set and achieve their own goals. So far he wasn’t helping this one at all. Time to change that.

“So, Mercedes, how much do you know about the program?”

She shrugged and rolled her pretty brown eyes then stuck her jaw out as she sagged back into the cushions. Then she sighed loudly and pretended to study her long, enameled acrylic nails, a look of boredom on her face. Suddenly, Derrick emitted an even louder sigh and flopped back on the couch, arms and legs sprawled. He sighed again and rolled his eyes exaggeratedly. The behavior looked silly on the skinny, brown skinned teenage girl. It was downright ridiculous on a built white guy who was probably nearing thirty years old.

The girl glanced at him out of the corner of her eye then took a deep breath like she was fortifying herself and sat up straighter. She crossed her legs, folded her hands in her lap, and managed a rather sweet smile. Derrick then sat up, too. He grinned.

Unsure of what he had just witnessed, Nigel ignored it and forged ahead. "I don't want to waste your time going over stuff you already know. Help me out here?" He gave her a goofy grin, hoping to look harmless.

The girl's body language may have changed but her attitude hadn't. "I read that lame brochure Mr. Derrick gave me." Mr. Derrick. Interesting. "It didn't say nothing. Just some lame-ass pictures of dogs and freaks. So you're like, gonna 'save' me by making me train some stupid dog?" She used air quotes when she said the word "save."

"If it sounds lame, why are you here?" The question was sincere, and he made sure it sounded that way. The kids were supposed to fill out the application themselves, without assistance. Their doing so helped him get to know them through their own words while making sure they really wanted to participate. Had Derrick forced her into this?

She rolled her eyes again. "I gotta do some kind of fucking community service. This sounded easier than the other shit Mr. Derrick told me about." She grunted and bobbed her head to the side and back again. Nigel half expected her to snap her fingers and say, "Mm-hmm," like some gangbanger in a late night comedy sketch.

Derrick leapt into action again. He groaned loudly and rolled his eyes again. "Oh my GOD, I'm such a hard-ass!" He pursed his lips. "I *forced* her to

choose something to do so she wouldn't go to jail again. It's so unfair! Expletive, expletive!" He moved with exaggerated motions, bobbing his own head side to side to the point that it looked like he might strain his neck. "It's all my fault. I telepathically *made* her stand on that street corner and ask that cop if he wanted a quickie." Derrick looked at the girl. "I would tell her how to answer your question properly but Mercedes does *not* like to be told what to do, mmm-hm." His lips were pursed as he shook his head then bobbed it some more.

Mercedes growled, but she stopped rolling her eyes and bobbing her head. When she next spoke, it was politely if a bit clipped. "I gotta do community service because I got arrested. I ain't sitting in no jail again. Mr. Derrick told me about this program, and it sounded kinda cool. It'd be fun to work with dogs. I'm good with animals." She shrugged. "I kinda always wanted to do something like that." As if she had read Nigel's mind, she added, "I really do want to do this. Mr. Derrick didn't tell me what to write." She looked at her hands in her lap and again feigned interest in one of her nails. She picked at a rhinestone stuck to the abstract design. "I worked real hard on it. I don't write so good."

Nigel was speechless for a moment. What the hell was Derrick's deal with mocking her? And why did it work? He pushed that thought aside for a moment. "Your answers were really good, Mercedes. That's why I chose to talk to you. We have many more applicants than we can take. We only choose those who really want to be part of this and who like dogs."

"I love dogs," she said quickly and with more enthusiasm than he had seen since she had arrived.

He smiled. "Tibbs, come," he called. A moment later, a large yellow lab mix trotted over and sat at his side, tongue lolling in a big grin. Nigel noted the shocked looks on his guests' faces. "Meet Delbert Tibbs."

"Where the hell did he come from?" demanded Mercedes. She was already reaching a hand out to the dog.

“He’s well trained. He was waiting quietly on his bed behind the desk until we were ready for him. If you work hard, the dog you train may one day be as well behaved as Tibbs here.”

Mercedes beckoned the mixed breed. Tibbs looked at Nigel, and when he gave the release gesture, the animal trotted over to sit by the girl. Nigel noted that Mercedes held the back of her hand out loosely for the dog to sniff before scratching his neck. Excellent. Nigel knew she was the right choice. “You get to have your dog at work?” she asked.

“That’s one of the advantages of working for Mom and Dad.” He smiled. “He’s essential to the program. He helps me decide who would be a good fit, and he’s a great judge of character. He likes you.” Mercedes’s fingers rubbed and scratched Tibbs’s chest when he rolled over on his back. “He also gets spoiled rotten by everyone who works here. He’s usually sniffing around the employee lounge hoping for a treat. I’m making him work today.”

“Tough job.” Her tone was sarcastic but she had only adoration in her eyes and hands as she played with the dog.

Derrick had been watching Mercedes. Now he turned to Nigel, a twinkle in his eye. “She’s really a softie at heart. Doesn’t want anyone to know she’s a good kid,” he said in a stage whisper.

Mercedes glared at him before looking at Nigel. “Yeah, well, he’s a fag, and he doesn’t want anyone to know that he’s really a hard-ass.” Her tone was meant to irritate, not judge. It was clear she respected the officer.

Nigel couldn’t suppress his grin. Derrick definitely had a fine hard ass. “That’s okay, I’m one, too, although I don’t know about the hard-ass part.” He watched Derrick’s face for a reaction and he got one. His easy smile turned sly and his eyes narrowed the tiniest bit. Oh God, could this beautiful stud of a man be attracted to him, too? How likely was that?

“Oh yeah? Bet on it.” He wasn’t sure if Derrick was referring to Nigel’s ass literally being hard or if he were trying to let Nigel know he was interested. Either was fine with Nigel. Or maybe he was just being sarcastic. “Tibbs? Like the song?” Derrick’s words pulled Nigel’s thoughts back out of the gutter.

“You know it?”

“Yeah. Who was it? Woody Guthrie? No, wait, Pete Seeger.” Derrick looked at Nigel with a soft smile. “My father listens to folk music sometimes, among other things. He has eclectic taste. I learned to appreciate a lot of different music because of him. Did you choose the name because of the death row reprieve?”

“Yes. Tibbs was a rescue from a high-kill shelter in Wenatchee where he had only a few hours left. I was looking for a dog to train as a service animal. He almost completed the training but was rejected near the end due to some minor health issues that have since been resolved. The health requirements for a service dog are very strict, and he could potentially have the same problem again. The agency offered him to me, and I jumped at the chance. Anyway, I wanted an apt name, and the song just jumped into my head. My parents were hippie wannabes. I grew up on that stuff.” And just like that there was a connection more than physical between them. They held each other’s eyes for a moment longer than men usually looked at each other.

Then Derrick cleared his throat and grinned again. “Your hippie parents named you Nigel?”

Nigel nodded his head, laughing. “Hippie wannabes remember? It’s a family name. They thought it sounded unique and went with it. I’ve been saddled with it my whole life. They were the ones who first started calling me Gelly. They thought it was cute. I’m just glad they didn’t name me after my dad. I would have been Egbert Buford Norbert Rutherford the third.”

“You’re making that up,” Mercedes cut in.

“No, I swear. Both my dad and granddad suffer with that name. Gelly is much better. One of the kids told me I sound badass.”

Derrick and Mercedes both burst out laughing. “No way.” “They was playing you.” They spoke simultaneously.

“Oh. Well, then I’ll stick with Nigel for now.”

Derrick was shaking his head. “Well that’s not great but the nickname is ridiculous. We have to work on that. We’ll come up with something.”

Nigel felt his throat constrict. *We? There was a “we”?* Time to change subjects. “So, Mercedes, tell me more about yourself. What do you want to be doing a year from now?”

The conversation moved on to safer topics. Mercedes told them about wanting to go to college. No one in her family had ever even graduated from high school. She talked about growing up in a seedy suburb south of Seattle, the crappy neighborhood filled with drugs and violence. Sexual abuse and maltreatment were alluded to but she didn’t go into detail. Instead, she praised her mother for sticking by her.

Mercedes also talked about her dream to become a veterinarian but said she knew she was stupid and that kids like her “didn’t go nowhere”; all that she could hope for was to find a good man to take care of her. Nigel had to suppress his anger and despair at what this bright teenager had been led to believe was her lot. From everything he saw and heard from her, she was a strong, intelligent young woman who didn’t need anyone to take care of her, as if any healthy grown woman did.

He and Derrick tried to reassure her that she was smart, and that anything was possible for someone who really wanted it. Nigel explained that Delbert Tibbs was an African American who was wrongly convicted of rape and murder. The all-white jury had sentenced him, and he sat on death row until finally he was exonerated after the key witness in the trial recanted and it came out that Tibbs’s alibi had been ignored. Tibbs went on to be a poet and a civil rights activist.

“See, people can be in the lowest of places and come out on top,” he finished.

“But he was innocent. It’s not like he really did anything wrong.”

“Sure, but sometimes being in jail changes a person. Sometimes it messes with his or her self-esteem. Sometimes it makes a person think that jail is where he, *or she*, belongs, whether the person was innocent, doing something really bad, or just making *really poor choices*.” Nigel glanced at Derrick who was watching the girl, a finger rubbing his lip. Nigel had to fight the urge to

jump over the table and suck that lip between his own. He turned back to Mercedes.

“I think you are a perfect fit for this program. The rest of the youth come from very similar situations. They have all been in juvie, none have any support in the community, and all have either dropped out of school or are failing. All of them want something better for themselves and are willing to work hard to get it. So what do you think?” The “work hard” part was key.

“What would I have to do?”

“You need to show up at French Lake Dog Park in Federal Way before three PM, Monday through Thursday, rain or shine. We’ll go by the Federal Way School District schedule if it snows.”

“I ain’t going out in no snow.” Mercedes raised one eyebrow at him as if she thought he was deficient. Both men laughed at that. Schools usually closed down if there was even a hint of white in the air, so it was unlikely that she would have to go out in it. The area was too hilly and too unused to snow for the cities to handle freezing temperatures and make it safe.

“On days it doesn’t snow, we’ll keep you busy until six, but you’ll have a short break in the middle during which we provide snacks and water.” Sometimes it was the only meal the kids got in a day, so the snacks were more like full meals. “You’ll be assigned a dog who will be counting on you to show up every day. As long as you arrive on time and participate, you’ll get community service credit.

“You are committing to complete the program, even if it goes longer than the community service hours you owe. If you do, you’ll get a gift card for a grocery store, and you will be eligible for one of our teaching assistant scholarships.” The goal was for the kids to use the cards for something they needed. In reality, most of them sold the cards for cash. “That means you would come back for the next session and work with the dogs whose trainers don’t show up or drop out. You would be paid for this, with half the money put into a fund to go toward educational costs. For instance, we would help pay for GED classes or materials for school, or you could save the money for college or a trade program.”

Mercedes affected a noncommittal look but her eyes were flashing. “Every day?”

“Every weekday except Fridays. The specifics are in the packet.” Nigel pointed to the folder in front of her. “I think you would be a great asset to the program. Are you interested?”

“What do you think, Mercedes?” Derrick asked. “It sounds kind of fun to me.” He turned back to Nigel. “Looking for instructors?” He pretended to be hopeful.

Nigel shook his head, feigning regret. Secretly he really was sorry because he would love to see this man every day. He usually only went once a week, but he could make an adjustment to his schedule for the right reason... or the right person.

“How would I get there? I live in Kent.” Mercedes looked worried now, like transportation was a major issue.

Nigel reassured her. “We provide bus tickets, and we have a shuttle leaving Kent Station at two thirty each day of the program. All you’ve got to do is show up.” He waited while she pretended to make up her mind. Looking too eager would make her vulnerable, but he knew he had her hooked.

She shrugged and continued to focus on Tibbs. “Yeah, I guess. Sounds okay.” She finally looked up. “When do I start?”

Nigel resisted an urge to jump up and shout, “Yes!” Instead, he pointed the girl to the schedule glued inside the folder and the bus ticket in the pocket. “You get two additional bus tickets at the end of each session, one to go home and one to come back. If you take the shuttle, you still get them in case you are coming from someplace else, but you only have two at a time. You only get new ones when you’ve used up the ones you have.” He went through a few more things she needed to know, such as what to wear.

When he was finished, she said she needed to use the bathroom. He called Danica in and asked her to accompany the girl. Trust was always an issue, and it went both ways. Mercedes hadn’t earned his yet. He had faith she would, but it would take time. When she was out of earshot, he turned to find Derrick

staring at his chest. “Uh...” He stumbled over his words as he felt a thrill run through him. “So what’s with the mocking?”

Derrick looked up and he looked embarrassed, probably at being caught ogling Nigel’s body. Nigel hadn’t minded at all, and his pants were getting a little crowded. “Oh, that. Well, for some kids it works really well. When they’re being inappropriate, I remind them by showing them how ridiculous they look. Well, and then some. Most of the kids get attitude when I just tell them their behavior isn’t okay. It makes me another antagonistic authority figure. If I let it slide, then I’m just being one of their friends. Neither is appropriate. I’m a support, I’m here to help, but I am not their friend. They need to learn that sometimes the people in charge are really there to help. For some kids, the mocking works. It’s not the most mature way to do it, but it’s damn funny, if I say so myself.” Derrick smirked.

Nigel couldn’t help smiling back. Derrick’s grins were infectious. “What if it doesn’t work?”

“Well, hopefully I don’t get beaten up.”

“Has that happened?” Nigel was shocked and somewhat distressed at the thought. What was that about?

“Not yet. I keep waiting. Some would say I have it coming.” His grin was somewhat crooked, and Nigel thought it was totally hot. “Assuming I’m still in one piece, I resort to guilt trips, blackmail, bribes—all the mature grownup things.”

“Does your boss know about this behavior?” Nigel asked with mock disapproval.

Derrick shrugged. “She cares about my success. I’ve currently got the lowest recidivism rate of all the juvenile probation officers in the greater Seattle area. I’ve got the second lowest of all P.O.s.” He put his hand on his hip, stuck his jaw up and out, and turned to a semi-profile position. “I am Juvie Man,” he said in a deep voice. He held the pose for a good ten seconds before Nigel couldn’t help it anymore and burst out laughing. Derrick joined in.

Then he dropped the act. “Sorry for bragging. But seriously, I’ll do anything that’s not unethical to get through to these kids. Most of them just need someone to believe in them and an opportunity to believe in themselves.” Derrick stepped closer. “I think your program is just the kind of opportunity these kids need.”

Nigel felt himself being sucked into those sexy eyes. “I hope so. I believe in opportunities.” He said the last sentence softly but his heart beat loudly in his ears. They held each other’s gaze for a long moment. Derrick opened his mouth but they were interrupted by Mercedes. *Damn*. He wondered what Derrick had been about to say.

“Mr. Derrick! You gotta see their bathrooms! It’s like the Taj Mahal or something.” Mercedes face was flushed with excitement.

Derrick turned to her so his face was in profile. Even his ears were sexy. “Well, I hope not since the Taj Mahal is a crypt and doesn’t have toilets. But there are some beautiful restrooms in India. There’s one in The Imperial New Delhi Hotel where each stall is a separate room, and there are attendants who will go so far as to squirt scented soap into your hands and give you a heated wash cloth.” Nigel had been places in the US that did the same thing, but the foreign location made Derrick’s story more grand and exotic.

“There’s marble everywhere, and everything is gleaming. As a backpacker, I felt a little out of place. I am pretty sure it was obvious that I was just eating at the historic restaurant and not actually staying at the hotel.” As he continued his story, Derrick moved to meet Mercedes at the door and handed her one of the packets.

The girl listened wide-eyed as Derrick recounted his tale. Nigel was just as enchanted. This man was a world traveler, too? What other surprises did he have? Just outside the door, Derrick stopped for a moment and looked back at Nigel. “Thank you. I have another kid on my caseload who might be a good fit. If it’s not too late, I’ll submit the application.” Derrick looked expectant and maybe a little hopeful.

Nigel nodded. He’d make a space if it meant he could see this electrifying man again. “It’s not too late. It’s never too late.”

Derrick seemed to catch the implication and nodded, a small, almost bashful smile on his face. “No it isn’t, is it?” He turned and walked out the door.

No, Nigel thought. *It’s never too late*. He had hit the big three-oh but it wasn’t too late to find Mr. Right. He knew he was being stupid, and there was no rational reason to think it might be Derrick—he barely knew the guy, and he didn’t believe in love at first sight—but maybe he would get a chance to see him again, date him, maybe more. He would find the man to love the rest of his life, he would. And who knew, maybe Derrick, this guy with the beautiful eyes, was the one.

Belatedly he realized that Derrick had never told Nigel what his new nickname would be. He wanted to run after them and ask Derrick what he should be called since Gelly was too stupid and Nigel too uncool. It was suddenly the most important question he’d ever had. He hoped he would have the chance to ask it.

CHAPTER 2

Now: Nigel

The water is cooling. Nigel turns Derrick's head gently and kisses his jaw. "Ready to get out now?"

Derrick nods slowly. They climb out. Nigel dries them both, wraps Derrick in a thick towel, and leads him to the bedroom. Although it's still early, Derrick is clearly exhausted. Nigel shepherds him into bed and tucks him under the covers. He quickly climbs in, too, and spoons up behind his lover, intending to keep Derrick warm with his body heat. They are both silent; Derrick will speak when he's ready. They lie there, Nigel holding him, just being there to show how much he loves him.

A long time later, Nigel is still awake and knows Derrick is, too. Nigel gently rubs his boyfriend's chest and buries his nose in his hair. He has thought of something. "Dare? Do you want me to call Marisol?"

Derrick doesn't reply immediately. "Yeah, I should probably at least text her so she knows I'm not a complete ass."

"You're not an ass *or* a dick, no matter what she says." Nigel climbs out of bed to retrieve the phone. When he returns, he slips between the sheets, sitting back against the headboard. "What do you want me to say?"

"Fuck, I don't know." Derrick turns over and faces him. Nigel is relieved to hear his boyfriend swearing. It's more liveliness than he's exhibited since Nigel got home.

"Do you think you want to see them? Do you want to go over there tonight? It's only seven thirty."

"I can't. I... I just can't tonight. I'll go tomorrow. Will you come with me?"

Nigel reaches down and pulls Derrick into his arms. "Of course, Dare, of course."

Then: Derrick

Derrick stared at the gate to the park, watching dogs chase each other in packs, tails wagging, ears flung back, tongues flying as the animals moved. He wiped his palms on his jeans and reached for the gate. He could do this. He was just checking on Mercedes and Demetrius, the other youth he got into the program. Nigel probably wasn't even there.

He stepped through the gate along with a woman clutching plastic bags in one hand and in the other, the leash of her huge dog, a young black and white Great Dane. They entered a little paddock with a gate on each side. The woman carefully closed the first gate and then took the leash off her youngster before opening the second gate. She must have noticed his confusion because she explained, "The gates prevent a dog from getting out when someone is coming or going. It's also a great way to get Panda's leash off before she gets pounced on by the others."

The moment the second gate was opened, he saw what she meant as the Great Dane plowed into a horde of dogs attempting to knock each other into the ground. Derrick stiffened for a moment, afraid a huge melee would break out, but he soon realized that the animals were having a great time, and the new dog just joined them in play. He smiled at the sheer joy in each wiggling body.

"Do you know where—"

"Around to the left and then to the right behind the pond," the woman cut in. "The training group is over there."

"How did you—"

"You don't have a dog with you." She smiled.

"Ah. Well thank you." As he followed her directions and headed toward the path, he noticed a tiny Chihuahua run toward the group of dogs. The Great Dane separated from the pack and ran to intercept the smaller dog. Fear froze him in place again. With the thought of that giant mouth on that tiny body, panic rose in his chest, but before he could shout, another woman moved toward the two, a wide grin on her face.

“Panda!” The first woman moved to meet the newcomer. “Hi, Sarah! Goliath was getting downright snippy waiting for Panda to get here. I wasn’t sure you were going to make it today.”

“Sorry we’re late, but we wouldn’t miss it. Panda would eat my shoes if she didn’t get play time with her best friend today.” The women laughed and began walking in another direction. A Great Dane and a Chihuahua best friends? That was different. But as they moved off, Derrick smiled. Seeing the two dogs scamper and play was calming, and already he was feeling slightly less nervous about seeing Nigel.

Nigel. Derrick hadn’t been able to think of much else since they had first met a few weeks before. Nigel had sounded interested, hadn’t he? Derrick had replayed the meeting over and over in his mind. *I believe in opportunities*. What did that mean exactly? The opportunity to meet someone when you least expect it? The opportunity to take advantage of meeting someone you liked? The opportunity to make it more? The opportunity to switch from plastic to reusable bags? Or had Nigel just meant the program, the opportunity to help at-risk youth succeed? *It’s not too late. It’s never too late*. For what? To meet The One? To date? To save a child? To get a stain out of his shirt? What? Was he just being arrogant thinking that Nigel could have been talking about him?

Derrick was pulled from his reverie as he rounded the edge of the pond with its tall reeds and saw the little area in the corner of the park. The roped off space wasn’t very big, much smaller than he expected, not more than thirty-five or forty square feet. Within were eleven teenagers, all holding the leash of a dog. The kids were watching Nigel’s assistant in the center of the area—what was her name? Danielle? Danique? Back at that first meeting she had introduced herself at the door, but by the time she had taken them up to Nigel’s office and he saw the man’s smile, all rational thought had left him, and he’d forgotten everything that happened after he met Mercedes in front of the Rutherford Foundation’s building.

Just outside the enclosure was a small table at which sat a tall, short-haired man. Nigel. Derrick sucked in a breath. Unlike the last time they had met, Nigel was dressed casually in jeans and a hoodie. He was leaning forward to

stretch, and his sweatshirt was riding up and pants pulling down so a small expanse of his lower back showed. Just seeing that bare flesh gave Derrick a jolt. He was thin but had some muscles, too, just Derrick's type. And that didn't even count his face.

Steeling himself, Derrick headed toward the table. In the enclosure, the kids were jumping up and down, yelling in voices that were probably supposed to be positive, pounding the ground, anything to get the dogs to come when called. Most of the dogs blatantly ignored their handlers and continued playing. Others looked confused, and at least one had lain down, clearly bored. Derrick chuckled. He wondered how that one had even qualified for the program.

"Derrick!" Nigel turned in his chair.

"Uh... Hi, Nigel." Derrick was suddenly at a loss for words for the first time in his life. Nigel had to be one of the handsomest men he had ever seen, with his strong features, warm brown eyes, and a light, open expression. His sleeves were pushed up, revealing strong forearms leading to large hands. Derrick shivered at the thought of what large hands meant, and what he could do with that. *Down boy.*

"Coming to check us out?" Nigel had a friendly—and beautiful—smile on his face.

Oh God, yes. Wait, he meant the kids. "Yep. Wanted to see what has my probationers actually acting eager about something and talking about animals instead of sex or how much they hate me. I figured you were dealing them drugs." He grinned.

"You found us out. We fill the water bottles with invisible, tasteless, odorless hallucinogens then seal them up afterward. Makes the kids think they're training dogs and that they love it. Wait, you don't see dogs here, do you? Some of it could have leaked out..." Nigel feigned concern as he pretended to search for an open bottle.

Derrick narrowed his eyes. "There aren't any dogs here? I was wondering why they all had purple fur and pink polka dots."

Nigel straightened and finally broke into his full smile. Derrick's heart skipped a beat. That mouth did him in the last time, and it hadn't been a fluke. He was again staggered by how Nigel's upturned lips and white teeth lit up his face, taking him from good-looking to drop-dead gorgeous.

"Derrick?"

"Um, what?"

"I asked how you are, but you're kind of staring off into space." Nigel looked uncertain.

Derrick snorted. "My folks always said I was a bit spacey. I'm good, really good. How about you?"

The smile came back. "I'm very well, thank you for asking." Nigel turned toward the youth and their charges. "They're doing a great job, too, although it might not look like it at this particular moment."

Derrick followed his gaze and saw Demetrius stomping his foot. He was a tall gangly kid, with skin pale beneath his dyed black hair; facial piercings and huge gauges in his ears; skinny body adorned in black, vinyl, and chains; and thick eyeliner that said, "I'm a raccoon, and I'm going to destroy your trash cans!" Derrick often wondered if Demetrius was going for punk or emo. The boy looked absurd wringing his hands next to a dog who was ignoring him and licking the kind of parts that straight men didn't touch with their mouths. Well, neither would gay men if said parts belonged to a dog. The thought made him laugh. Fortunately, Nigel appeared to think he was laughing at Demetrius's futile attempts to get the dog's attention, and Derrick was saved from having to explain his perverse and convoluted way of thinking.

"I'm really glad to hear that." Derrick managed to speak at least semi-professionally. "The program is already working, I think. Both of my kids have more confidence. Mercedes actually asked how she could enroll in a high school completion program at Green River Community College. Now if I could only get her to wear clothes that don't make her look like a hooker..."

"Baby steps, my friend, baby steps." *My friend?* Did Nigel think he was a friend? That would be an excellent baby step. Derrick mentally chided himself.

It was just an expression. “Here, have a seat.” Nigel gestured to an empty chair beside him. Derrick took it. “So how did you become a juvenile probation officer? That must be a tough job. I can’t imagine you get a lot of positive feedback from your kids.”

Derrick shook his head and laughed. “No, not so much. But I do get through to them sometimes, and even those few make it all worthwhile.”

“Oh, yes, you’re Juvie Man.”

Derrick felt the blood rise in his face and thanked his genetics for his tan, mixed-race skin that would hide the flush. “Yes, of course.” He forced himself to smile when he felt like crawling under the table. Why was he suddenly so embarrassed? He usually didn’t have any trouble bragging about his successes, because after all, they weren’t his achievements, they were his kids’.

“But to answer your question, it’s because I needed a program like this when I was their age.” The expression on Nigel’s face was not what he expected. Usually people looked pitying or embarrassed. Nigel, however, was both curious and smiling admiringly at him.

“You were one of these kids, and you pulled out of it and made something of yourself? And then you came back here to help others like you? That’s really cool.” Nigel slightly shook his head. “That is just—that’s a wonderful thing to do. I’ve known a couple of people who grew up in that kind of life, and all they wanted was to get the hell out. I think you’re—” Nigel blushed. His pale skin didn’t hide anything. “I mean, I think that is really noble. Wait, that doesn’t sound right. It’s virtuous? I mean... It’s not that it’s bad to come back, and therefore it’s amazing that you would. I mean, I’m not trying to be condescending. I just think that’s it shows what a great person—” he blushed again. Derrick couldn’t help but smirk at his discomfort but he decided to help Nigel off the hook he had caught himself on.

“I understand what you’re saying. Thank you. My dad raised me to give back to my community. I was taught that we are only as strong as we make ourselves, and that some people need the kind of support and love only someone who’s been there can provide. He saved me. I didn’t have your program, but I had him. He put me on the straight and narrow.”

Nigel looked confused but nodded. “He sounds like a great man. You had a—I thought—I mean, why would you have needed...” He trailed off.

“Sorry.” Derrick rolled his eyes. “I forget people can’t read my mind sometimes. It can be confusing enough in my head, let alone being outside looking in.” He smiled. “I’m talking about my foster father. He yanked me out of the system when I was fourteen and already had a record that stretched into the next state. I was young and angry and unloved. He and his wife, Celeste, took me in, sat me down, told me what was what, and turned me into a man.” He felt a warmth in his chest when he thought of what they’d done for him. “They are amazing people. I love Celeste, and she loves me like a son, but it’s Ronald who really made me who I am today.”

Again Nigel surprised him by not showing pity, just interest... intense interest. “You were in foster care. May I ask you about that?”

“Uh, yeah, sure. What do you want to know?”

“Well, maybe how you got into it?”

Derrick thought about what and how much Nigel would want to hear. “I went into foster care when I was six. My birth parents were both prostitutes. Apparently it’s true that many rent boys are straight.” He chuckled. “They were always leaving me alone or bringing tricks home.” He didn’t mention how he was drugged to keep him quiet or that there were twenty-two CPS reports before he was finally pulled out.

“That’s awful.” Again, Nigel looked sad and understanding, but there was no pity in his eyes nor judgment, just acknowledgment of an awful situation. “What was it like being in foster care?”

“I was lucky at first. I went straight from a receiving home into a loving foster family, the Bryants. I acted out a little but almost all foster kids do. It’s pretty traumatic being ripped out of your world and made to live with people you’ve never seen before. I was there for a year and a half, and they were planning to adopt me when I became legally free. But then there was a tragedy in their family, and they had to move to Dallas to take care of their nephews.” The memory still made him sad.

“They couldn’t take you with them?”

“The Bryants said they loved me and wanted to, but my birth father was still fighting to get me back. He didn’t have a chance, but there are all kinds of rules the state has to follow, and they couldn’t allow me to go until my father had relinquished his rights to me or the rights were terminated. I never believed the Bryants. I was seven and dumb as fuck.”

“You were just a little boy.” Nigel frowned.

“Yeah, well.” Derrick looked at the kids working with the dogs. Most of them had big grins while the dogs lay on the ground a few feet away. What was that, a down-stay? After Mercedes had agreed to the program, Derrick had checked out dog training books from the library. He wanted to be able to talk to the kids about it. He looked at Nigel. No, he was lying to himself. He wanted to learn about dog training to impress the guy with the gorgeous smile, the one who appeared to be fascinated by Derrick’s story. He found his mouth going dry just looking at Nigel. “Do you think I could have some of that invisibly, odorlessly, tastelessly drugged water?”

Nigel had been leaning forward and now jerked back. “Oh, of course, I should have... Sorry, I don’t always—they’re here somewhere—here, oh oops.” He had ripped the packaging and the bottles had scattered. “They aren’t chilled, I mean cold, I mean they’ve been sitting out so they’re warm... oh, but not hot uh... here’s one here, I mean, there are lots, but this one looks good—wait, I mean it doesn’t have grass on it, I mean, just a little, just let me wipe it off—oh is that gross? That’s gross. I can go to the car and get—”

Derrick was desperately trying to keep from showing his laughter. The poor man was really flustered. He wondered why. “It’s fine, that one looks perfect.”

Nigel handed Derrick the bottle.

The water felt good going down Derrick’s throat. “Oh, yeah, you said you reseal them after you add the drugs. Very smooth.” He grinned then faltered because Nigel was having some issues with being smooth right now.

“I’m all about the smooth, as I’m sure you can tell.” Nigel grinned and Derrick really liked that the man didn’t take himself too seriously. “So, you were left without a home, again? I’m sorry if this is too personal.”

“No, it’s fine. Yeah, not having a home anymore was what was really hard. I had trouble understanding why the children they had to go care for were more important than I was. It’s a tough thing to get for a seven-year-old who’s never really had a family.”

“I can only imagine.”

Derrick nodded. “I was moved to another foster home. They were fine, I suppose, but they weren’t the Bryants, and I was even angrier than before, so I made life hell for them. I was moved to another foster home where I was... mistreated...” That was the understatement of the century. The things that happened there were the cause of much of his PTSD. “I then went to another foster home, and another, until I ran away for the first time when I was nine. After that, they couldn’t keep me anywhere, even in those foster homes that were good. I was eventually put in a group home, but that didn’t last, either. In this state, you can’t keep children—probably anyone—against their will without a court order, although I’m sure there’s a base age range. It’s illegal to run away but it’s also illegal to physically stop a kid from doing so, too.”

“Really?” Nigel looked shocked.

“Really. Anyway, I got caught shoplifting for the first time when I was eight. By the time I was twelve, I’d been in juvie half a dozen times already and was drinking heavily. At thirteen, I was convicted of grand theft auto. I was high on Oxycontin.”

“At thirteen? You could drive at thirteen?”

“Nope. That’s how I got caught.” He smirked, and Nigel grinned back. Derrick felt like he was floating every time he saw that smile. “By then I knew I was gay, and I had done it to impress a boy—a supposedly straight boy. When he found out I had a crush on him, he beat the crap out of me, and then we fucked. I lost my virginity over that car, and I can’t say I’m entirely sorry I stole it.”

This time Nigel laughed. “I wish I’d known you then.”

He did? Was he trying to tell Derrick something? He knew he sometimes read too much into things. “Well, you would have hated me. I was an arrogant asshole. It was another year before I was rescued.”

“By your foster dad.”

“Yeah. I was sprung out of juvie and was told that my foster father had come to pick me up. I figured the group home had gotten sick of me and was just foisting me on another unsuspecting family. So imagine my shock when Mr. Bryant was standing there.”

Nigel was the one who looked surprised. “The dad from the first foster family?”

“Mm-hmm. By then, the last nephew had left for college, and the Bryants were able to finally move home. Anyway, Ronald was standing there when I was released, shaking his head like he was disappointed in me.” Derrick left out the part that really got to him. That was the first time he saw in Ronald’s eyes what he came to understand as love. He hadn’t seen that from anyone else before the Bryants, and that was the first time he understood what it was.

“I was still so angry with them, and I started shouting, telling him he was an asshole, describing all the horrible things I’d done because he’d left. I was even posturing with my chest puffed out, my hands in fists, threatening to hit him. But somehow I didn’t. Something stopped me from actually doing it. And he just stood there through the whole thing until I finally got tired. I’m amazed I wasn’t rearrested. I was in the basement of the courthouse outside the entrance to juvie, after all.”

“So what did your father do?”

“Nothing. He just stood there with his arms crossed. This part is kind of funny. When I finally stopped my rant, he said, ‘You done?’ It wasn’t what I was expecting. I was even madder at him for not getting angry. So I lashed out with the last thing I had left.” Even back then, part of Derrick knew it was kind of a test, pushing Ronald to see if he would leave him there, or maybe trying to make it happen so Derrick wouldn’t be hurt again.

“I yelled at him, right there in the basement of the courthouse, ‘I’m a fag! A fucking queer! I like sucking dick!’ He just looked bored. Bored! Then he said, ‘Your point is?’ Again, not what I was expecting. So I said again, ‘There’s nothing I like better than a big fucking cock.’ And you know what he said to that?” Nigel shook his head. He was clearly trying not to laugh. “He said something along the lines of, ‘So do I, as long as it’s my own and has a matching set of big hairy balls.’”

Nigel couldn’t contain his laughter anymore. He managed to ask, “Seriously? You’re making that up.”

“No, I swear. But that isn’t all. He then said, and I quote, ‘I like big tits and a real big butt on a hot mama. Long as you don’t got a problem with that, we’re good.’ And then he just turned and headed for the stairs. I was floored. He was already on the third step before I could move and run to catch up.”

Nigel was wiping tears from his eyes. “Wow. You had your family back.” He sobered. “But it wasn’t that simple, was it?”

Wow, yourself. Nigel got it. He knew that the Bryants were Derrick’s family, not his birth parents. Like any foster kid, he did want his parents back, but they had never been a family, and he hated them as much as he loved them. The Bryants were the ones who had truly loved him back. “No, it wasn’t. It took me a long time to trust them again. I ran a couple of times, but they always took me back. They were usually the ones that found me. I couldn’t believe they actually went and searched. I pushed every button they had and railed against those boundaries they set up.” He had never pushed it too far, but he’d had to fight himself to not try to drive them away before they hurt him. He had been terrified they would leave him again. Anybody else would have. “But they took everything in stride.”

Derrick had been angry for a long time, and he was chagrined now to think how hard he had made their lives. They had explained to him again why they had to go. They didn’t apologize for leaving but told him how hard it was. They claimed they had kept track of his progress, and when he was legally free, they tried to start the adoption papers again. But the paperwork kept getting lost every time he switched social workers, which was a lot since he

got a new one every time he went from group care to a foster home or vice versa. Then there was the turnover rate which was insane. But that's how they knew he was in juvie.

Derrick looked to see if Nigel was still listening. He was, and he was chewing on his lower lip like he was concentrating really hard not to miss anything. Derrick thought that might have been the sexiest look he had ever seen. "So anyway, this story is getting too long. Basically they finally got through to me. I think it had a lot to do with them coming back. I don't know if a brand new foster family could have turned me around like they did. I had lost so much trust. But them coming back for me? That made me think that maybe someone could love me."

Derrick didn't understand the look on Nigel's face. Shock? Disgust? Confusion? "How could—I mean, how didn't you know—Who put the fucking—" Nigel closed his eyes and swallowed before opening them again. "I'm sorry. It just infuriates me that what happened to you could leave you with the ridiculous idea that you couldn't be loved. I want to strangle everyone who ever hurt you and left you thinking that." He looked sincere. He looked angry and sad and something else that Derrick couldn't figure out. But he did know, although he couldn't say why, that Nigel didn't just mean any kid—he meant Derrick. He couldn't believe Derrick ever doubted he was loveable. The thought made his spine tingle.

They looked at each other a tad longer than people who barely knew each other usually did. For the first time, Derrick believed that maybe there was someone else out there who could love him, that the Bryants weren't the only ones capable of feeling such affection for him. The sensation made him uncomfortable, and he pulled his eyes away.

"So how and why did you become a probation officer? I'm sorry, I asked that question before. If you don't want to tell me, or wait, I mean, I'm not trying to imply that you wouldn't, like it was something to be ashamed of, not that it would, I mean, it's so great. That is, it's just a normal job, well no, it's a hard job, but—Damn." Nigel was so adorable when he was flustered. Could Derrick be the cause of that? He didn't recall Nigel being that way the first time. He supposed it was possible. He couldn't believe how interested in his

story Nigel seemed. No one had ever shown this kind of interest, not even past lovers, not that there had really been any; more like past fuck buddies.

“Well I finished high school, a bit late as could be expected given my time in juvie, and my grades were terrible.” That he finished high school at all was an achievement, and he had been very proud of himself at the time. More than forty percent of foster kids in Washington state never graduated. “I figured that was it for me. But there was Ronald again, convincing me that I could do more. So I went to community college, since I didn’t have the GPA for anything else, and then the U-dub.

“Then I wasn’t sure what to do, but I wanted to help kids who’d been where I had. Most of my probation officers were dicks, so I thought that would be a good place for me to reach those kids. I figured I could maybe not be a dick for once.” He laughed. “And then I had to go to school for like another hundred years, and then I was certified, got a job, and the rest is history.”

“That’s an amazing story. Thank you for sharing it with me.” Derrick was relieved that Nigel’s voice was respectful, not ingratiating, almost as if they’d just been discussing Derrick getting a special bonus at work, as if that would ever happen in a civil service job. If Nigel had shown obsequious sympathy, Derrick might have felt obligated to deck him. He was not used to sharing like that, not even with his kids (not that it would have been appropriate). He just didn’t want anyone that close. So why had he spilled his guts now? It was Nigel’s fault. Maybe there really were drugs in those water bottles. He realized he was now quite nervous.

“The kids are coming for snacks.” Derrick looked up to see the teenagers hurtling toward them. He jumped out of the way. The dogs had been given water and were off-leash in the enclosure chasing one another, their running and jumping legs sending bowls sloshing.

“Mr. Derrick!” Mercedes ran over. “You came! I told you Mr. Gelly was here every Thursday. You didn’t believe me.” Derrick blanched and looked at Nigel but he hadn’t heard. Derrick didn’t want the man knowing that he came that day because he knew Nigel would be there. That would just be too awkward.

“I did, I did.” Quickly, he jumped in to help Nigel and Danica—yeah, that was her name—hand each youth a large sandwich, chips, a soft drink, and cookies. The rest of the break he spent talking to Mercedes and Demetrius, both of whom were eager to show him what they had learned. Danica came over and praised the kids as well. By the time the youth had returned to their training, Derrick’s heart and mind had slowed enough that he could face talking with Nigel again.

They resumed their seats. Derrick figured it was time to turn the conversation toward something—someone—else. “So what made you start this program?”

Nigel chuckled. “I wish my story were in the slightest way interesting, but it’s not. I feel guilty for having such an easy life. My family started the foundation when they got to the point that their millions of dollars in Microsoft stock wasn’t doing anything but making them richer. They always believed in living socially responsible lives, even after they became wealthy. So they never spent any of it.

“We lived off their substantial incomes; they worked for Microsoft after all. They just lived like they always had and tried to teach us to appreciate our lifestyle and not take it for granted. I have no idea how what they said sank in. So many of my friends from high school are either rich assholes, drug addicts, or slackers living off their parents.”

“Why would a ri—well-to-do person become a drug addict?”

“Boredom usually. Sometimes it comes from the intense pressure to succeed. We were all expected to go to Ivy League schools, or MIT, or something equivalent, then get graduate degrees to become doctors, lawyers, dentists, engineers, or corporate executives.”

“Huh. I never thought of that. The media makes it sound like drug abuse is a problem that only poor people have.” That it wasn’t that way had never occurred to Derrick. Sure, he saw films where rich folks snorted cocaine, but that was the movies.

“Well, it is primarily a poverty thing. When you have nothing, especially no one who cares about you, I imagine it’s probably easier to face a bleak existence when you’re high or stoned.”

Derrick agreed. “Yeah, it is.” Been there, done that. “Plus, when gang members are living in your neighborhood, drugs are everywhere, you’ve been told you’ll never be worth anything, and you’re not treated equally in school—almost no one even admits that’s the case—it’s a lot easier to fall into using. Add racism and the issues minorities face that result in a greater percentage in poverty than white people, and it becomes an ethnic/cultural problem, too.

“It really saddens me that the percentage of the kids on my caseload who aren’t white grossly over represents the percentages in the general population—despite Demetrius’s presence here. Actually, he’s part of this program because he was doing better than most of the others I work with. I can’t help but think he is still benefitting from being a straight white male, although issues of poverty came into play for him as well.”

Nigel nodded then shook his head. “Probably. It’s just not fair. Poverty sucks. I thank my lucky stars every day that I had breaks that so many other people didn’t. I truly do. That’s why I started this program.”

Derrick heaved an internal sigh of relief. How Nigel responded to that long diatribe had told him that he was actually date material. Derrick didn’t care what color people were that he dated; he cared how they thought about those kinds of issues. “Did your parents make you work for the foundation?”

“Oh, no, not at all.” Nigel looked surprised. “We could do anything we wanted to with our lives. We were adults. But after college I didn’t want to be a doctor or a lawyer or a dentist, and I really didn’t want to go into the business world. I didn’t get my parents’ math/science gene so high tech was out. I mean, I could have worked in some other capacity but then it would be like any other business world. So I just stayed in school as long as I could. When my parents created the foundation, it was a no-brainer for me to work here, too. I was sick of academia and was eager to find something meaningful to do with my life; I wanted to give back to society.”

That was interesting. Derrick figured Nigel for having been in business somewhere. “What did you study in school?”

Nigel laughed. “Basket-weaving.” At Derrick’s skeptical look, Nigel continued. “Anthropology, learning about how cultures live and work. Throughout time, most cultures have made baskets of some kind. My PhD thesis was on basket-weaving.”

Derrick snorted. “Really?”

“Sort of. It was a comparison of tribal designs in traditional basketry in two cultures, one in Australia and one in Canada, two cultures that could not have been in contact after the division of Pangea into the continents we have today. Yet there are incredible similarities between the designs made by these two groups of tribes that aren’t found in other tribal cultures.”

“Pangea?”

“The lost continent. Basically, it’s what scientists believe was the single continent that was over time broken up by earthquakes into the continents we have now. Continental drift and all.”

You learn something new every day. “So you became a doctor after all.” Derrick couldn’t stop himself from teasing. He hoped it was okay; that was really important, too.

Fortunately Nigel both grimaced and chuckled. “Just call me Doctor Who. Or rather, Doctor What?” Since Nigel was laughing, Derrick felt it was okay to join in. All that and a good sense of humor, too. “It wasn’t the most useful degree, so I was working as a waiter.”

“Doctor, I’d like a burger and fries. Be quick about it or we won’t tip you.”

More laughter. “Yep. It happens more often than you’d think. So obviously it was a no-brainer to work for the family foundation when it was created.”

That was the perfect opening to lead to what he really wanted to know. “Why did they start it?”

“Well, I told you we were raised to give back. They had all that money and more because they kept getting more options that kept increasing in value as

the stock split. So my parents dedicated the foundation to combat poverty because they felt so lucky for what they had. They think it's unfair they were paid so much for doing their jobs, even as hard as it was and as long the hours were, when plenty of other people who toil away working two or three jobs just to make it through another month get paid in magic beans."

Here it was. "So why this? Why this program? Why these kids?"

"Oh, again, it's not an interesting story. The foundation was set up to dole out money to other nonprofits. But I got tired of just sitting back and keeping my fingernails clean. I wanted to be more actively involved. I wasn't sure at first what I wanted to do, but I read somewhere that recidivism in prison is greatly due to a lack of skills and not having a healthy support network. I learned that low self-esteem was a huge factor, and that most of those in jail have records all the way back to childhood. I figured that if I wanted to be proactive, I needed to start there. Then I saw this show about dog-training programs in prisons, and how well they worked for both the prisoners and the shelter dogs, lowering recidivism rates."

"Is there a big problem with dogs going back to prison?" Derrick was relieved that Nigel laughed at that.

"HUGE problem. Those dogs just cannot get on the straight and narrow. I heard about one dog that was arrested eight times and never learned better. He died in an altercation with another inmate over a dog bone."

"Tough world."

"Yes it is."

Derrick was grinning so hard it hurt. "Sorry, go on with your story."

"Okay. So I thought, what if I worked with kids from juvie? I couldn't do it with kids actually in detention because they just aren't there long enough, and they often slip through the cracks as soon as they get out. So I figured that if I just work with kids that are at least trying a little, ones that are attempting to follow the probation rules, that maybe I had a chance there. Even that subset of the kids on juvenile probation has a huge recidivism rate, as you know. Although, perhaps I shouldn't have bothered with Juvie Man's kids." He

grinned. “So I did a bunch of research, talked with about a hundred thousand people, then built a program I thought could work. It has been an incredible experience.” Nigel looked to be assessing Derrick’s reaction. He was chewing on his lip again. God that was hot.

“So what you’re telling me is that you’ve lived the American dream of a perfect life with a perfect family, you have no need to work and no pressure to do so, and yet you decided for no particular reason to help at-risk kids after watching a reality TV show.”

Nigel looked chagrined. “I like dogs?”

“Nigh, that’s the coolest thing I’ve ever heard.”

Nigel perked up. “Liking dogs?”

“No, dork. There is absolutely no reason for you to be doing this. You don’t have any connection here, you don’t have the sense of obligation that someone like me has. You just do it because you want to help. I can’t even tell you how awesome that is. Nigh, you’re totally rocking my world right now.” Fuck, had he actually said that out loud?

Apparently it hadn’t freaked Nigel out because he was beaming. “I am?”

“Uh, yeah. You are.”

It didn’t seem possible, but Nigel’s smile got even bigger and brighter. “That means a lot. It really does. Thank you.”

“For what? I mean why?” Oh crap. Did that sound like Derrick was fishing to see if it meant a lot because it came from Nigel? Did he even want to know? Did it matter? He was thinking it actually did because he liked this guy—a lot.

“Well, sometimes I feel like people don’t want me here, that the kids don’t trust me because I’m not part of their world. I don’t have any experiences to draw from. It’s just nice to know that someone who’s been there thinks it’s okay. To come from someone like you, who has been through so much and who is an amazing person, is just...” He trailed off. Their eyes met again, and this time the look lasted even longer. Derrick felt like his body was expanding, like he had taken the best drug in the world.

He thinks I'm amazing. Derrick decided there would be no better moment to put himself out there. He could always just leave if things didn't go as he wanted them to. "Um, so, uh, do you think that—" He needed to get a grip; he never stammered. He prided himself on always appearing self-assured and easy-going and didn't want to look like he was anxious. Then again, Nigel made it look sexy. It probably wouldn't be sexy on Derrick, though. He took a deep breath. "Can I call you sometime?"

Nigel's beautiful smile never wavered. "Yes, please do. I'd like that."

They exchanged contact information, each entering it into the other's phone. Nigel put his away but Derrick kept his out and dialed a number. Nigel cocked his head a little but Derrick held his finger up in a "just a sec" gesture. He clicked the "call" button and put the phone to his ear, then covered the mouthpiece and leaned toward Nigel for a moment. "It's dialing." Nigel nodded and sat back, looking away politely.

A moment later, Nigel's phone rang. He seemed surprised but he pulled out the device. When he saw who was calling he started to laugh. "This is Nigel Rutherford. May I ask with whom I'm speaking?" Talking in a snooty voice, he enunciated each word carefully.

"Yo, Nigh, I is Derrick Cole. We be talking at the dog park like a minute ago?" Derrick was using his best boy-from-the-hood impression.

"I remember. How may I help you, sir?" He was straining not to laugh. Derrick could see muscles working beneath the translucent skin of Nigel's neck. Derrick wanted to feel them with his tongue.

"Hey bro, you wanna kick it? Like, you know, this weekend sometime. If you ain't got nuthin' better to do. I ain't got no shit going down." He was trying to suppress his own laugh. He sounded like an idiot.

"I might be able to fit you into my schedule," Nigel said stiffly with his nose in the air. He sniffed. "I believe I have some time tomorrow evening. Are you available around, say, seven o'clock?"

"Yo, that be tight. You wanna meet somewheres? Like where there ain't no po-po?" Derrick wasn't sure how up on current street slang Nigel was. He

knew the kids would be making fun of Derrick if they could hear. He had been out of the game too long to sound right, which was a good thing.

“Certainly not where there will be police, good man. I have no desire to have the constabulary involved in our little *tête-à-tête*. Shall I have my car retrieve you at your place of residence?” He wasn’t as square as Derrick thought. Nigel not only knew what “po-po” meant, he was willing to play along with one of Derrick’s silly games. Excellent.

“Stay on the down low. I don’t want my homies—” Homies? He knew that wasn’t current but he was blanking on what was. “—be thinking I be hangin’ with the man.” Geezus. He could never face his kids again. He’d turned into a nerd. The thought helped him keep his composure, unlike Nigel who was about to fall out of his chair.

“Very well,” *snicker*, “I shall see you at seven o’clock tomorrow evening. Good day, sir.”

“Later.” They both hung up and collapsed into gales of laughter.

“Would you two keep it down over there? We’re trying to learn,” Mercedes yelled. Derrick looked over, sheepish. “Fuckin’ fags.” She turned but he didn’t miss her wink and leer as she looked away. She was a great kid, although he needed to speak with her about her word choices.

When he caught his breath, Nigel turned to Derrick and asked, “Did you learn to speak like that on the streets?”

“Yeah, but that was terrible. I’m out of practice.”

Nigel shook his head. “It sounded fine to me, annoying white man that I am.”

“Well your impression of a rich snotty prick was right on.”

“Thank God I have no experience with that.” Nigel chuckled. They lapsed into a comfortable silence for a few minutes, just watching the kids who were now working on something involving cones. Mercedes told him they worked on a lot of different things each day to keep both the teens and the dogs from getting bored. They practiced each item until they got it right, but it could take days or even weeks for some of the training.

Derrick tried to think of something to say that wasn't so personal. He wanted to learn more about Nigel, but in a read-between-the-lines sort of way. Finally he just stuck to the typical boring dating questions. "So what's your favorite movie?" Shit, that was stupid. But he could learn a lot about a person from what they liked to watch.

"*Spirited Away.*"

"I've never even heard of that."

"Most adults haven't. It's an animated kids' movie from Japan." Derrick's surprise must have shown on his face. "Yeah, I get that a lot, surprisingly. It actually won an Oscar for best animated feature." He went on to explain what it was about. Nigel was surprised at Derrick's answer to the question: *Schindler's List*, but understood when Derrick explained that similar things were still happening, and that the marginalization of minorities and extreme nationalism was where such things started. He didn't think it was an impossibility that such a thing could happen in the US. Derrick worried that he was being too political and boring in what he talked about, but Nigel stayed right along with him.

They continued talking about movies, then music, then books, and basically spent the rest of the time chatting about nothing important and laughing a lot. When the kids were finished, Derrick helped them all break down the enclosure and pack it in the van. In the parking lot were several cars with dog crates and volunteers who loaded up the dogs. A few of the kids piled into cars, and the rest ambled off down the road, presumably to catch a bus. He wasn't allowed to transport youth affiliated with his program, or he would have offered rides in his classic car. He loved cars. Instead he watched the vans pull out of the parking lot.

"The dogs all go to foster homes during the training. Those volunteers just transfer the dogs back and forth. When training is finished, the dogs will go to their forever families." Nigel came to stand next to Derrick.

"That's probably hard on these kids."

Nigel nodded. "Yes. And not just because they'll miss the dogs." He looked at Derrick resignedly. Yeah, Nigel got it. He'd listened and understood.

Loss was very hard for a lot of people from these situations. Derrick was one of the lucky ones. He had the Bryants, his true parents. He had Ronald, a great man who took a messed up kid and made him into a human being.

“So I’ll see you tomorrow at seven. You’ve got my address?”

“You put it in my phone yourself.” Nigel chuckled.

“Yeah, well, you can never be too sure. See you then, Nigh.” Derrick turned toward his truck.

“Is that what you’re going to call me?” Nigel looked at him expectantly.

“What?” Derrick turned back. He hadn’t even realized what he’d been saying.

“Nigh. Is that what you’re going to call me instead of Gelly?”

“Do you mind?”

That beautiful smile took Derrick’s breath away again. “No, Dare, I don’t mind at all.”

And in that moment, Derrick realized he was already falling.

CHAPTER 3

Now: Nigel

Nigel isn't sure what woke him, but he's instantly alert. Although his back is to the rest of the bed, he can tell by the way the mattress dips and the coldness of the sheets that Derrick is not there with him. The sound of something breaking has him in the hall in an instant. He plunges into the living room, belatedly realizing if there is danger, he is naked with nothing to protect himself or his family. It may be a small household, but Derrick and Tibbs mean everything to him.

Immediately he sees that he doesn't need a weapon, he needs compassion. Derrick is hitting the edge of the fireplace with the poker. He hears his lover scream with rage, and he prepares himself to help Derrick come back from wherever he is. The PTSD has manifested before. He doesn't know if Ronald's death triggered it this time, but right now it doesn't matter.

“Dare?”

It appears Derrick doesn't hear him at first; he pounds the bricks again and howls.

“Dare, honey? It's me. I'm right here. Can you put the poker down?”

Derrick spins to face him, his eyes wild and shining with emotion. His chest heaves in giant panting breaths, and the poker remains aloft, ready to swing again.

“Dare, I'm here for you; I'm going to help you. I need you to put that down so I can come closer.” He smiles ruefully. “I don't want to accidentally get hit. I'm a big baby when it comes to pain.”

Derrick looks like he's processing what Nigel is saying, then he throws the implement away from himself in horror. He blinks and looks back at Nigel. “I'm sorry, I would never...” He takes a step forward.

Nigel nods in encouragement as he slowly moves toward his boyfriend. “I know, Dare, I know.” He holds his arms out to the side, careful not to spook Derrick in case he's still confused. “You would never hurt me.”

“Yes I would. You can’t trust me. I’m a pariah. I hurt everyone I love.”

“No, Dare, never.” Nigel shakes his head and moves closer.

Agony streaks Derrick’s face. “I hurt Ronald. I left him when he needed me, and I abandoned my sister and brother. I hurt them, too. He died because of me, and they are left alone because I’m a selfish prick.”

Nigel feels his heart constrict at Derrick’s anguish. “No, never. It’s not selfish to refuse to be manipulated into giving up true love.” His boyfriend appears to be listening, like he’s hoping to be absolved and terrified he won’t be. “Dare, you had to make a choice. Ronald forced you to make that choice. You’ve said all year that you can’t choose the one who forces the decision on you.” He steps forward again. “You still see Marisol. She’s said over and over again that you made the right choice. She’s just hurting and angry right now.”

“But Benji? What about Benji? I abandoned him, Nigh.”

“No, you left for a while. We never thought Ronald would keep this going so long. You’ve said yourself that while we were apart you checked out, you weren’t there at all. Getting your letters, telling him how happy you are and how much you miss him, that’s better, Derrick. He’s your brother, not your son. Would you rather show him how to be strong and stand up for who you love and what you believe in, or teach him how to be lonely, sad, and miserable? Marisol said he’s doing great. Dare, you made the right choice, you know that.”

Derrick’s eyes are unfocused as memories overlap in his head. Nigel continues, “I needed you then, and I need you now even more. I want you in my life, in my heart. Picturing anything else makes me ill. I’m here for you.”

Derrick’s eyes focus on him. Nigel jumps forward and catches him as he crumples. He lowers them both to the ground and wraps himself around the tight ball that is his lover. Derrick presses his forehead to Nigel’s chest and leans in closer. Nigel does his best to surround him—legs, arms, torso, head, all reaching and curving to enfold, trying to ease some of the grief with love. A tentative hand touches his side, and he knows he’s getting through. Pressing his cheek to Derrick’s temple, he closes his eyes, breathes him in, feeling Derrick within him as well as in his arms.

“Why didn’t he love me enough to set me free? Why did he have to try to control me? I’m thirty years old now, and it was only a year ago. Why wasn’t it okay for me to fall in love?”

Nigel kisses Derrick’s temple. “He loved you. It was all about his love. Your father just wanted what was best for you. And he was scared of losing you.”

“But he did lose me.” Derrick’s voice is muffled, but he isn’t letting go.

The words bring fresh sorrow to his voice, and Nigel finds it difficult to bear. He somehow manages to hold himself steady. “I don’t think he thought you would challenge him. He wasn’t himself, and he was hurting from the loss of your mother. You’ve always said he’s a lot like you, and you are stubborn to your core. I think he believed it was a contest, and he was too bullheaded to give in first.”

Derrick shakes his head, his nose rubbing against Nigel’s chest. “He was an idiot.”

“Sometimes even the greatest men are.”

Then: Nigel

“Oh my God that was so good!” Derrick scarfed down the last of his ice cream like he hadn’t eaten in a week. Nigel knew for a fact that wasn’t true because so far Derrick had eaten two orders of salmon and chips, several slices of hot-out-of-the-oven sourdough bread, a plate of oysters during which seemingly endless awkward teasing and innuendos ensued, two large Cokes, the biggest iced mocha Nigel had ever seen, and a sack of fresh saltwater taffy made right there. It was a wonder Derrick’s teeth didn’t fall out. Nigel thought it was adorable and longed to see what else the small man was willing to put in his mouth. So far the oyster talk had left him hopeful.

“I’m glad you like it.” Nigel smiled. “I’ve never seen anyone love food so much. Did you know you hum when you eat?”

Derrick glanced at him. “I still do that?”

“Yes, you still do that.” Nigel laughed. “It’s charming.” He laughed again at Derrick’s scowl. Those beautiful eyes were bright, revealing that the expression was all in good fun.

“Are you going to finish that?” Derrick indicated the cone in Nigel’s hand. The late November air on the Seattle waterfront was cold, but Derrick didn’t seem to notice as he looked eagerly at the icy glob.

“Oh. No, want it?” He handed the dripping mess over.

“You didn’t like it?” Derrick looked a little worried, as if he were afraid he had made a bad suggestion when he declared he wanted ice cream.

“I loved it. I’m just stuffed!”

Derrick seemed to accept that answer along with the ice cream, which he proceeded to stuff down as well. “Guess I’m getting there, too.” He looked sideways at Nigel, and they both burst out laughing. “I guess I eat a lot.”

“Well your body needs it because you don’t have an ounce of fat on you.”

Derrick ducked his head. “You haven’t seen beneath my clothes.”

“Not yet anyway.” Their eyes met, and Nigel’s heart fluttered. Derrick was striking. Every time Nigel looked at him, he found himself momentarily mute. When Derrick spoke, he often had to replay the words in his head before they registered.

“Have you ridden the Great Wheel yet?”

God that sounded romantic. “Not yet.” Nigel felt stupid. He wasn’t sure if Derrick wanted to ride the Ferris wheel or if he was just making conversation. The ride was pretty pricey. He had no idea how much Derrick made, probably not much working for the government.

Derrick turned and looked up at the giant ring above them. “You know, they’re just copying London. They could have come up with something more original.”

Nigel didn’t look up, just gazed at those eyes. “I suppose, but I haven’t ridden that one, either, despite having been to the city twice.”

“Does that mean you’re too scared?” Derrick’s grin was teasing, and his eyes sparkled. Nigel swallowed at the sight.

“Er, no. I just didn’t have the opportunity.”

“Well, we’re all about providing opportunities, aren’t we? Want to go?” Did Derrick look a little nervous? He always seemed so self-assured.

“I’d love to.” He really did—anything to be closer to Derrick.

Derrick grinned. “Race you, slowpoke!” He took off down Alaskan Way, and Nigel had to strain to catch up, despite his longer legs. It took a while to get their tickets and board. The whole time, the two were pushed together by the crowd, and Nigel was hyperaware of Derrick’s body next to his. When they finally entered the gondola, six more people piled in after them, and the two were squished into a corner. Nigel didn’t mind at all. His side tingled where it touched Derrick’s, even through the cloth separating them.

The giant Ferris wheel began moving slowly. Derrick was sitting on the outside and had a better view over the water, but again, Nigel didn’t care. The only view he needed was the one of the man sitting right next to him. He had never been so attracted to someone before. Every moment with Derrick was like opening a present. He was fresh and vital, so full of life. Derrick didn’t seem to take anything for granted and reveled in each new sensation—humming when he was eating, commenting on how interesting everything was, eyes shining when looking at anything new, sometimes even bouncing with excitement at something others would find stupid.

“This is great! Isn’t this great?” Derrick was lightly bouncing in his seat now, looking out over the water, in at the other passengers, and then back to grin at Nigel.

Derrick took Nigel’s breath away. “Yes. It’s really, really great.” He knew he probably never stopped smiling when he was with Derrick, but he didn’t care if he looked like a giant goofball. Derrick was just so much fun to be with.

When they reached the top, people gasped as they hung there, nothing above or around them. Puget Sound was dark except where the wheel’s lights

speckled the surface. Derrick was looking back over the water, one hand pressed against the window. Nigel felt something press against his palm—Derrick’s hand. He fought the urge to grab it and squeeze it hard enough that Derrick could never let go but he didn’t. He gently took the hand and pretended like nothing out of the ordinary had happened instead of one of the most momentous occasions of his life. It was their first date, their third time meeting, and he was already in major lust with this man.

The next time they reached the top, Nigel looked out at the water and found Derrick’s reflected eyes watching him. When Derrick noticed he’d been caught, he broke into a smile, and Nigel squeezed his hand lightly. He squeezed back, and they held the gaze for a long moment before Derrick turned his head to watch the view behind them.

When they disembarked, Nigel kept hold of Derrick’s hand, and Derrick didn’t try to pull away. They casually walked back to the street amid the throngs of tourists. No one bothered them, although Nigel was pretty sure an older couple took a picture of them. *Welcome to Seattle, folks. We’re everywhere*, he thought. A moment later, he belatedly realized that they were surrounded by tourists, complete unknowns, possibly unfamiliar or uncomfortable with public displays of gay affection. He never minded before but suddenly he was worried for Derrick. He was a small man, and if some homophobic Luddite with a beef decided to start something...

Nigel forced himself to calm down. They were in public in Seattle. There were too many people here, too many vendors wanting to make all their customers feel welcome, too many tourists from places abroad where being gay was even more accepted than Seattle, too many urban denizens who had seen it all, too many Seattleites proud of their city’s quirky and accepting nature, and just too many people period for anything to happen. Nevertheless, he took a step closer to Derrick. Even in Seattle, homophobia still thrived.

“Want to walk up to the sculpture park? It’s too bad the streetcar was torn up for the viaduct removal.”

Nigel missed the streetcar, too. It had been one of his favorite Seattle waterfront attractions, a repurposed old relic from Seattle’s early days. “Sure.”

They began walking north along Alaskan Way toward the Olympic Sculpture Park, an outdoor extension of the Seattle Art Museum. They held hands as they walked and enjoyed being next to each other. Neither felt the need to speak. The population dwindled as they got further from the main piers, but Nigel didn't feel a resurgence of his nervousness. He inexplicably felt safer with no one else close by.

When they reached the park they discovered it had officially closed just after dusk, but they were still able to see and even access many of the exhibits. They sat on each of the six benches shaped like eyes, and Nigel had a sudden desire to curve Derrick along the arc of an eyelid and make their bodies into one. It was so not the time or the place, and he quickly tamped down his libido. Instead they headed back down to the water and into Myrtle Edwards Park, which extended along the shore north of the piers. After a while, Derrick turned to lean on the railing overlooking the water, letting go of his hand. Nigel joined him.

“I love the smell of the sea,” Nigel said after a while.

“What, the smell of rotting fish and seaweed?” Derrick teased.

“Yep. Yummy.” Nigel turned sideways to face him. “But I like the company better.” God that was cheesy. Was that too cheesy?

Derrick turned toward him and grinned. “That was cheesy.”

“I was afraid of that.”

“But I like cheese.” Derrick moved closer. “It's one of my favorites.”

Nigel felt a stirring and a sudden need to adjust his pants. “Is it now? What kind do you like best?”

Derrick took another step closer. Nigel could feel his breath brush the bottom of his face. Derrick placed one finger on Nigel's chin to tilt his head down a bit. He fell into Derrick's eyes. He had never before seen eyes quite that hue. The Caribbean Sea's cerulean had nothing on that color. “All kinds. But I like the hot ones best.”

“Temperature hot or spicy hot?” Was that lame? That was lame. Nigel felt like his skin was too tight, all of him straining to touch Derrick, leaving no room for his brain to work.

“Both.” Nigel noticed Derrick’s breathing was a little faster. Good. It matched his own. It was his turn to move. He reached one hand up and cupped Derrick’s cheek, smooth skin with a light covering of coarse five o’clock shadow. His thumb traced a tapered cheekbone. They were close enough now that he had to look from one eye to the other to see both, but he couldn’t pull his gaze away.

He felt Derrick swallow under his palm. He realized Derrick was looking at his mouth. That gave him the strength to look down. When he saw a tongue slide along Derrick’s parted lips, he closed the distance. They met halfway, their lips just touching at first, then that sexy mouth opened, and Nigel felt a tongue gently slide along and around his own. Derrick made the tiniest sound, half a step above a hitch of his breath, and that was Nigel’s undoing.

He took Derrick’s head between his hands, tilting it slightly so the kiss could deepen and his tongue caressed Derrick’s cheeks from the inside. He pulled back and sucked on Derrick’s lower lip a moment before opening wide to dive back in. Derrick’s hands slipped around his waist and pulled him closer. Nigel turned and pressed Derrick between his own body and the railing. His arms moved to wrap around Derrick’s shoulders and he felt Derrick’s hips press against him, the hardness there mirroring his own arousal.

The kiss quickened and turned more intense as they plundered one another’s mouth, desperate to be closer. Derrick made the half moan sound again and pressed one leg between Nigel’s thighs. Nigel gasped and drew back. He touched their foreheads together as he got his breathing under control. He pulled away a little and looked at Derrick’s beautiful face, mouth canted to the side in a smirk.

“Told you I like cheese.”

Nigel laughed, although it was a little more like a pant. “Good thing. I am great at being cheesy.” He leaned in for another kiss but made it short. Derrick whimpered when he pulled away, but Nigel shook his head. “If we keep this

up, I won't be able to stop, and we'll be arrested for public indecency. Correct me if I'm wrong, but I don't think it looks good for probation officers to get arrested."

Derrick shoved him away. "We wouldn't want that. I was hoping to get laid tonight!" He grinned mischievously.

"Anyone I know?" Derrick punched him lightly. "Okay then, 'Your place or mine?'" Nigel hoped that was funny. Was that funny?

"Which is closer?" They turned to run to the car and almost bowled over an older couple sporting American flag hats, his and her matching clothes, and shopping bags with Space Needle logos. Both of them were gaping, and he got the impression they'd been watching for more than a mere few seconds. He ducked his head and mumbled an apology as Derrick laughed and dragged him forward. Nigel had time enough to notice that the tourist's pants were tented and he couldn't suppress a chortling snort as he passed.

"We just gave the tourists a peep show. I think they enjoyed it. A lot."

Derrick turned to look at him. "Really? Well next time they have to pay. Your body is worth its weight in platinum, and as the new guardian of its flame, I decree that you don't give out freebies."

"Not even to you?" Nigel was having trouble maintaining the conversation as they raced along what was, in all likelihood, the only level road in Seattle.

Derrick gave him one last look with his eye quirked. "I don't pay for what's already mine." He laughed to indicate it was a joke but deep down, Nigel didn't mind the thought of belonging to Derrick at all. In fact, he quite liked the sound of it.

CHAPTER 4

Now: Nigel

They sit entwined for a long while, until Nigel realizes how cold Derrick's back is. "Let's get you back to bed." He releases his lover and starts to stand.

Derrick reaches for him. "No, I can't. Nightmares. Please, I can't." His eyes are pleading, and his face so full of pain that Nigel is willing to do anything to take it away. He wishes he could absorb all of the hurt so that his lover could rest. But all he can do is be there for whatever Derrick needs.

"Okay. Let me get you something to wear. It's chilly." Derrick reluctantly lets go, and Nigel hurries into the bedroom to grab sleep pants and long sleeved tees for each of them. In the corner, Tibbs blinks at him sleepy-eyed then lays his head back down. "You slept through that noise? I have you trained too well. You're supposed to break the rules for that sort of thing and bark your head off." The dog sighs and closes his eyes.

On his way back to the living room, Nigel turns up the thermostat. He finds Derrick on the floor, back to the couch, leafing through photo albums arranged on the coffee table. Nigel forces him to get dressed and then sits down next to him, shoulders and thighs touching. Derrick is still agitated, and Nigel's goal is to calm his lover down.

Derrick points to a page in one of the binders. "This was the day I left for the month-long wilderness camp I told you about." The photos show a much younger and rather sullen Derrick in front of a school bus painted bright red. A water bottle is in his hand and a huge backpack lies beside him. Ronald has his arm across the teenager's shoulders. "I was so pissed off. Ronald kept reassuring me that I could do it, that I would be fine. At the time I thought he was full of shit. I had convinced myself I just didn't like the outdoors because I was a city boy. But after this picture was taken, on the bus to the site, I realized I was terrified."

"How old were you?"

"Sixteen. Ronald spent three weeks gearing me up for the trip but I still wasn't prepared. We spent the first couple of days at a campsite learning

basics before heading out, and I bribed one of the staff to let me use the phone to call home. I cried and begged for Ronald to come get me. He just repeated that he had faith in me, that he knew I could do it, that he didn't have a doubt in the world that I was capable of finishing the program. He reminded me to take just one day or one hour or even one minute at a time. He said that I just needed to make it through one day out there on the trail and if I couldn't do it, I could call him to come get me. He said he'd arranged it with the head guide.

“That’s what I did. Every time I felt like I couldn’t walk another yard or couldn’t climb another tree or couldn’t go out to gather food, I told myself ‘just fifteen more minutes.’ I didn’t want to disappoint him.”

Nigel rubs Derrick’s knee; his lover is still trembling. “And did you finish?”

Derrick nods. “I did.” He flips the page and shows his homecoming. In the photos, the same bus is behind him, but Derrick looks like he was raised by wolves: He is filthy. His hair is wild and matted. His clothes are ripped and caked with dirt. There are scratches on his face and a bandage around his wrist. But he is grinning, and this time, he has his arm over Ronald’s shoulders. Nigel feels a burst of pride knowing that his boyfriend survived several weeks in the wilderness with no amenities or outside food.

“After this picture was taken, I said goodbye to the guides and told the leader that I was glad I hadn’t had to use the phone. She had no idea what I was talking about and told me that there was no cell phone service out there, that in an emergency, someone would have had to hike out for help. There was no way I could have gotten out early. I was so angry, I didn’t speak to Ronald for a week. But in the end, I realized that without the belief that it was up to me when it ended, I wouldn’t have believed I could do it.”

Nigel smiles and kisses his lover. “I’m really impressed. I don’t think I could do it.”

“Be quiet. Of course you could.” They sit in silence as Derrick flips the pages, his erratic movements a sign that adrenaline is still rushing through his system.

“Why is there an expensive piece of furniture in your yard?” Nigel points to a photo of Derrick sitting cross-legged on top of a beautiful wooden desk resting on a tarp.

Derrick touches the photo. “I made that.”

“Really? That’s incredible. Seriously?”

“Yeah. This was while we were letting it air after the stain had dried. It smelled terrible.” Derrick’s fingers trace the lines of the desk. “One day I was trying to get out of doing my homework, and I told Ronald that the desk in my room was too small and unstable.” Derrick chuckles. “Kind of like me at the time. I said it was impossible to get anything done there and the rest of the house was too noisy. He told me to make it work or make a new desk. I laughed at him. He asked me what was so funny, and I realized that he was serious.

“As always, I was utterly convinced it was impossible. No way could I make a piece of furniture. But he dared me. He said he would buy the supplies, but I had to do the research. If I did it, not only would I have the desk, but he would let me sell the one in my room and keep the money. See, it was an antique and I’d royally offended Celeste by not liking it. But neither of them told me that. When I did finally sell it, I was shocked at how much money I got.

“But anyway, I went to the library and checked out books on how to make furniture. I bought some drafting paper and designed the desk. Ronald went to the store with me to pick out the kind of wood I wanted, the stain color, the drawer pulls, screws, etc. At least fifty times, I stopped building because I decided I couldn’t do it, and Ronald had to boost me up again until I was ready to continue. It took me almost a year, but the day I finished, I felt like I’d climbed Mt. Rainier.”

“Wow. That’s a gorgeous piece. All that detail.” A dozen photographs depict various angles of the desk and drawers. “Do you still have it?”

“It’s at the house.”

Nigel looks around the living room. “I think it would look really nice over there where that boring sideboard is.” He points to an alcove that they’ve never found any real use for. “When things are less emotional, do you think we could bring it here?” The piece is lovely, and he genuinely means it, but he’s also trying to calm Derrick and nothing is working.

Derrick smiles for the first time since Nigel came home. “Yeah. That’d be great.”

They pore through the albums, Derrick occasionally explaining a photo or telling a story of how his foster father helped him build his self-esteem and belief in his own abilities. Until now, Nigel didn’t know a lot about how Ronald helped Derrick turn around, only that he did. Since the rift when his father expelled him from his home, Derrick hasn’t talked about his father at all. Nigel is glad to finally get to know a little about this man Derrick still idolizes.

“Thank you for sharing this with me.” Derrick just nods, his leg still bouncing. Nigel pulls his lover into his arms, and they hold each other, thinking and remembering. Silence settles around them like a mantle. A long time passes before Derrick chuckles without humor. “It’s ironic, isn’t it? He made me who I am today through his love and tolerance. He understood me and what I went through and he didn’t judge me. And yet, intolerance is what tore us apart.”

He turns in Nigel’s arms and kisses him deeply. “I almost lost you. I almost lost this.” His throat works as he swallows several times. “I’m so angry with him. He didn’t trust me in this, the most important thing of all. I had to leave. I had to, right?” He clings to Nigel. “You were the one thing that was missing in my life. I needed you to feel whole.” His body shakes. “This is right. We’re right. Right?”

Somehow Nigel manages to pull the quivering mess that is Derrick closer. “Don’t second guess us, please don’t. I’m here and I’m not going anywhere. We were meant to be together, you know that. I love you forever, don’t ever doubt it.”

Derrick punches the table. “The fucker did this, made me choose, and then went and died on me. Fuck. Fuck!”

Derrick looks like he’s falling apart. Nigel can almost see pieces tumbling off his lover as he comes undone. He grasps Derrick’s face between his hands. “Dare, I’ve got you. I’m here. I will always be here. You won’t fall; I’ve got you.”

Derrick stills then lunges in for a frantic kiss. “Fuck me. Please fuck me so I can stop thinking for a little bit. I need you to surround me inside and out. I need you now, please. Fuck me hard.”

Nigel is more than ready to oblige. This is something he can do, something he is good at. He kisses Derrick deeply then pulls him to his feet.

Then: Derrick

“That our girl?” Ronald asked, watching a young woman enter the “arena”—a cordoned off portion of a soccer field—and direct her dog into a down-stay. The animal lay down on his belly and watched the small crowd.

“Yep. That’s Mercedes.” The young woman and her dog were the first ones to take the test. Nigel stepped out and introduced her and the dog, Spot Check, then left the field and the exam began.

“That dog’s sure cute. Girl looks like she’s handling him good.” The mutt in question looked like a long-haired Dalmatian with a black head. No one knew what his breed mix was.

Derrick beamed. “She’s doing great. Nigel says she’s the top of the class. Since she completed the full course and did so well, she’s been offered an internship for the next training session, and I think she’s going to take it.”

They watched the girl lead the dog through its routine, from walking on a leash without pulling, to staying in place while Mercedes walked twenty feet away and turned her back, to coming when called. The dog was required to sit patiently while being groomed and while being examined as if he were in a veterinarian’s office.

Derrick stole a glance off to the side where Nigel was watching, his lower lip between his teeth. He was nodding slowly, moving his head in minute motions as though he were the one leading the dog through his paces. Each time a task was completed successfully, which was always, his face lit up in that amazing grin, and he whooped and clapped. Derrick couldn't take his eyes off his lover. That lip thing was so hot. Just looking at Nigel made him hard.

"That dog was so out of control it couldn't be adopted?" Ronald's voice pulled Derrick back to himself.

"Yep. Kind of like Mercedes—well not unadoptable, but out of control."

Ronald shook his head in disbelief. "How many times she in jail?"

Derrick laughed. "You know I can't tell you that. The only reason you even know she was in detention is that she's in this program and it's a requirement. You can ask her, though."

"Nah, it's fine. She's doing a real good job there, real good. That dog looks like it's never done anything wrong in its life." On the bleachers between the two men, his brother Benjamin was squirming.

"Can I go play with the dogs, Dad? Please?"

"Shush, boy. We got to watch them taking their tests first." Ronald squeezed Benji's shoulder and pulled him into his lap. The child was eight but emotionally about five, with the accompanying attention span.

"I don't like tests."

"Hey, Benji, Mercedes and Spot Check have a surprise at the end after the assessment is over. Just watch." Derrick tried to make it sound exciting.

"What is this test again?" Marisol asked, sounding bored. At sixteen, his foster sister found everything boring. He wasn't buying it, though. She had been bribed into coming but she was watching, not texting on her phone.

"The Canine Good Citizen test. See that woman in the tweed skirt and sturdy shoes standing next to Nigh?"

"The lesbian?"

Ronald sighed with annoyance, but Derrick hid a laugh. “Now let’s not stereotype. I happen to know she’s happily married to a rock star named Bad Boy.”

Marisol stared at him wide-eyed for a moment, then pursed her lips. “You’re making that up.”

“Maybe.” He grinned. “But I made my point. Anyway, she’s from the American Kennel Club, a big organization devoted to purebred dogs. She’s administering the evaluations.”

“That is *not* a purebred dog.” Marisol was clearly repulsed. Beside her, Ronald mimicked her posture and disgust loudly and comically. She glared at him but straightened up.

“No, but any dog can take the CGC test.” Derrick wondered if he looked as ridiculous when he mocked his kids as Ronald did just now. He decided he didn’t care.

“Is there a ’Merican Mutt Club?” Benjamin piped up. Ronald smiled and squeezed his shoulder.

Derrick shook his head. “I don’t think so, but it would be a good idea to have an organization promoting mixed breeds, huh?”

“Yeah. Mixed is best, like us.” Benjamin sat up proudly, his white teeth extra bright against his beautiful dark brown skin. He was part African American and part Lummi—a tribe close to the Washington–British Columbia border—and was very proud of his heritage.

Ronald smiled and scratched the boy’s head. “Well, people are people, Benji, you know that. Anyone can be best no matter their race or color. But it’s true that some of us mixed folks are pretty special, like the four of us, and they don’t always get the same chances. So maybe you could start a ‘Merican Mutt Club’ someday, Benji, for those mixed dogs that aren’t getting all the attention.” Ronald never missed a teaching opportunity. It was both wonderful and terribly annoying. Derrick hated that he was the same way but he couldn’t help it.

“A mixed dog club?”

His father nodded.

“That would be cool. Will you help me?”

Ronald smiled encouragingly. “I’ll help you figure out the best way to go about learning what you need to know about what needs to be done in order to start the program; but you don’t need my help. You’ll be just fine doing it yourself.”

Derrick flinched at the confusing sentence. It took him a moment to work out that Ronald was offering to help Benji determine where to start the process of figuring everything out before he actually began anything rather than Ronald starting the whole process with Benji. As always, Ronald didn’t plan to actually help with the project at all, just guide his son in the right direction. Benji didn’t look confused, though, so Derrick figured it was safe to move on.

“So anyway, passing the CGC test shows that the dog is well-trained and safe to be around. Being labeled Good Citizens makes the dogs easily adoptable.”

“Oh.” Marisol rolled her eyes but he could tell she was interested. “So what’s the surprise?”

“You’ll see. Wait, here’s the fun part of the test.” On the field in front of the bleachers, several of the other trainers had gathered in a loose group. At a signal from Danica, the teens began to make loud strange noises, flail their arms around, and move about randomly—distracting and unpredictable. Mercedes led her dog through the group. The animal moved out of the way once or twice when he was about to get stepped on, but other than that, paid no attention to the boisterous and bizarre teens. Derrick didn’t think he could have done that himself; those kids were nuts. Mercedes had done a great job.

After the girl led Spot Check through the group three times, she had the dog sit. The audience applauded; Derrick and his family all shouted and cheered. Nigel was bouncing on his toes as he clapped, then he turned and looked up into the seats where his eyes met Derrick’s. His grin turned into the huge open smile that always set Derrick’s heart skipping, and Derrick smiled back. Danica was standing next to Nigel, and when she caught Derrick’s eye, she pantomimed a giant wink so he could see it from where he sat. He rolled

his eyes but he felt his face flush. Once again he thanked the universe for giving him naturally tan skin.

“That your man?”

“Duh, Dad. He’s the only guy over there.” Marisol sounded disgusted again.

Ronald ignored her. “It’s a good program he put together.”

Derrick’s smile never waned, nor did he take his eyes off Nigel. “It sure is. He’s a good man.”

“And fucking hot, too. Why the best ones always gotta be gay?” Marisol sighed.

“Marisol. No cussing.” Their father then leaned over a little. “She’s right though. You caught a handsome man.”

Derrick thought he might die of embarrassment, until he looked at Nigel again and a warm feeling spread in his chest. Yes, Nigel was definitely a good-looking guy, and he was Derrick’s.

They all turned to watch the last of the test. Mercedes had Spot Check allow himself to be petted by an overeager Demetrius in a wheelchair. The boy was pretending to be out of control of his limbs, flopping around, drooling, and making strange sounds.

“What’s he doing?” Benjamin was wiggling in imitation as he watched.

“He’s pretending to be a person who is a little different than the average Joe. Spot Check proved a minute ago that he can be calm around unpredictable behavior. Now he needs to show that he can be attentive and relaxed when he is introduced to and greeted by someone with special needs.”

“Oh. My. God. That’s Demetrius! He used to go to my school. He is such a jerk.”

Ronald nodded in agreement. “He’s kind of rude. Doesn’t seem very tolerant of disabled people.”

Derrick sighed. “Sensitivity is not one of Demetrius’s strong suits.” Below, Spot Check nosed the teen’s hand for more petting. Following that, Mercedes

took the dog around the ring and then back to the center where she met Nigel and Tibbs. They talked for a moment while the dogs ignored one another, and then she continued on. Nigel returned to his position near Danica, Spot Check having shown that he could be calm around a strange dog.

“Gelly has a dog?” Benji exclaimed.

Ronald looked confused. “Jelly? Who’s Jelly?”

“That’s what the kids call Nigel,” Derrick explained.

“When did you meet Nigel, Benji?”

Benji wasn’t paying any attention to his father. Instead he was standing and waving to Nigel with his whole body. Below Nigel was laughing and waving back just as big.

“Last Thursday when his playdate was cancelled, I took Benji and Marisol to watch the dogs and meet Nigh.”

“Man’s called a lot of weird names. That’s probably your doing, Mr. Alias.” It was true. Derrick had a nickname for everyone except his parents. Their nicknames were “Mom” and “Dad” but for a long time, he hadn’t felt comfortable calling them that, and then it was too awkward to start.

Derrick looked down to where the last part of the test was happening. A jogger ran close by Mercedes and the dog as they walked placidly across the field. Spot Check ignored the woman, calm until two teens carried a ladder nearby and dropped it just as they drew abreast of the dog and handler. Spot Check jumped a little and looked at it but then kept walking. They returned to the center of the arena where Mercedes bowed and the dog kneeled on his forelegs.

“Yes!” Derrick jumped to his feet yelling and clapping. “Way to go, Mercedes!” He whistled. His family and the rest of the audience were on their feet, too. The other trainers were off to the side also whooping and cheering. Mercedes beamed. Nigel ran over and shook her hand hard, his own face bearing his radiant smile. Derrick thought his heart might explode.

“Mercedes Walters and Spot Check, everyone!” Nigel spoke into a microphone in his hand. Everyone cheered and clapped again. The woman from the AKC lightly tapped her hands together, a polite smile on her face.

Not a very emotional person, Derrick thought to himself. *Boring*. He looked back at his boyfriend whose feelings were plastered across his whole body. Nigel made his whole world sing.

“Now Mercedes and Spot Check have a special treat for you.” The onlookers sat. Nigel caught Mercedes’s eye, and when she nodded, he signaled to Danica then hurried off the field. Mercedes and the dog stood side by side, the girl’s hand on her hip. In a moment, music began piping through the microphone’s speakers. There were a few catcalls as folks recognized the song, “Single Ladies” by Beyoncé.

Mercedes first tapped her foot for a few beats, her eyes meeting those of the dog. Then she twisted her left foot toward the right one a small bit and swung her hips to the right as well. The dog followed by moving his back left paw to the right, his hips moving as a result. Mercedes moved the foot back and then repeated the motion with her other leg. Spot Check followed suit. As the two continued in this manner, the crowd caught on and cheered. When Beyoncé told everyone to put their hands up, Mercedes kicked her right leg out and lifted her hands. Spot Check first kicked his right hind leg out and back, then reared up, batting at the air with his front paws. The crowd roared.

The two then moved their hips from side to side again. When the song mentioned “dipping,” Mercedes bowed and the dog move his legs forward so his head was near the ground and his tail was up in the air. The two moved around in a circle as they continued their dancing. Behind them, the teens had all lined up and were imitating Beyoncé’s moves from her video, too. By then the audience was on its feet again, clapping and singing along. Even Ronald mouthed a phrase or two.

“God, this song is so old. I was in middle school when this came out,” complained Marisol, but even she was nodding her head to the beat. Girl and dog swung their heads and moved their hips to the music, never breaking eye contact. It was clear from Spot Check’s wagging tail, bright eyes, and lolling

grin that he was having as much fun as the young woman. The prancing “Egyptian style” bit had the crowd cheering again when Spot Check hopped along on his hind legs, his front right paw in the air and the left hanging downward.

Only a short portion of the song was used, but it was enough. When the music ended, Mercedes took a bow and the dog kneeled on his front legs. The cheers were deafening. Everyone was on his or her feet, even Marisol. Nigel was jumping up and down, and Derrick wanted to jump up and down on him, only in private and with their bodies horizontal. He put that thought away the moment it came to him. It would not do to have to adjust himself here around his father and siblings.

Nigel hurried out to shake Mercedes hand again. “Mercedes and Spot Check!” He reminded the crowd of their names and held the girl’s hand up like he might a winning prizefighter’s. After the applause died down, Nigel continued. “Wasn’t that amazing? That’s called dog dancing. It’s very hard to do, and Mercedes had to work extra hours with Spot Check to train him to do it. Thank you to Spot Check’s foster family, the Carters,” he pointed to a large family taking up a good chunk of the bleachers, “for providing opportunities for the two to practice.

“We have more testing for you to watch, and more entertainment and surprises, so please stay. Afterward we’ll have a pizza party right here for the participants, audience, and volunteers. Please join us. Up next is Molly Ng.” Derrick watched him wave a plump girl with a small terrier mix over and then head for the sidelines again. He longed to join Nigel but he needed to play host. His family was doing him a favor by being here.

“Is it all going to be that fun?” asked Benjamin.

Derrick shrugged. “Depends on what you think is fun. Nigh wanted to start the event off with something special to keep people interested. But all the dogs are going to demonstrate something, and I do know a couple will be showing agility, and at the end, at least four, including Spot Check, will be playing a shortened version of flyball together. That’s really fun to watch.”

“What’s flyball?” Marisol’s pretense at boredom was failing miserably.

“Well, both agility and flyball are kind of like obstacle courses for dogs. The course in agility is varied and difficult, and the trainer leads the dog through it. In flyball, the course is lower and easier, but the dog has to grab a ball at one end and bring it back to his or her handler who remains at the start the whole time. It’s also a team sport. Both are really fun to watch. You’ll like it.”

They settled back to watch the rest of the show. All of the dogs passed the test, even Demetrius’s mutt which took every opportunity to lie down and try to sleep. Derrick had never seen a lazier dog. But he figured it was a good match for the teen who suffered from ADHD and didn’t need any more stimuli than he already got.

At the end, each youth was reintroduced with his or her dog. Both the handlers and dogs got a certificate, the handlers for completing the program, and the dogs for passing the tests. The CGC certificate was a fake for the awards ceremony only; the real certificates would come in the mail once the judge had turned in the results. Twelve teenagers had started the program and only eight finished, but that was one up from the first time the program ran and was incredible for such an unreliable and unstable population.

After the awards ceremony, most of the crowd gathered for pizza and soft drinks. Derrick knew that most of the adults were friends, social workers, volunteers, and supporters; very few were family. Nevertheless, Demetrius came up to him dragging an elderly woman who smelled of peanuts and citrus. The teen’s demeanor was a little sullen and fit more closely with his whole emo look, but Derrick saw the happiness in his eyes as the young man introduced them.

“Derrick, this is my grandma. Grandma, this is my P.O.”

The woman smiled and took one of Derrick’s hands in both of hers. “Thank you, young man. You’ve worked a miracle with my grandson. He talks about you all the time.”

“No I don’t.”

The woman turned and patted her grandson on the arm. “Oh, don’t worry, dear. I don’t care if you’re gay.”

“I’m not gay!”

She ignored him and turned back to Derrick. “He takes after his father. I did a terrible job with him, and I was at my wits’ end with Demmy.”

“I’m not gay!” Demetrius was still back a few sentences ago. Derrick heard Ronald snort.

“This program and your guidance have just done wonders for the boy.”

“That’s nice of you to say, Mrs. Nagle? Same surname as Demetrius?” She nodded. “But I can’t take credit. It’s Nigel Rutherford’s program, not mine, and it’s your grandson who’s done all the work.”

“Derrick, I’m not gay.” Behind Derrick, Marisol was snickering.

“Nonsense.” The woman was still ignoring her grandson. “He has had lots of opportunities to do work, but this is the first time he’s ever done any. You got him into this program, and you kept him in it.” She nodded in agreement with herself.

“Grandma, just ’cause I wear eyeliner doesn’t mean I’m gay.” Demetrius turned to Marisol. “I’m not gay.” Marisol burst out laughing and Benjamin joined in, although he clearly had no idea why he was laughing.

“All we did was make opportunities available. Demetrius did all the work,” Derrick repeated.

“Humph. Well I couldn’t do a thing with him, and I provided all sorts of opportunities.”

Derrick suppressed an urge to hiss and swipe at her with his hands molded into claws. The fact that one of his paws was still trapped between the woman’s helped. “Sometimes the right chance takes a while to show up.”

“If anyone’s listening, I’m not gay.” The kid scowled.

Ms. Nagle sighed. “I suppose you’re right. As I said, I didn’t do a great job with his father, either. My daughters all turned out fine, but I guess I never knew how to parent boys.”

Behind him, Marisol giggled.

Derrick wasn't sure what to say to that. "I'm sure you did your best."

"Oh my God. Grandma, tell her I'm not gay!"

"Don't patronize me young man," she said to Derrick gently. "But thank you. Now I've got to be going. It's almost time for *Jeopardy*." She verified that Demetrius had a way to get to work after the pizza party, said goodbye, and left.

"Derrick, tell your sister I'm not gay!"

"Marisol, Demetrius says he's not gay." That resulted in a new burst of laughter.

"Derrick!" Demetrius stomped his foot. "Marisol, I swear, I'm not—"

"Gay, I know." She giggled. "I don't care if you are. My brother's gay." She nudged Derrick with her shoulder.

"I know, but I want—I mean... Would..." Demetrius trailed off. "Never mind." He turned to go.

Marisol calmed down a bit. "Maybe you could show me the dogs?"

Demetrius looked surprised and hopeful. "Yeah? I mean, yeah, come on."

Marisol grabbed Benji's hand. "Come on. Let's look at the dogs. Dad and Derrick need to talk." Derrick was surprised by that. He wasn't sure what they needed to talk about. He'd actually forgotten his dad was there, he'd been so quiet.

Clearly having Benjamin tag along was not what Demetrius had in mind, but he went with it and grabbed Benji's other hand. The three headed off toward the kennels where the volunteers and some of the teens were gathered with the dogs.

Derrick turned and was shocked to see his father's jaw set, anger in his eyes. "What? What'd I do?"

"Nigel *Rutherford*?" Ronald gritted out through clenched teeth.

"Uh, yeah. I told you, he's the head of the program." Derrick was baffled.

“I thought he was just running the program or something. I didn’t know he owned the whole damn thing.” Ronald’s eyes narrowed in anger.

“Well, his parents do, but why? Is that a problem?” Derrick had no idea what was going on.

“So he’s rich.” Ronald’s expression made it clear he thought nothing more needed to be said. Derrick was even more confused. Nigel having money was the problem? He thought his father would be thrilled his boyfriend wasn’t sponging off Derrick like had happened in the past with a couple of those fuck buddies.

“Derrick?” He turned as Nigel walked up, face flushed, his wonderful smile lighting his face. Derrick immediately forgot the current conversation and grinned back. His lover pulled him into a quick hug and kissed him lightly on the lips before letting him go. Derrick loved that Nigel was okay with touching him in public. “I’m so glad you came!” He then turned to Ronald and held out his hand. “You must be Mr. Bryant. I’m Nigel. Thank you for coming. We really appreciate the support.”

Derrick’s father ignored the hand. “I’m here for the kids.”

Looking unsure, Nigel put his hand back down. Then his polite smile was back. “I know they appreciate it. So many of them don’t have anyone here to cheer for them.” He turned back to Derrick. “I’m sorry your mom couldn’t make it. Did you see Mercedes’s mom? I thought she would pop a blood vessel telling me how proud of her daughter she is. I hadn’t met her before. She’s very nice, just like her daughter told us.”

Derrick was still at a loss as to his father’s behavior, and part of him felt like mocking Ronald’s rudeness, but he ignored it for now and instead tried to draw his father into the conversation. “No, we haven’t talked to her yet. Ronald, Mercedes’s mom is delightful. She’s tried really hard with her daughter, but she’s a single mom of three and has to work two jobs, and they’re still struggling. She was just a kid herself when she had Mercedes, and she didn’t have anyone to model good parenting. She’s become a fine mother, but Mercedes rebelled with the wrong crowd and the kids’ father was... Let’s

just say he wasn't a nice man." He moved to put an arm around Nigel's waist. "Your program was what she needed, Nigh. She's turned completely around."

Nigel kissed his cheek. "You're what she needed. She listened to you. You got her into the program and you kept her coming. The rest she did herself."

"If this annoying mutual admiration society is finished, I gotta take my kids home; it's late and they got school tomorrow." Derrick could almost see Ronald baring his teeth.

Nigel didn't react to the disrespect. "It was very nice to meet you, Mr. Bryant. Derrick's told me so many great things about you. He says you saved him. I want to thank you for that. He means the world to me." He squeezed Derrick's shoulder. Derrick felt like humming. Instead, he squeezed back.

"I didn't do it for you." Ronald turned. "Get the kids, Derrick." He didn't wait for an answer, just strode toward the car.

"What happened? Is he okay?" Derrick turned to find Nigel's face shadowed with concern. His lover had just been treated like garbage, and yet he was worried about the person who insulted him. How did Derrick earn such a compassionate and kind boyfriend?

"I'm not sure. Don't worry about it. I'll talk to him. Can I meet you later?"

Nigel face relaxed into a sultry leer. "Depends on what you have in mind."

"Depends on what you have to offer."

"Oh, I have a number of things you might like." Nigel spun so they were facing each other.

"Oh yeah? Why don't I stop by and you can give me a demonstration." Derrick slipped his fingers into the waistband of his lover's jeans and tugged. Nigel hopped closer to keep from falling over.

He put his hands on Derrick's chest. "I would love to show you right now, but I think a certain level of decorum is required of the program director." Nigel looked at him wistfully.

Derrick shrugged and stepped back. "Your loss." Nigel swiped at him but Derrick jumped easily out of the way. "Uh-uh. You have to wait."

Nigel frowned. "I hate decorum."

"Me, too. I'll see you in a couple of hours." He leaned forward for a kiss and then hurried after his dad.

"What was that about?" Derrick asked when he reached the parking lot. "You were really obnoxious!"

Ronald was leaning against the hood of the car. "Where're the kids?"

"I'll call Merry on her cell phone when we're done talking. Tell me why you were so rude to my boyfriend!"

Ronald snarled. "He's not your boyfriend. He isn't worthy of you."

Derrick pulled back. "Uh, yeah he is my boyfriend and has been for several months. I believe I've mentioned him a time or two."

"Well you didn't say he's a Rutherford."

Around them people were returning to their cars. Derrick lowered his voice a little, not wanting an audience for this family argument. "Why is that relevant?"

Ronald shook his head. "I love you, and you can do anything you set your mind to, but you're an idiot."

"Excuse me?" Derrick's jaw fell open and his eyebrows jumped for the sky, he was so shocked. That was the first time his father had ever insulted him.

Ronald turned and headed around the car to the passenger side. "Call your sister. We're leaving."

"Ronald, I'm not going anywhere until you tell me what's going on."

He father put his hands on the car door. "What going on is your 'boyfriend' is just a rich playboy who's using you, and you're a fool to let him."

Derrick took an unintentional step back. "What are you talking about?"

"He's just fucking you. You think he's gonna settle down with some 'boy from the hood'?" Derrick could hear the quotes around the words. "He's

slumming it, playing around with the poor ‘trash’ until he gets bored and moves on to the next thing.”

Ronald was hitting on some of Derrick’s biggest insecurities, but he refused to let that show. “You’re wrong. You don’t know him at all. He loves me.”

“Oh really?” Ronald tilted his head. “How do you know? Because he said so? Men like him get anything they want, and they’ll say anything to get it.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about.” Ronald was pissing him off. “Nigel’s not like that.”

“Again, how do you know that? From what he told you? Tell me, boy, has he ever had to work for anything? Does he need this program to work out ’cause he put his life’s blood or everything he owns into it? Or is it just something to make all that white guilt go away? Did he spend his life working to make this happen, or did he just decide one day, ‘Hey, maybe I’ll go throw a shitload of money at a problem and see if it goes away’? How does he understand these kids at all?”

Derrick was getting that twisty feeling in his gut that he got when he was about to throw up. “He just wants to help.”

“So does he want to help you, too? Does he pay for everything yet?”

“No! You know I wouldn’t take his money!” Derrick was appalled his father had even suggested it. “He knows I don’t love him for his money. He doesn’t lord it over me. He really cares.”

“Why? Other than that you’re attractive with a nice ass. Is he even gay, or is that just something he’s experimenting with, too?”

“Fuck you!” He didn’t know whether to be irate, or disturbed that his father knew he had a good-looking butt. He decided to go with furious for now. “Of course he’s gay! I have irrefutable proof he is. Men who are gay don’t—Never mind. But I’ve got more to offer than a nice ass and a big dick.” He was irritated when his father didn’t react to his statement any more than he had to similar words when he pulled Derrick out of juvie. It was unfair his father could use shock tactics and he couldn’t. At least Ronald didn’t argue

with the “big dick” part. That would have been particularly mortifying. “I can’t believe you asked ‘why’.”

Ronald softened his expression and posture a little. “Son, that isn’t what I meant. ’Course you’re a catch. You’re a really wonderful man. That old woman is right—you are rescuing these kids. I’m your biggest fan. But people like us are nothing to people like the Rutherfords. We’re just something for them to buy. We only matter if we’re useful to them. I just don’t want to see you get hurt.”

“I know what I’m doing,” Derrick lied. He suddenly had no idea what he was doing.

Ronald came back around the car and put his hand on Derrick’s shoulder. “Derrick, you’re my son, and it doesn’t matter what anyone might think or say. You know I’d do any fool thing for you, and I’m not trying to get you upset. But I know that man is gonna hurt you far more than what I’m saying right now is. I’m telling you the truth.”

“You only think that. You don’t know.” Derrick was disgusted to find his voice barely above a whisper.

“Aw, Son, you’ve got it bad, don’t you? I’m sorry. I’ve just been around a lot longer than you, and I know what I’m saying is true. Please, do yourself a favor. Stop seeing that boy. I’ve never done wrong by you, have I?”

Derrick was finding it hard to speak at all. “No.”

His father looked at him for a bit then told him to call his sister.

Derrick pulled out his phone and texted Marisol to come to the car right away. He knew it would take her a few minutes, time he really needed to get himself under control. “Ronald, I need to say goodbye to Mercedes. I’ll be right back.” He couldn’t meet his father’s eyes and was glad Ronald just grunted in return.

Derrick found the young trainer and her mother, and after a few pleasantries, he said his goodbyes. He caught up with Marisol, who was ignoring her phone in order to kick at the ground and chew on her lip. He noticed her hand clasped tightly with Demetrius’s. A few months ago he

wouldn't have wanted his sister anywhere near the boy. Now it was different because Demetrius was different. He started to smile but then remembered his conversation with Ronald, and he felt the sick twist in his gut again. He ordered her back to the car with Benjamin, who had to be dragged away from the dogs. He waited until they were well on their way before heading to intercept Nigel's beeline toward the pizza table.

"Hey, Nigh?"

Nigel turned in surprise and then smiled. As always, Derrick's heart flipped in his chest. He just wanted to bury himself within the other man's heart and stay there until the sun died. Instead, he stopped a few paces short. Nigel reached for him but Derrick remained out of touching distance. His lover's smile faltered.

"Look, I won't be able to make it tonight after all." He needed the time to think, but he didn't plan on telling Nigel that.

"What's wrong? Are you okay? Is your family okay?" His lover's look of concern almost undid him, but Derrick managed to stay determined.

"Yeah, we're fine. I just—" He almost said he forgot that he had stuff to do, but he wouldn't lie to Nigel, not ever. "—I'm just tired and need some time to myself." That was absolutely true. "I'm going to drop everyone off at my dad's house and then go home and turn in early."

Nigel relaxed a little. "Are you sure? Do you need anything?" Nigel wasn't pushing or showing too much worry. He asked in a way that just said he was there if Derrick needed anything. It was the perfect response, as always, and Derrick's gut twisted further.

He managed a smile. "I'm sure. I'll talk to you tomorrow."

"Okay. Have a good rest. You know you wouldn't get any at my house." Nigel grinned.

Oddly, that wasn't exactly what Derrick wanted to hear. Maybe his father was right and Nigel just wanted his body. When Nigel reached to hug him, Derrick cut him off with a handshake and a clap to the shoulder. He tried to

ignore the look of hurt and confusion on his lover's face. It killed Derrick, knowing he put it there.

“Dare?”

Derrick tried to smile reassuringly. “I’ll talk to you tomorrow.” As he turned to go, he couldn’t miss Nigel’s forlorn expression. Derrick figured it probably matched his own.

CHAPTER 5

Now: Derrick

Derrick urgently pushes his lover toward the bedroom while their mouths collide. He grabs his boyfriend's tee and yanks it up as far as he can. Even before his lover has started to take it off, Derrick is sucking a nipple, his hands exploring his Nigel's body. He is so aroused it hurts. He only stops long enough for another passionate kiss.

They continue to stumble along, mouths jammed together, tongues dancing around one another's. They rub against each other, sliding their cocks together, heat building. Nigel reaches to pull off Derrick's shirt, but they both are too impatient, and it rips in the process. Derrick desperately needs to be close to his lover, feel his life and vitality through his warm body. He badly wants to bury himself within his Nigel.

They separate long enough for Derrick to assert his need. "I've changed my mind. I want to hear you begging me to come inside you."

Nigel's breath catches. "Oh fuck, yes."

They reach the bed where Derrick shoves his lover back, and Nigel bounces a little when he lands. Nigel scoots toward the headboard, and Derrick crawls after him, falling on his boyfriend when he's close enough. He can't get enough of Nigel; he doesn't want to stop touching him long enough to get the rest of their clothes off.

Derrick feels the pleasure of his lover's hands slipping under his waistband to cup his ass. He arches into the touch. Nigel pulls him close to grind against him, and Derrick feels his already erect cock harden still more. They rub together, Nigel kneading his ass, and Derrick finds himself thrusting already. His hands caresses his lover's neatly shorn head, and he feels the bristles poking, like tiny pieces of Nigel reaching for him.

They continue their heady kissing. "Clothes off." Nigel's voice is muffled but insistent. Derrick slithers down and yanks Nigel's pajama pants out of the way. Before him lies his lover's beautiful, uncut penis. Usually Derrick takes his time to admire the jutting strength and soft skin, but tonight he can't wait.

He needs Nigel now. That fine cock bobs over his lover's balls, and Derrick dives right in. Hairs tickle his nose as he nips the stretched skin. Nigel sucks in a breath. Unable to resist, and not really wanting to, Derrick raises his head and takes in just the head of his lover's dick as he pulls the foreskin back with one hand. He uses his tongue to curl around and massage the corona, savoring the taste before sucking hard. Nigel gasps. Derrick looks up to see him watching, his eyes wide open with need.

Nigel is breathing heavily and his hips rock. His fingers weave through Derrick's hair. Derrick loves the feel of his lover's fingers fondling his scalp, but he is too fired up. The cock between his jaws demands his attention, and he takes it in as deeply as he can. The hardness fills his mouth as he pumps the shaft with his hand, adding a twist of his wrist to the movement. His other hand tweaks and scrapes Nigel's nipples one at a time.

“Shit, Dare! That's fucking hot.”

Derrick is too wrapped up in his enjoyment to pay much attention. He devours and fists his lover's cock, lapping at the come seeping from the slit. His other hand makes its way down to fondle the sack hanging below. A moan escapes his own mouth as he digs his throbbing erection into the bed.

He must have more, and he pushes himself up to suck Nigel's collarbone until a mark begins to form. Then they are kissing again, hard enough that he feels his lip catch and tear on one of his lover's teeth. The pain reminds him he's alive and only goads him further, but Nigel pulls away looking concerned. “I taste blood.”

“I cut myself. It doesn't hurt. I'm fine.” Derrick quickly shows his lip to his lover and Nigel's look of concern touches him for a brief moment before he clasps their lips together again. He finds himself climbing Nigel, his feet scraping at his lover's ankles and calves.

But it isn't enough. Somehow his lover senses this and rolls Derrick onto his back. Nigel rocks his hips against Derrick and straddles his pulsing cock. He leans down and tilts Derrick's head back. Derrick feels his lover's hungry mouth ravishing his neck. They twine together, clutching shoulders, hips, thighs.

Derrick urgently wants more and growls. “I want to fuck your mouth.” Nigel nods vigorously, eyes shining with anticipation. Derrick stands and his lover drops to his knees in front of him. He feels hot, moist heat engulf him as his boyfriend swallows him down. Nigel is vigorously pumping his own erection, and the sight makes Derrick groan.

“Fuck that feels good.” Derrick’s hips begin to move. Nigel repositions himself, and Derrick’s cock slides in all the way. “Fuck!” He flexes, grasping his lover’s head to hold him steady. Nigel makes choking sounds, but he doesn’t try to pull away or put his hands on Derrick’s wrists, the signal that he can’t breathe. Instead, he opens wider and his lips edge around Derrick’s scrotum.

It’s still not enough, though; nothing is enough. Derrick has to be inside Nigel immediately. He slips out, grasps his lover under his arms, and hauls him upright. “I need to fuck you right now.”

“Fuck yes. Where do you want me?”

In answer, Derrick bends his boyfriend over the bed, grabbing a couple of pillows and slipping them under Nigel to prop him up a bit. The lube is on the nightstand and Derrick grabs it, grateful they don’t have to use condoms anymore. He is sure that in his urgency, he would rip it trying to get it on.

“Ready?” He tries to consider Nigel’s comfort even though he feels like he’s vibrating and on the verge of shattering.

“Yes, yes, hurry.”

Derrick sticks his slicked thumb inside his lover’s hole and moves it around briefly before drawing back and replacing it with two fingers. He scissors them quickly and firmly. When he brushes against the gland, Nigel jolts and gasps.

“Holy shit. Hurry up, I’m loose enough; take me.”

Derrick knows his lover isn’t quite there but he is too revved up to worry about it. He pulls his fingers out, quickly coats his cock with more gel, then moves into position. The beautiful white ass awaits him. “You are so fucking hot.”

“Less talking, more fucking!” A groan of frustration from Nigel is unneeded as Derrick is already rubbing the head of his penis against his lover’s hole, slicking the entrance and tantalizing both of them. It’s momentary, though, because he just can’t wait any longer. He lines himself up and pushes just the tip of his cock in past the muscle. Beneath him Nigel makes a sharp sound and spreads his legs farther. Derrick grasps his lover’s hips and sinks agonizingly slowly into the tight hole. Before he is even halfway in, Nigel shoves backward, slamming into him and shoving Derrick’s cock in all the way.

Derrick cries out as the moist heat envelops him. A whimper clues him in that this was not painless for his lover. “Nigh? Are you okay?” He can barely speak, all he wants is to move, but he doesn’t want to hurt Nigel.

“Wonderful,” Nigel insists, but Derrick hears the words through what are clearly gritted teeth.

Derrick gently caresses his boyfriend’s back while he works desperately to keep himself still. He listens to his lover’s stilted breathing until it is almost even again.

“I’m okay. Move.” Nigel sounds less pained.

Derrick puts an arm around his lover’s chest and yanks him backward. With his other hand, he tilts Nigel’s head so he can kiss him hard and bruising, relishing his lover’s lips, just as hungry as his own. Nigel gasps into Derrick’s mouth and it spurs him; he wants to feel his lover’s heat grabbing his cock as it slides in and out. He rears back and plunges back in. Nigel moans. The sound of his usually quiet boyfriend’s feral pleasure is a strong aphrodisiac, and Derrick jerks out so he can ram right in again. Another moan, and he can’t stop himself; he pounds into Nigel without pausing, swinging his hips back and forth, eliciting a cry with each thrust. His own grunts provide harmony to his lover’s chorus.

“Harder!” The word goads him. He puts one of his legs on the bed and turns slightly to get into a better position. Now his cock goes deeper with each stroke, and the better angle strikes Nigel’s gland each time. “Oh fuck, right there.” His lover gasps the words out, his voice straining to hold steady.

“This isn’t right. I need to see your face when you come.” Derrick draws back and yanks Nigel to his feet. He mashes their mouths together, his hands roving over his lover’s body, trying to be everywhere at once. His boyfriend’s hands are busy, too, first twisting Derrick’s nipples then scraping his back. Derrick spins them and rams Nigel against a wall. He lifts one of his lover’s legs in the crook of his elbow taking a little of Nigel’s weight. Even with his built muscles, Derrick isn’t a big man and he finds his lover heavy and unwieldy, but for some reason, it adds to the intensity.

He aligns his dick again and slides in. Almost immediately he resumes the fast pace, hammering into his lover’s hole. Nigel’s head is thrown back, and Derrick attempts to mark his neck. But the fucking is too hard and fast; he can’t move slowly enough to make it work. Kissing is a major turn on so Derrick stills long enough to seal his mouth on the alabaster skin of Nigel’s throat. He sucks hard until a bruise begins to form, then braces himself and begins thrusting again.

The position makes it hard to see Nigel’s face, though. He lifts Nigel and practically tosses him onto the bed, the adrenaline from his panicked outburst earlier still spiking his strength. His lover’s eyes grow wide, but he is able to straighten out just before Derrick’s pounce lands him between Nigel’s knees.

“Fuck, that was hot, Dare.”

Derrick spares a glance at that stunning face and body that make his world spin, but he’s almost unraveling with desire and doesn’t linger. He tilts his boyfriend’s legs so far back, Nigel’s shoulder blades are supporting his weight and his knees hug Derrick’s neck. Realigning his cock takes Derrick just a moment, then he drives back in and all thoughts leave his mind.

Multiple sensations infuse his body: friction, moist warmth, smooth pressure, and velvety softness along his cock; roughness and tickling from hair on Nigel’s legs along his shoulders. Inside his chest, deep emotions like passion and want whirl and churn. Nigel’s fingers have found his and they are tangled together, the grip tight and strong. Sounds of pleasure and lust fill his ears. But the best sensation of all is the sight of the writhing body, flushed face, and wide smile of this man who makes all his senses chime.

Nigel is furiously pumping his own dick. He's not usually vocal in bed, but his groans are louder than Derrick's. His lower lip is caught between his teeth, which has always been one of the sexiest things Derrick has ever seen, and tonight is no exception. He feels his balls drawing up as he approaches climax.

“Dare, I'm close. Can we come together?”

Derrick nods and manages to utter the word, “Ten.” Together they clench and unclench their hands together in a silent countdown. It's a code they established long ago, intimate and familiar, the two of them allying toward the promise of simultaneous release.

Three. Two. One. Derrick lets himself go, and the upwelling of his orgasm thunders through him. He cries out, a long breathy moan of pleasure. In his arms, Nigel's body contorts. A shout escapes his lover as a powerful climax surges through Nigel's body, and he gasps an emotionally charged, “Dare!” Derrick feels like it's his own seed spilling as Nigel shoots between them. At this moment, he feels like they are one person, seamlessly united.

He collapses atop his lover, still inside him. Nigel moves his legs and wraps them around Derrick's waist. His arms drape around Derrick's back who in turn cups his lover's face. Gently they kiss, lingering, drawing out the sweet contact. Derrick's adrenal high is finally waning, to be replaced by exhaustion.

They hold each other closely. Derrick feels his sadness welling again, and he tries to shake the pain out of his head. Nigel uses the sixth sense he seems to have and tightens his grip.

“I've got you, Dare.”

How many times has his boyfriend said this over the two years they've been together? Derrick feels like he's constantly falling, and Nigel is always there to catch him. He wonders if his lover ever gets tired of it.

“Stop thinking. I'm not going anywhere. You don't have to bear this alone. I am here for you, always.”

“I'm trying.” How he won Nigel's heart he doesn't know, but this man is a gift he's still attempting to earn. “I love you so much.”

His lover graces him with one of his wonderful smiles that always lift Derrick's heart, if only for a moment this time. "My heart is yours, Dare."

Derrick slips out of his lover who then reaches in a drawer for wipes to clean them up. When he's finished, Nigel pulls the comforter out from under them. He nestles in the bed and pulls Derrick close. His boyfriend's chest is warm against Derrick's back, and he snuggles in when Nigel pulls the covers over them. He lies in his lover's arms, emotions churning.

"Dare, please stop thinking. You need to sleep."

"I can't just shut it off." Derrick rubs his eyes.

"Want me to sing to you?"

Nigel's tenor is beautiful and soothing, and might actually help. "Yeah, that would be... I would love that."

Nigel begins a song Derrick doesn't know, but it's calming, and he lets the melody drift through him. He concentrates on the words rather than the turmoil in his head. A particular passage catches him as it floats past, the lyrics talking about how the singer will always be there to pick him up if he falls. Another part of the song makes it clear that Nigel needs Derrick, too. He knows his lover chose this song because the words express Nigel's own feelings toward Derrick.

When the song is finished, he clutches Nigel's hand. "That was... That's intense. What's it called?"

"'The Adventure' by Angels & Airwaves. I always think of you when I hear it."

"It was nice. I... It's... I want to sing that to you."

"Oh God, Dare, can you just speak the lyrics instead? Spoken word is good." Nigel's voice is teasing.

It makes Derrick laugh. He's been told that Nigel is always on key, but he doesn't know from experience. He's pretty close to tone-deaf, and he's been told by more than one person that his singing is painful. "You've said I can do anything I set my mind to."

Nigel coughs and his breath ruffles Derrick's hair. "Uh, yeah, well, except sing. You're great at talking, really amazing at that, not like I am, but singing? Not so much." Nigel laughs against Derrick's head. It's been said many times before and undoubtedly will be repeated many times again. Derrick doesn't mind. Nigel's voice is what he wants to hear.

"Fine. Then you keep singing. I think we'll both find it more soothing."

"Good choice." There's a pause, presumably so Nigel can think of what to sing. Soon he's crooning "Simple Song" by The Shins, a tune Derrick recognizes. The lyrics seem to be a metaphor for how Nigel felt stranded and alone until he found Derrick. He smiles at how Nigel changes the word "girl" in the lyrics to "Dare." His lover sings other songs he doesn't recognize and Derrick asks what they are. One of these, The Apples in Stereo's "Sunndal Song", describes how Nigel will always be there to show Derrick how wonderful he is. He decides he loves the song, and maybe he'll speak the lyrics to Nigel one day. No need to torture the guy.

One song slips into the next, and Derrick's eyes finally grow heavy. His last coherent thought is that his lover has taken a lot of hard and/or loud music and made it into lullabies. Nigel is singing Muse's "I Belong to You", and the beauty of the French part, which Derrick doesn't understand, is enough to tip him over into sleep, nestled in the arms of his one true love.

Then: Derrick

Derrick didn't go straight home. Instead, he got on the freeway heading north and just drove and thought. He and Nigel had only been dating a few months but they had been the happiest of his life. He had never met a kinder, gentler, more compassionate man. Nigel didn't just talk about things that were wrong in the world, he dedicated his life to making change, and not just with his job. He also was politically involved, frequently writing his congressional representatives, and staying current on issues.

Nigel volunteered at a food bank, donated his personal money to a spay and neuter project, tried to protect the environment not just with his car but by recycling everything he could and carrying reusable bags to the grocery store even before the disposable kind became basically illegal in Seattle. He even regularly checked the Human Rights Campaign's Buyer's Guide to make sure he was only patronizing corporations that treated gay people fairly.

His Nigel was fun, too. He was always willing to try something he hadn't done before, which was good because Derrick thrived on new experiences. Nigel was refined but also adventurous if guided, and he was spontaneous. Twice he had collected Derrick from work and whisked him off on an unplanned weekend away. They liked many of the same things and had introduced each other to pleasures the other hadn't yet appreciated. They weren't the same, and they didn't enjoy all of the same things, but that would be boring. Instead, they complemented each other perfectly. Derrick never felt as alive as he did when he was with Nigel.

But Nigel's passion and strength were what really attracted Derrick. He felt Nigel was capable of anything, and he felt safe in his arms. Nigel was the hottest, sexiest man Derrick had ever touched let alone slept with. When they were making love, he sometimes felt like the universe was exploding. Nigel was skilled and attentive in bed. He made Derrick feel like he was the most attractive man on the planet. Every time together was a new adventure. He didn't like remembering how cold life was before Nigel. He felt sick just thinking about living without him.

But did he mean as much to Nigel as Nigel meant to him? What did Derrick have to offer someone like that? Nigel was intelligent and well-read, sophisticated and mannerly, more world-traveled and educated than Derrick was—he had been to India once, but Nigel had lived abroad and traveled the globe and had a doctorate to Derrick's own MA. Why would Nigel want to be with a man who had spent much of his adolescence in jail and on the streets, using drugs, stealing, and sleeping with older men just to have a dry place to spend the night? Was his father right and Nigel was just slumming it for kicks?

Derrick thought back to the time he and Nigel first met. There were sparks there before Nigel knew anything about him, before he knew Derrick's

background. They both had been attracted to one another. Rerunning their first real conversation through his head—the one they had that day at the dog park when Derrick visited the program ostensibly to check on his probationers—he couldn't remember anything being said that would have indicated that Derrick's past was arousing or exciting for him. No, Nigel had been interested and his emotions fitting, not pitying, condescending, or indicative of inappropriate arousal.

Derrick thought again about sex. Nigel was as excited by their lovemaking as was Derrick. His boyfriend enjoyed what Derrick did to him. He came explosively every time, occasionally twice. There was no doubt that Nigel was attracted to his body. Derrick wouldn't hazard a guess as to why, but he really didn't believe that his past influenced his own allure.

He began to get angry. Why was he second-guessing himself? Nigel told him every day how much Derrick meant to him. The time or two Derrick had let his insecurities show, Nigel acted surprised and was quick to reassure him. His boyfriend had been the first to say the L-word, and the sincerity when he said it wasn't an act. No, his father was wrong. Nigel did really love him, and for the person he was, not his past. He was not just a notch on Nigel's proverbial bedpost.

“You're being an idiot,” Derrick told himself out loud. He took the next exit, somewhere in Everett, turned the car around and got right back on the freeway heading south. He was going back where he belonged: to Nigel.

CHAPTER 6

Now: Derrick

Derrick stares at the phone in his hand. He can do this, he can.

“Dare? Is there something I can do to make this easier?” Nigel’s face is drawn and worried.

“No. I just need to suck it up.” Derrick forces his fingers to press the quick dial button for Marisol. He listens to it ring.

When the phone is answered, the band restricting his heart gets tighter. “Derrick?”

“Yeah, Merry, it’s me.”

“Dad’s dead.” Her voice is so sad; it breaks his heart.

“I know; I got your message.”

“I’m sorry I told you that you were being a dick.”

Derrick chuckles. “It’s okay. I kind of am.”

“I was just mad and was screaming at everyone. You know I’m on your side about you leaving.”

“I know. Are you at home?”

“Yeah.” She sighs. “I’m hiding in my room. Some of the people from church are here. Auntie says more are coming. They’re nice, but I just don’t want to be sweet and friendly.”

“You don’t have to be. No one expects you to have a smile on.” It’s a terrible thing for a child to lose a parent. So far Marisol has lost four: First, the father that walked out when she was born, followed by her birth mother who abused and then abandoned her. Then Celeste passed away last year, and now Ronald was dead. It’s hard enough for him and he’s thirty. Although he knew similar loss when he was very young, the death of her adoptive parents is undoubtedly more traumatic at her age than his. Then there’s Benji... He can’t think about Benjamin, not yet.

“I don’t know if I can do this.” She begins to cry. Each sob is like ice water injected into his veins. Nigel’s hands rub his shoulders, and he leans into the touch. Marisol doesn’t have a Nigel. She doesn’t have parents. All she has is their aunt who is nice enough, but not exactly the hugging sort.

“Merry, it’s okay. We’ll get through this together. Is it okay if I come over?” He tenses in case she says no. He realizes he wants to be there, needs to be there.

“Please?” She blows her nose. “Can you come soon?”

“We’ll leave in five.” The car keys are on a hook by the door. His signal to Nigel is unnecessary; his lover is already grabbing them.

“Is Nigel coming, too?”

“Yes. Is that okay with you?”

“Of course, but Auntie may not like it.” She doesn’t sound like she cares.

“Fuck Aunt Edwina.” It’s probably not the best choice of words, but Marisol laughs. “We’re a package deal. I need him there. I’ll see you soon, Sis. I love you.” The occasion calls for more sap than he’s used to with his sister.

“Love you, too, Derry. Hurry.” They hang up.

After grabbing his coat from the closet, Derrick reaches for the keys. “I need to drive. I need to do something to deal with this nervous energy.”

“Whatever you need, Dare, you’ve got.”

Then: Derrick

Derrick was pacing in front of Nigel’s fireplace, still fuming about Ronald’s behavior.

“It’s okay, Dare. He’s just trying to protect you.” Nigel sat in the chair-and-a-half that Derrick had convinced him to buy. It was huge and perfect for snuggling, but Derrick was not in the mood.

“I’m twenty-eight. I don’t need my father’s protection anymore.”

Nigel hoped his smile was reflected in his voice. “I’m two and a half years older than you and my father still worries. He’ll be worrying about me on his deathbed.” He modified his voice to a caricature of that of an elderly man. “Never mind that I’m dying, Son, did you remember to wear your mittens?”

Despite himself, Derrick had to smile. “Still, he’s wrong about this, and besides, he had no right to be rude about it.” He was upset again and sped up his steps as he wore a path in the Kashmiri carpet he’d brought back from India and later given to Nigel.

“Is that really what you’re upset about?” Nigel asked gently.

Derrick stopped and turned. “What do you mean?”

“Well, I’m wondering if maybe you’re worried that he’s right.”

“What?” Derrick asked, perhaps a bit more forcefully than necessary. Nigel just looked at him wearing his soft smile and loving gaze. “I mean...” Derrick thought about whether he should admit it. “Okay, yeah, you’re right. He did hit some buttons for me.” He tilted his head down. He couldn’t face Nigel. “It’s still hard to understand what you see in me. What do I have that you can’t get from some rich debutante?”

“Besides a penis?” Derrick didn’t respond, just kept looking at his shoes. “I’ve told you this before, and I will tell you again until you get it. You can ask me as often as you want, and I will never get tired of telling you how smart, strong, brave, loyal, loving, kind, funny, interesting, and gorgeous you are for starters. You have the biggest heart of anyone I’ve ever known. You’re the hottest guy I’ve ever seen let alone taken to bed. I’m the one who should be wondering what you see in me. I know you don’t care about the money.”

Derrick lifted his eyes to meet Nigel’s gaze. “Are you kidding me? You just listed everything I see in you. You doubt I love you for you?”

“No, I don’t. I believe and trust you when you say you love me. How can I make you understand that I love you unconditionally?”

Derrick felt ashamed. “It’s not that I don’t trust you. It’s just... Fuck. It’s hard when I’ve spent most of my life without love. When I wasn’t with the

Bryants, there wasn't anyone in the world who gave a damn what happened to me, let alone loved me. I made sure of it."

"That's not true." Nigel's voice was soft and his eyes so full of affection, Derrick had to swallow.

"How would you know?" He tried for playful but his voice came out raw.

"Come here, Dare." Nigel reached for him, and Derrick let his lover pull him into the chair. Nigel shifted and wrapped as much of his body as he could around Derrick. "I know because I have loved you always."

Derrick tried for a laugh. "That's ridiculous."

"No it isn't. Let me tell you my coming out story. When I was little, around two and a half—note that's how much older than you I am—I suddenly decided I wanted a brother. I don't remember this but the family does. Apparently I kept pointing to my mother's stomach and shouting, 'Baby!' and 'Boy!' My mother always replied no, I already had an older sister, and that's all the children she had a right to. They've always been big into population control, one descendent per adult. My sister insists I never used the word brother, and my parents don't remember for sure, but I believe my sister. You never argue with my sister—she's always right, as you know."

Derrick nodded, managing a small smile. "I don't dare mess with her."

"I know. Anyway, the family thought it was a cute phase, but it lasted nearly a year. Finally, I stopped bugging my mom and started bothering everyone else. I'd see a baby and ask if it was a boy. If the person said yes, I'd ask if—sometimes insist that—the baby was mine. It became embarrassing for my parents so they bought me a male baby doll."

Derrick raised his eyebrows. "Your parents gave a boy a doll?"

Nigel smiled. "Most boys have dolls at some point. They're called action figures and G.I. Joes. But as for the baby doll, my parents have always been very liberal as you know. I was raised on *Free To Be You And Me* and the 70s had already passed. 'William wants a doll' and all. My parents were belated hippies at that point.

“I loved that doll and took it everywhere. I refused to name him and just called him ‘my baby’. When I was six, I handed the doll to my mom and said I didn’t need it anymore. She said something like, ‘Yes, you’re a big boy now and don’t need a baby.’ I remember this part. I replied, ‘No, I don’t. The real one is out there waiting for me, and I’m going to find him.’”

Derrick felt like he was losing his connection with the universe. He clung to Nigel’s torso like it was the only thing keeping him in place.

“That talk became my coming out because my mom asked if I meant a real baby. I replied, and again I remember the exact words, ‘No, Mom, geez. He’s not a baby anymore. I’ll find him when we’re all grown up. I love him now, though.’ We talked some more until she was certain I was talking about a boyfriend. I told her I was going to marry him. She didn’t want to out me to myself. She admitted later that she already knew but didn’t want to force the issue so I could figure it out at my own speed. I was a young kid. It was never a big deal in my family as I told you. Everyone just always knew.

“You came out when you were six?”

“Pretty much, although I didn’t really quite get what it meant, just that I wanted to marry a boy not a girl. Not like most boys who say things like that because they think girls are icky. I mean, I thought girls were icky, too, but it was different, I liked boys. I mean, not as friends like other boys like boys. No, I mean I had friends who were boys, but I liked boys in other ways, too. Wait, I didn’t mean I did anything different with boys... Shit.”

Derrick was used to Nigel tripping over his words when he second-guessed something he’d just said. It was adorable and he smiled.

Nigel took a deep breath. “The point is that I knew not just that I was gay, but that there was a certain boy out there that was mine. I just had to find him. When I first saw you, something about you felt familiar. As we got to know each other, it felt more and more like I’d known you my whole life, and that you were meant to be with me. When I finally remembered what I said to my mom when I gave up my doll, I realized that you’re the one I’ve waited for all my life. I’ve always loved you and always will. Even if you decide I’m not the one for you, always know that you are loved and cherished.”

Derrick didn't know what to say. Instead, he just snuggled closer and breathed in the scent of his man. Finally he said shakily, "That's kind of creepy." They both laughed. "But it's the sweetest and most romantic thing I've ever heard. Geez, I'm turning into a teenage girl. I don't know if you made that up or if it's true but I don't want to know."

"It's—"

"Shh, I really don't want to know. But thank you. I keep falling, and you keep catching me." He pulled back to look in Nigel's eyes. "I don't know if I'm worthy of that love. But I hope to spend—" He gulped. "—um, the rest of my life showing you how much that means to me, and how much I love you, too." Admitting, let alone expressing, attachment was still hard for him, but he found once he voiced his eternal devotion, it was suddenly easy. He would think about that later.

Instead, he stopped any response from Nigel by leaning in and pressing their lips together. He deepened the kiss, and he felt Nigel's body responding. He slid one hand under Nigel's shirt and the other cupped his lover's cheek before Derrick pulled back long enough to whisper, "Let me start right now." Then he leaned into his lover and got to it.

CHAPTER 7

Now: Derrick

The house looks smaller than Derrick remembers. Smaller and older, dilapidated. It's only been a year but it feels like so much longer. The driveway is filled, and the road lined with cars. He had no idea his father had so many friends. He suddenly feels unsure about his decision to come. He watches the front door, people moving in and out, smokers congregating on the lawn near the curb.

“Dare?” He turns to find Nigel watching him. “Do you want to go in? It's not too late to leave if that's what you want.” Derrick turns back to watch the house again, trying to make up his mind. Nigel gives him a minute or two then adds, “We're parked far enough away that no one will know you were ever here.”

“What do you think I should do, Nigh?” He's aware his voice quavers, but he isn't worried about being manly at the moment. A shaking voice is a lot less embarrassing than the scream he is desperately trying to hold inside.

Nigel pauses before answering. “Do you think anything that might happen in there could make you hurt more than you already do right now?”

Good question. He thinks about it. “No. I already feel rejected by my family and guilty for leaving. If Benji came at me with an axe, I think I would actually be relieved.”

“Now you're just being maudlin. That's the grief talking. I've never heard you feel sorry for yourself before. You know you are wonderful.”

That stopped Derrick mid-thought. “I'm not really, you're the one who's awesome, but you're right. This isn't me, nor is it about me. I'm being self-absorbed. My thoughts are just spinning too fast. God I suck. I'm sorry for being an ass here; you don't deserve that.”

“Dare...” Nigel pulls him close and holds him tightly. Derrick feels his lover's breath in his hair when Nigel rests his cheek there. “I hate that you think that about yourself. You're being silly. You don't have to apologize for your emotions. I'm just trying to help you not sink too far under.”

“Shit. Benji hasn’t seen me in over a year. It’s easy to see Merry, she’s an independent teenager, but does Benji understand why it’s been impossible to sneak behind Ronald’s back to see him? That even if I had, I would have put him in a horrible position to either lie to his dad or get in trouble for seeing me?”

“He will one day, even if he doesn’t now.”

Derrick fervently hopes that’s true but he doubts it. “Fuck, I’m still being a coward. Let’s go.” He pulls away from Nigel and climbs out of the car. The door to the house seems miles away, and he feels exposed walking toward it with people around. He is sure they are all watching and judging him.

Derrick feels a hand on his lower back. “No one is looking at you. You’re doing fine.” How does Nigel always seem to know what he is thinking?

“Thank you for being here. I couldn’t do this without you.”

“This wouldn’t have been so hard if I weren’t in the picture. I don’t regret loving you or our being together, but I’m sorry that it cost you so much.”

Derrick stops to look into Nigel’s eyes. “I know. I love you.”

“I love you, too.” The words and Nigel’s smile are what he needed to keep going. He turns and steps up onto the porch and into the house.

Then: Nigel

When Derrick’s mouth touched his, the intensity of Nigel’s response had Nigel pushing into his lover. Derrick’s mouth parted, and Nigel felt his lover’s tongue touch his own. He pulled it in and sucked it, then slid his own into Derrick’s mouth. The kiss was slow and sultry, gentle but passionate. He opened his mouth wider and tilted his head to deepen the kiss. He felt his lover’s arms tighten around his shoulders. Fuck Ronald. Nigel’s love for Derrick was real. He would have to talk to Ronald about it sometime, but right now, Nigel was going to spend his evening convincing Derrick. After all, his lover’s feelings were what were important. He wasn’t in love with Derrick’s father.

Their tongues moved faster, and the kiss grew more urgent. Derrick moaned against his mouth, and he felt himself hardening. He lingered a moment longer then pulled away. Derrick buried his nose against the skin of his neck, and Nigel rubbed a cheek against his head. For a moment they stayed there, the intensity of their emotions holding them still.

Eventually Nigel led his lover into the bedroom where he gently lowered him onto the blankets. He untied and removed his boyfriend's shoes and socks. "Lie down and relax. I'm going to take care of you; you don't have to do anything. I'll be right back." Derrick sank into the pillows and closed his eyes, and Nigel slipped out of the room. In the bathroom, he took a very quick shower but cleaned himself thoroughly as he wasn't sure whether Derrick would want to top or bottom. He returned to the bedroom naked where he found his lover sprawled, sound asleep.

It was too early for bed, and he wanted to finish what they started. He was pretty sure Derrick would want to as well. It was time to wake his lover, and he was going to do it right. Nigel very carefully slipped up the bed between Derrick's legs, careful not to touch him. Using only his fingers, he gently lifted the bottom of the thin tee blocking access to the perfect body he needed to have. When enough flesh was showing, he carefully touched his lips to the taut skin. He kissed another spot close to the first. His made his way across Derrick's abdomen, caressing him with his mouth as he went. He peeked over the fabric to see his lover's eyes still closed, so he changed tactics.

He carefully lowered the shirt, then slowly unfastened the fly on his lover's jeans. The zipper was silent as he lowered it, revealing white jersey boxer shorts. His next kiss was to the cloth halfway between Derrick's full bulge and his waistband. Nigel felt his own dick hardening. At his second kiss, he heard Derrick's breathing quicken. He looked up and saw his lover watching him with hooded eyes. Neither said anything, and Nigel went back to his ministrations. Apparently Derrick didn't remember that Nigel said he would do everything because he reached for Nigel's head.

"Don't move or I'll stop." Nigel grinned at his lover wickedly and was rewarded with a groan.

“You suck.”

“We’re getting ahead of ourselves. There’s time for everything.”

“Bite me.”

“Okay.” Still smirking, he nipped Derrick’s flesh below his navel, then Nigel slowly worked his way back up his lover’s body. He was careful to only touch with his mouth, lifting the shirt as he went, kissing and nipping as much flesh as he could. When his lips closed over a nipple, he heard a sharp intake of breath, and he smiled around the hardening flesh. His tongue helped the process along, and above him he heard panting. The other nipple firmed even faster, so he soon continued upward until he had pushed the shirt up to Derrick’s neck.

“Nigh, I need this off. Now.” Derrick pulled at the cloth, and Nigel helped him remove it. Derrick lifted only long enough for the shirt to be removed then tried again to touch Nigel, who simply batted his arms away. Derrick lay back again. His eyes were bright with lust, his breathing labored, but he didn’t move. Nigel loved the feeling of being the one doing everything. He lived to make Derrick happy.

Nigel’s mouth worked its way up his lover’s neck and down his jaw after pausing to nip and tug at an earlobe in passing. He covered Derrick’s face with gentled kisses, avoiding his lips until Nigel had covered every inch of skin. Finally, he dove in, hungrily devouring his lover’s mouth. Derrick responded just as passionately, soft moans and gasps the soundtrack to their lovemaking.

After a short while, he pulled away. Derrick whimpered but stayed where he was. Nigel made his way back down the center of his lover’s chest with only a quick stop to lick the erect nipples. The kisses were more urgent now, with his mouth open wide, tongue swirling and stroking the skin. Soon he reached Derrick’s underwear again, and Nigel pressed his lips to the bulging fabric.

“Fuck!” Derrick’s body arched, no longer able to stay still. Nigel finally touched Derrick with his hands, pushing his lover’s hips back down. He held him there and opened his mouth to suck the swelling through the fabric. Derrick reached for him yet again, but Nigel pulled away until his lover

clenched his fists and moved his hands back where they were. Derrick's deep groan showed how hard he was finding it to stay still. Nigel chuckled and opened his mouth as wide as possible, and through the cloth, sucked in as much of his lover as he could.

Derrick gasped and pulled at Nigel's shoulders. "Please, Nigh."

Nigel took pity on him and stood to yank Derrick's pants off. When he moved back to the bed, he stopped short as his gaze fell on the beauty spread before him. He felt a rush of blood to his cock; he worshiped his boyfriend's body. He felt the tan skin calling to him, inviting him down, so he again lowered his face to his lover's groin. For a moment, he just breathed Derrick in, reveling in the unique and intricate combination of scents that he loved so much. The shaft he admired was hard, and Nigel lowered his face to it and blew the hair curling around its base.

"Mmm..." A quick glance showed his lover's tongue poking out ever so slightly. It was Nigel's turn to gasp as he watched it glide along Derrick's upper lip. God, how he loved that mouth; those kissable lips were one of the first things he had noticed about this man who became the love of his life.

"Nigh..."

He laughed softly. "Sorry. I was distracted by your magnificence." Derrick rolled his eyes. Seeing his lover's hands twisted in the blanket, knuckles white from exertion, Nigel chuckled again. "Someone's enjoying himself."

"Stop talking and do something better with that mouth."

Nigel obliged and, one at a time, took in each of his lover's balls, rolling them around and puckering his cheeks to caress them from all sides. Then he took in both at once and Derrick cried out. He enjoyed them a bit then let the sack slide out. He opened his mouth wider and turned his head sideways to wrap his lips around the base of his lover's shaft. He made his way up slowly, sucking and licking as he went.

"Oh, fuck."

"Not yet." Nigel continued until he was just below the head where he used his tip of his tongue to rapidly flick the sensitive spot just below it. Derrick

gasped and curled up to grab for him. Nigel pushed his lover's hands away, then let his mouth slip over the crown just briefly teasing before repeating his movements down the other side.

“God, Nigh, you're killing me.”

“I'm not even close to done,” he replied. The answering groan made him smile. “But I'll take pity and give you a present.” He moved back to the head where he let his tongue lap at the leaking fluid for a moment before opening wide and taking his lover in as far as he could. Derrick was whimpering now, and when his lover tried to touch him, Nigel let the hands stay.

He worked his mouth up and down, twisting his head as he went to stimulate even further. One hand massaged Derrick's balls, working his fingers around them to increase sensation. Nigel's tongue lapped and he hummed, allowing the vibrations to add to the effect of what he was doing. He felt his lover harden even more, like a skin-covered baton, just as dangerous but in an entirely different way. He smiled inwardly.

Derrick was sweating now, and Nigel could smell the tang in the air. He pulled off and moved down the delectable expanse of skin stretching from Derrick's sack to his hole below. He spread his lover's legs up and out to give himself more room to maneuver. With one hand holding a leg in place and the other stroking Derrick's belly, he worked his lips along his lover's taint until he got to his opening. Nigel gently blew on it, seeing the muscles contract. Watching Derrick's body respond to his attentions was one of his favorite things ever. A moan from above reminded him that he was there for a purpose, and he lowered his head to brush his lips against the pink skin before circling the opening with his tongue.

“Fuck, Nigh!”

“Soon.” He stopped teasing and let his tongue penetrate his lover's hole. Derrick tried to heave upward but Nigel held him in place by pushing down on Derrick's stomach. He continued to probe with his tongue, prodding the muscle to loosen it. Moans proved they were both enjoying Nigel's play, and he poked in further. After a loop around just inside the tight ring, he pulled out

and circled the entry again before pushing back in. The intimacy was intoxicating.

“Nigh, please; I can’t stand it.”

He hated to disappoint his lover, so he rose back up and wrapped his arms around Derrick, letting their legs entangle. Their lips touched and soon they were both moaning as they rubbed their erections together, mouths frantic to become united. Their pre-come allowed a smooth glide as they rubbed against one another. Nigel reached into the nightstand and pulled out a large bottle of lube. The gel was cold on his fingers, and he knew it would be icy for his lover, so he forced himself to take a moment and warm some in his palm. He then slathered the gel on his fingers and pushed Derrick’s legs up again before placing his fingers against his lover’s hole.

“Are you ready, Dare?”

“Fuck yeah, get to it.”

He slipped one finger in and moved it in circles.

“Hurry up. Another.”

Nigel complied, letting a second finger join the first. He scissored them until the surrounding muscle gave more easily. When he reached the sweet spot, Derrick cried out and his body shook. Soon Nigel had three digits inside, and he began wriggling them, feeling the warm walls stretching. He was aching with his own arousal and flushed with the heat of it.

“Come here, Nigh. Let me get you ready, too.”

“I am ready, Dare. Just touching you has me close to coming.” He twisted his hips around anyway to let Derrick stroke him. What he felt, though, was wet heat enveloping him and he gasped. His lover was an expert with his tongue. Nigel let himself fall back as the talented mouth worked him. He quickly realized his mistake. “Stop if you still want me to fuck you, because I’m about to blow.”

“Maybe I want to fuck you instead.” Nigel knew Derrick’s words were merely a feeble attempt at humor.

“I think if that were the case, you would have stopped me much earlier. But if you really want to.” Nigel lay back on the bed, spread his legs, and stared at the ceiling.

Derrick grabbed for him, panic in his voice. “No! No, no, get back here. I need you inside me. I want to feel you as you come in me. Please.”

Nigel chuckled. “If you insist.” He quickly spread lube along his cock then shifted around so they were facing the same direction. He glanced up and saw that Derrick’s eyes were wild with lust. He moved to kneel between his lover’s legs which were already up, ass cheeks spread. Derrick was trembling and moved his hands to clutch Nigel’s wrists as if to ground himself. His whimpers made Nigel’s spine vibrate; the sounds Derrick made aroused Nigel even more than his lover’s touch. He paused and stilled so he could get a grip and make this last. Coming too soon would be unfair and disappointing to Derrick, which was the last thing Nigel wanted.

After a few moments, he let his penis slip along the cleft between Derrick’s buttocks a few times before lining himself up and pushing inside. He stopped with just the head of his cock past the ring of muscle. Derrick’s loud moan morphed into pleas, so Nigel relented and pushed in until he was completely seated. Again he stilled, giving his lover time to adjust.

Beneath him, Derrick gasped and panted. “Don’t wait. Move; move now. Right now!”

“As you wish.” The *Princess Bride* reference was lost in Derrick’s sounds as Nigel rocked in and out again. Derrick’s body shuddered beneath him, and he moved faster.

“You feel so good, Nigh. You’ve ruined me for anyone else.” Derrick turned to reach for him, and Nigel pulled out to let Derrick move onto his back. Nigel slid inside his lover again, then leaned forward for a passionate kiss, his own body producing noises he had never shared with anyone else. His love for Derrick filled his heart, filled his soul. He just wanted to crawl inside him and never leave. Derrick pulled back and looked him in the eyes, a wealth of emotions churning there. “I love you with all that I am.”

Being deeply buried inside his lover was Nigel's favorite position. He didn't mind staying there awhile as he drank in his lover's words and tried to come up with a reply that expressed everything he felt for his wonderful man. The cruelty of Ronald's attempt to separate them had only brought them closer together. Like Derrick, Nigel wanted to express his love. "Cheesiness makes me happy. You make me whole."

Derrick's smile lit the room. "Then stop talking and fuck me through this mattress."

Exhilarated, Nigel pushed up to brace himself on his arms then drew out and bore back in. Just a couple more rounds had Derrick making beautiful sounds again. Nigel increased his speed, each thrust accompanied by a louder moan, until his lover was crying out as Nigel drove into him over and over. Within a short time, Nigel found himself grunting, his face warm, sweat drenching his forehead. He paused to reposition Derrick and plunged in again.

This time his lover howled as Nigel hit his prostate. "Fuck. There, right there. Do that again." He complied, hitting his lover's gland each time he swung his hips and entered. Nigel almost lost his rhythm when he looked up and saw the euphoria on his lover's face. Although improbable, Derrick was even more gorgeous when he was excited and nearing orgasm. The sight took Nigel's breath away.

Derrick met Nigel's eyes. "Oh God, I think I'm going to explode." Nigel pounded in again, and his lover threw his head back and cried out. Every time Nigel buried himself within that sexy body, his lover moaned and hollered. Under him, Derrick writhed and quivered, his head twisting about, his fingers digging into Nigel's thighs. The motions brought Nigel to the brink.

He moved his weight to one arm so he could use the hand on the other side to wrap around his lover's rock hard cock. "Dare, come for me; let me watch you. I want to see you enjoy this." He used the copious amount of pre-come to slick Derrick's shaft then slid his hand along its length.

"Oh God. Oh fuck. I'm going to come." Derrick's words were slurred together.

He couldn't explain why those words filled his heart with joy, but they did. He pumped his hands a few more times as he resumed pounding into his lover.

“I'm coming, I'm coming.”

“I've got you. Come.”

“Nigel!” Derrick reared up and silky strands of white spurted out of him and over their torsos, tremors and cries wracking his body as he shot. Nigel watched his lover's agile body buck and thrash. Derrick's muscles tightened around him, and the feeling tipped Nigel over the edge. He was usually quiet but he, too, shouted as he crested, calling out his lover's name again and again. His orgasm went on and on, and he felt another stream spill out, as if he were somehow marking his lover from inside.

Nigel finally finished and pulled out, and Derrick cleaned them up. They kissed for a while until sleep overtook them. Nigel's last thought was how lucky he was to have this man, and how grateful he was that Derrick believed in them. Nigel was in this until the end of time.

CHAPTER 8

Now: Derrick

When they walk in, nothing happens. Derrick isn't sure what he expected, but this isn't it. People continue to talk in small groups, or place casseroles and salads on the overflowing dining room table, which he can see through the archway on the right. To his left, a cluster of women in florals and heels hover around the sofa near the fireplace. That's where he needs to be.

The sea of bodies parts before him, and to his surprise, hands touch his shoulders, cheeks, arms. Voices murmur condolences to him. The eyes he meets are full of sympathy and sorrow, not a judgmental glare among them. He is confused, but all thoughts leave his head when he reaches the couch and sees his sister and aunt sitting there. Sitting isn't quite the right word; they are existing, bodies that stop from sinking to the floor only through the support of the furniture. He saw his sister grieving when their mother died, but it was no comparison to this. He realizes she is an orphan at eighteen, no parents to guide her through leaving home and setting out in the world. He will have to stand in for them. He is her brother and he will do whatever he can for her.

For the first time since he received Marisol's text, he feels tears sting his eyes. In seconds he is blinded by them, and sinks beside his family both in body and in spirit. He was wrong when he told Nigel it couldn't hurt more. It does. Seeing his sister in such pain cuts him so deeply he isn't sure he can live through it.

He reaches for her and she finally looks up. "You fucking asshole..." She says the words softly, finding refuge in sibling banter, but her heart isn't in it. Unable to keep up the pretense, she melts into his arms and sobs. Their aunt opens her mouth to admonish Marisol for her language, but Derrick cuts her off with a glare. She remains silent.

The siblings cry together for a long time. Around them, Derrick hears gasps of sympathetic grief, then people moving away. Even in times of deep sadness, emotional displays of sorrow are still difficult to watch. Derrick feels Nigel's presence, a warmth behind him from where his boyfriend perches on the sofa arm. If Nigel is uncomfortable with the intensity of the moment, there

is no indication. His body is still. Nigel doesn't reach for him, and Derrick appreciates it. This is something between Marisol and himself. Nigel's being there is enough.

Tissues are pressed into Derrick's hands. He wipes his sister's face, blows his nose, and they cry some more. Eventually they pull apart. Derrick brushes Marisol's hair out of her eyes. "Tell me what happened." Behind her, Edwina rubs his sister's back, glaring at him all the while. He tries to ignore her.

Marisol dabs her nose. "He's been so sad. Since Mom died, he just hasn't been the same, you know?" He nods; he does know, even though her death was such a short time before Ronald kicked him out and his world fell apart. "Then you were gone and he just, just kind of stopped. He stopped living. Benji went and stayed with Auntie a lot because Dad couldn't really take care of him."

"That was your job, Derrick." His aunt's voice is harsh and unwelcome.

He wants her to go away but she is right "Thank you for stepping in, Edwina. I'm sure Ronald is—was—very grateful. Go on, Merry."

"He drinks a lot. He never went back to work. I think he got unemployment or something. I'm not sure what." Her confusing tense, from present to past and back again, is normal. She still hasn't fully accepted her father is gone. "Anyway, he drove drunk all the time. I told him to stop. I tried hiding his keys, but he's so angry all the time... I was afraid."

Derrick feels the words trickle down to his gut and freeze his insides. He should have been there. He reaches over and rubs his sister's upper arm. Before he can offer inane words of comfort, his aunt steps in. "Isn't your fault, dear. Can't expect a young girl to watch out for her papa. Needed your brother to step up and be a man for a change."

The words have been said before. Edwina believes homosexuality is a sin, although she has never said the words in front of him. She loved her brother Ronald, and respected him enough to keep her silence. But she also made it clear that once Derrick became a man, he needed to stop doing sinful childish things and take care of his "kinfolk." She never explicitly said what those childish things were; everyone knew. She undoubtedly blames him for

choosing Nigel over his family. But they have always gotten along all right, and her words sting.

Still, he doesn't want a fight so he remains silent. Instead, he catches his sister's eye and nods for her to continue. Her look of discomfort changes to gratitude. "Last night—no, I guess it was the night before last, now—I was spending the night at Ellie's house. Doing nothing. We were doing nothing. I should have been here." She starts crying again, and Derrick put his arms around her once more. After a moment, she pushes him back. "He called to tell me he was going to the grocery store, but it was probably just to buy more booze." She shook her head. "I did all the grocery shopping."

Derrick feels like screaming. Marisol is only a kid. She just turned eighteen and is starting her senior year in high school. She should be having the time of her life, looking forward to all the fun the final year of high school offers, with the anticipation of what is to come. Instead, she's been doing the shopping and undoubtedly cleaning, doing laundry, and cooking for a man who lost his reason for living. Derrick doesn't think he has ever hated himself more than he does at that moment.

Behind him Nigel shifts slightly, and Derrick feels his lover's scent wash over and inside him, calming and soothing him just by being there. He knows Nigel moved so that Derrick was aware of his presence, but his lover can't have known how his unique aroma stills Derrick's torment. He wishes he had a way to show Nigel how he makes Derrick feel, how he stays Derrick's demons.

"He told me he loved me." Marisol looks up from the tissue she is shredding. "He wanted to make sure I knew that he loved me, that he loved us, all of us. Even you." She swallows. "Especially you. I should have known something was wrong when he said that. I should have known." A new fit of crying has his shoulder wet and his heart aching again. "His car ran into a cement wall. He missed some exit up in Everett and hit the barrier instead. The police said there isn't any sign that he braked at all, and he was going over eighty miles an hour. Why was he going so fast? What was he doing up there? Why couldn't he just take the next exit? It's like he had a death wish."

Derrick can't say anything she would want to hear. He is grateful her cheek is pressed to his shoulder and he doesn't have to look her in the eye. They will never know for sure, but he is fairly confident he knows what happened, and there is no way it will bring her peace.

"Marisol, dear, only God can help now, and we mustn't question the path that he has set for any of us. We need to trust in Him now, to guide us. We are not worthy to know His plan. May God rest your father's soul." Derrick bristles at his aunt's words and has to force himself to relax. He has no love for Christianity and doesn't want it here in this private place. But if it brings his sister solace, he will keep his feelings at bay.

He doesn't need to, though. "Shut up, Auntie! I'm sick of all this bullshit!" Marisol jumps up. "I don't care about God's plan or whatever. I want my father back!" She pushes through the crowd of well-wishers and runs toward the back of the house.

"Merry!" Derrick jumps up to follow.

"Don't you go filling that girl's head with your atheist rants. She needs God right now."

He whirls to glare at Edwina. "I'm not filling her head with anything. You're the one trying to brush away her pain with useless platitudes. What the hell has gotten into you? You didn't used to be like this, so fucking cold." He runs after his sister.

He catches up with her in the kitchen where he finds her hugging a woman in her late fifties, Reverend Angelica Hernback. Derrick skids to a stop. The minister is from his family's church, not his aunt's. His sister is clearly turning to the woman for help and has stopped crying, so he steps back to give her room. Nigel's hand is now on Derrick's waist, and he leans into the support of his lover's body. When his boyfriend begins to pull away, Derrick stops him. "It's okay, Nigh. She's not homophobic." Nigel is still stiff behind him, but he leaves his hand where it is. Derrick doesn't blame him for being worried about the intimate touch in front of the minister. There are still far more clergy who disapprove of their love than who accept it.

“Yeah, I get why you’re angry with God right now,” the pastor is saying. “What do you think you’d say to Him if He were standing right here?” Derrick thinks it is a ridiculous question—Christians believe God is everywhere, right?

But his sister apparently doesn’t think it’s dumb. “I’d tell him he’s a motherfucker for taking both of my parents when I’m not really a grown-up yet.” Her fury is trapped in the creases in her scrunched up face. “He left us fucking orphans. Again! Because I guess having one set of parents disappear from your life forever isn’t enough. No one should have to fucking lose four parents.” Angelica watches Marisol as she rages but doesn’t say anything. “I’d tell him how angry I am for taking my family from me.” Something punches Derrick in the gut and he’s pretty sure it’s his conscience. “For taking them both. For letting Dad hurt that way.” Tears fill her eyes. “For letting *me* hurt this way.” His sister stands there for a moment, looking like a little girl for the first time in years, and then she crumples into the Reverend’s arms. “Why did He do it? Why did He take them?”

“I don’t know, honey. Sometimes it’s hard to know why God allows things to happen. It’s hard not to be angry with Him.” The older woman doesn’t try to placate Marisol or deny her grief. She is simply there as a support for his sister to lean on. “I just try to remember that He loves us. Sometimes love is all we have.”

Derrick backs away and takes Nigel with him. The last sentence stays with him. He still doesn’t find his parents’ religion in the slightest bit appeasing, mostly because he doesn’t find any of it even remotely believable. But he also knows he has to let the people in his family deal with their grief in their own ways. It isn’t up to him to make those decisions for them; he can only offer his support. He turns to his boyfriend. “Did that make you uncomfortable?”

Nigel pauses, probably to gauge how he should answer, but he finally says, “Yes. Truthfully, that religion stuff is harder for me to deal with than the grief.”

“Me, too. But if that’s what Merry believes, then I’m going to support her no matter what, because right now it’s not hurting anybody.” He laughs. “Angelica said her faith is about love. Love’s never wrong, right?”

“Yes. Real love, not abuse masquerading as love, is never wrong.” Derrick thinks about his aunt, and something niggles at the back of his mind, some connection he needs to make. He lets it go for the moment. “I’ve got to find Benji.” He steels himself for whatever reaction he will receive from his brother.

Benjamin is in the backyard throwing a football around with a few other children. When he catches sight of Derrick, he freezes and the ball bounces off his shoulder. He barely acknowledges the hit. Then he bursts into motion, runs across the grass, and flings himself in Derrick’s arms. “Derry! You came back!”

Derrick lifts his brother and holds him tightly. He can’t speak for a moment. He finally manages, “I’ve missed you so much, Benji.” Tears gather in his eyes again, and he presses his nose into his brother’s tight little curls.

“I miss you, too. Daddy said you wouldn’t be back for a while. You musta fixed all those kids quick!”

Derrick pulls back to look at Benjamin’s face. “What?”

His brother’s eyes shine with excitement. “You made all those kids better, right?”

Derrick is baffled. “What did Ronald say to you?”

Benji rolls his eyes. “Dad says that you and Uncle Nigel had to go away and help a lot of big kids so they wouldn’t go back to jail. He says that when you’re done, and the dogs are all trained, you’ll come back. I don’t know why you can’t help kids here, but Dad says it’s a grown-up thing.” Derrick hasn’t thought about what his father would think was appropriate to tell an eight-then nine-year-old. He supposes that story is as good as any. “Are you back now for good?” Benji eagerly awaits an answer.

“Yes, Benji. I’m back for good.” Derrick isn’t sure how to react to Benjamin’s simple acceptance of the lost time. He decides he doesn’t need to think about it right now; he should just be glad he doesn’t have to deal with his brother hating him on top of everything else. “Did you get my letters?”

“Yep. Dad read them all to me.” Ronald must have left out the parts that interfered with the lie. Derrick is selfishly grateful Benjamin is behind in school due to being in foster care, and thus his skills are not at the point where he could read the letters himself. The boy squirms and Derrick puts him down. “I can do a handstand, wanna see?” Benjamin’s grin is contagious.

“Uh, sure.” Derrick watches. His brother does more of an elongated forward roll than a handstand, but Derrick praises him anyway.

Beside him Nigel claps. “Great job, Benji!”

“Thanks Uncle Nigel. Wanna see me do it again?” Benjamin tries a few more times.

Nigel moves closer to his boyfriend. “Uncle Nigel?”

Derrick shakes his head, as perplexed as his boyfriend. “He’s said it twice now. I have no idea. Maybe Merry told him to say that? No way would Ronald.”

Nigel shrugs. “Benji seems rather chipper for someone who just lost his father.”

With the words, Derrick feels the heaviness weigh him down again. “I know. He was the same way after Celeste died. His therapist is working on it with him, but it has to do with his inability to face his grief. He was only two years old when he first went into foster care. He wasn’t adopted until he was four or so, but he was too young to remember his birth parents. He doesn’t talk about them—Celeste and Ronald were his real mom and dad. Everyone thinks that losing the only mother he’s ever known has been too traumatic to face. He still talks about her as if she were alive.”

“I noticed he did that when talking about your father, too.”

“Yeah.” Derrick doesn’t realize how cold he is despite the warm day until Nigel’s arms go around him. He feels his lover’s cheek against his temple.

“I’m right here, Dare. I’ve got you.”

Derrick leans into his lover, trying to relax for a minute, but he doesn’t succeed. He appreciates that Nigel isn’t a macho he-man who can’t show

affection in public. He needs to be touched. After a while, he pulls away and takes Nigel's hand instead. "I wonder what story he told the church people. That's who are here, by the way. These are almost all family friends from the congregation."

"He may not have told them anything. You never went to church so why did they need to know?" Nigel is always so logical.

"Good point." They watch for a while as Benjamin plays with the other children. "Oh shit! What the fuck is going to happen to Benji and Merry?" He lets go of Nigel's hand and races inside. He finds Edwina where he left her, women from the church having closed in to fill the spots vacated by him and his sister.

"Edwina, can I talk to you for a sec?"

His aunt looks up and narrows her eyes. She then shoos the other women away and indicates he should sit next to her on the couch. "What is it?"

"Has anyone thought about—Do you have any idea what's going to happen to Benji and Merry? Where they're going to go?"

Edwina looks disgusted. "Of course. They'll come live with us. Benjamin basically already does now." She hesitates, and something passes over her face that he doesn't understand. Then her expression hardens. "Ronald's will hadn't been changed in years. It just said that he wanted his children to stay together if possible. At that point, you were still a minor." She doesn't say anything else, just sets her jaw and waits for Derrick to speak.

He has no idea what she is bracing herself for, and he turns to look at his boyfriend for help. Nigel squats beside him. "You figure out what's best for the kids. We'll make it work if that's what you decide. If we have to move, we'll move. We're a family, and I love your sister and brother as if they were my own. I've probably missed them almost as much as you have. Whatever they need, they'll get."

Derrick blinks at him before he realizes what Nigel is saying. Then he blanches. *Holy shit*. He looks back at his aunt. "You're afraid I'm going to take them from you." For the first time he sees weakness in her, but she says

nothing. “This is too soon to be making final decisions. But it seems to me that Benji’s living with you already. He belongs there. Did Merry stay with you last night?”

Edwina shakes her head. “She stayed with a friend.”

“She may need her friends right now more than she needs us. It’s sad but true. At her age, she’s closer to her peers than her family and can talk to them about things she can’t discuss with us. I want the kids with me, but I don’t think change is good for them right now. Merry is legally an adult, and I think we need to talk to her about what she wants, but Benji needs to stay with you. Everything else can wait until after the memorial service. Have you figured when it will be?”

“Saturday.”

“Okay. Right now, let Merry stay where she wants, and let us bury our father. Everything else can wait a little while.” Derrick is surprised to see the tension ebb from his aunt’s shoulders. “Edwina, I don’t know what’s going on in your head, but I’m not trying to hurt you or pull this family apart. I want what you want: what’s best for Merry and Benji. They’ve been through enough.”

Edwina purses her lips for a moment, then softens. “How could you choose that man over your own family? After everything Ronald did for you?” She glances at Nigel then quickly looks away. She has the decency to look uncomfortable, seeming to recognize how hurtful she is being.

Derrick feels anger stab him behind the eyes. Nigel takes his hand and their eyes meet. His lover’s gaze holds all the love and understanding it always has, and rather than alleviating Derrick’s rage, the gentleness only stokes it. He moves toward his aunt slightly to give him room to haul Nigel up from his crouch to sit on the sofa behind him. Derrick pulls his boyfriend’s arms around his waist and allows the touch to soothe him. His aunt only recoils a little.

“*That man* is the love of my life. If your father had forced you to choose between your family and your husband, which would you have chosen?”

“It’s not the same thing.”

“It’s not?”

She looks appalled. “Of course not. Our love is sanctioned by God. It’s what is natural. A man is biologically designed to be with a woman, not another man. Almost everyone knows that love is only between a man and a woman.”

Derrick barely suppresses the urge to roll his eyes. “That’s actually not what multiple polls say.” He sighs. She will never understand how he and Nigel fit together like a split piece of wood rendered whole again. He has to suppress his juvenile and inappropriate reaction to the apt metaphor. At that moment, what he has been trying to piece together ever since he and Nigel were in the backyard talking about love always being right, solidifies in his mind.

“In the kitchen, I heard Reverend Hernback telling Merry about God’s love, how thinking about His love for her is what got her through the tough times. Is that true for you?”

Edwina narrows her eyes but answers right away. “I wouldn’t put it that way—my church is a bit more traditional—but yes. It is through God’s grace that we are strengthened. His grace is His kindness, His good favor, His compassion. Essentially that is love.”

“Well the majority of the world is not Christian. They do not know your god’s love. Two-thirds of the people alive do not know the love that you feel. Does that mean you condemn their lives?”

“That’s not the same, either.”

“Isn’t it? In many places around the world it is illegal or dangerous or socially unacceptable to be Christian. Can you imagine life like that?” His aunt doesn’t say anything but she is visibly upset. “Would that stop you from loving your god?”

“No,” Edwina’s eyes are blazing. “Of course not.”

“If you were forced to choose between your home and your god, which would you choose?”

Edwina doesn't say anything for a minute. "You've made your point. I still don't agree that it's the same, but I suppose that doesn't matter from your perspective—apparently to you it is." Shocked, Derrick can only nod. "If you feel that your love for this—" She eyes Nigel over Derrick's shoulder, and purses her lips. "—for Nigel is as powerful as my love for God, then perhaps I can see why you might make the choice you did. I still think it's a sin, but maybe I understand you a little bit better." Then she softened. "You could have called... or written..."

"I did. Well, maybe not to you. I'm sorry about that. But I see and talk to Merry all the time. I wrote letters and sent cards to Benji every week or two. I didn't know if they got through because I never heard back, but just now he told me Ronald read them to him."

Edwina cocks her head to the side. At that angle she is nearly an exact likeness of Ronald only with her lustrous skin a few shades darker. They didn't share the same father, so their mixed heritage is different. Her paternal grandparents got custody when she was still a baby. She had the proper childhood her brother never did; it shows through her speech, her perfect teeth, her flawless skin not ruttled by years of meth use and poor sanitation, unlike Ronald's pitted and scarred flesh. Derrick is reminded that he has always thought his aunt was breathtakingly beautiful, not just on the outside but within as well. He is saddened that his sexual orientation has come between them.

"I imagine if Benji wrote you back, Ronald wouldn't have sent the letters. He was trying to wait you out. He wanted to make you come crawling home, and I know he was hoping that you missing your siblings would be the crushing blow, so to speak."

Derrick nods. "I bet you're right." They talk for a few more minutes, filling each other in on the major events of the past year, a truce of sorts having been reached. Eventually he stands and makes the rounds, saying hello to family friends, all of whom express their condolences, and not one of whom gives any indication they know of the family rift. He wonders for a moment how Benjamin hasn't given the ruse away with his improbable story, but then he

remembers how little his brother talks about his personal life with others. For the first and probably only time, Derrick is glad of that fact.

He and Nigel both spend some time with Merry in her room. Nigel offers to leave them alone to talk but Merry asks him to stay. She missed him, too. Afterward they play with Benjamin for a while before the strain of keeping himself in control becomes too much for Derrick. He says his goodbyes and they leave. His knees give out as he is climbing into the car, and Nigel takes his elbow to steady him. They drive away in silence, Derrick lost in his thoughts, processing all that has happened. The afternoon didn't go at all like he expected. It was both better and worse, but he is glad he went.

When Nigel asks him how he's doing, he has to think about it. "I'm not sure," he says honestly. "Take me home and fuck me through the floor, then maybe I'll know." He reaches over and places a hand on his lover's knee. "Or let me do the fucking. Either works for me."

Nigel glances at him, his eyebrow raised. "Not what I thought you'd say, but I can do that." He chuckles. "I am *always* willing to help in that way." He interlaces his fingers with Derrick's.

Derrick sighs and leans his head back against the headrest. "Thank fuck. At least that's one thing I can count on. Everything else is just too fucking weird." He closes his eyes and tries to make his mind go blank. "You were amazing in there. Thank you."

He feels Nigel squeeze his hand. "I will always be there for you, Dare. Always. In any way you need me."

"Are we passing a fondue restaurant or something? I'm getting a whiff of something cheesy."

"Shush." Nigel strokes Derrick's fingers. "Rest awhile. You need to get your energy back in order to fully enjoy my fucking you into next week. That is, if you think you can handle it."

Derrick hears the smirk in his boyfriend's voice. It reassures him. He loves the cheese, but it scares him sometimes, too. It's easier to take snarkiness. "I can't wait, Nigh. It's all I dream about. That and Ellen DeGeneres making

pancakes in the shape of wiener dogs while convincing me to take up billiards.”

Nigel snorts. “You would be terrible at that. You’d need too much patience.”

“That’s why the dream is a nightmare. Ellen is usually so nice, but she has it out for me when I’m sleeping. I’m thinking of keeping a spatula under my pillow for safety.” Derrick opens his eyes long enough to meet Nigel’s eyes and grin, then closes them again. “Wake me when we get home.” He sinks down and lets the car’s movement lull him to sleep.

Then: Nigel

It was Derrick’s turn to decide where to go for their day out, and Nigel was anticipating fun. Derrick always came up with something original. It had become a tradition: on the monthly anniversary of their first date, they chose someplace special to go, usually somewhere the two hadn’t been before. Now, it had been nine months and Nigel knew Derrick had struggled to find something they hadn’t yet done together. He had announced this morning, though, that he had come up with the perfect idea.

“Are we there yet?” Nigel whined and then grinned. Over his shoulder, Tibbs sniffed at air coming in through the open window. Nigel could smell horses and hay. Who knew what the dog was inhaling with his tens of millions of olfactory cells. He shuddered. “Ick, Tibbs! Drool! So very not cool.”

“Almost.” Derrick signaled to turn left at the stoplight.

“We’re in the middle of nowhere. I think I see Grandpa Jed’s tractor over there.” Nigel pointed to a pile of rust next to a railway crossing. He still had no clue where Derrick was taking them, and the anticipation was making him uncharacteristically antsy.

“I don’t even understand that reference, old man.”

“*Beverly Hillbillies*. I’ve never seen the show, so I could have the character name wrong. I really don’t even know if they drove a tractor. I have a vague

impression of a bunch of people piled on some farm machinery in some publicity still.”

“It was a 1921 Oldsmobile Roadster.” Derrick made the turn and swung around a curve onto a two lane road winding through cornfields.

“Now who’s old? How do you know that? You like *The Beverly Hillbillies*?” Nigel was surprised, and a little disturbed.

“I like old cars.”

“Oh. I knew that.” Derrick was driving Nigel’s car, an environmentally sound Toyota Prius. Derrick’s 1966 Alfa Romeo 2600 Spider was still a work very much in progress and wouldn’t really have been comfortable for the forty-five minutes they had already been on the road.

Derrick turned and grinned at him. “Of course you did. You know everything about me. Everything important, at least.”

Nigel raised his eyebrows suggestively and reached over to cup Derrick between his legs. “Oh yes, I know all the important stuff.”

Derrick batted his hand away. “Stop that. That’s for later. We’re here.” Tibbs was whining and showing very bad manners by pawing at Derrick’s head.

Nigel looked up. They were pulling into a parking lot with a small building decorated to look like an old time general store. The porch was lined with ancient harvesting gear, a crooked straw scarecrow, and barrels of apples, stalks of corn, and piles of pumpkins. Lots of pumpkins. There were pumpkins everywhere, and behind the building stretched a large field full of even more of the things.

“A pumpkin patch?”

“Well it’s October, isn’t it?”

Nigel nodded. “That it is. Lead on.”

The place was packed. A woman in an orange jacket directed Derrick to a parking spot about ten miles from the building, or perhaps only a few hundred feet. It seemed farther. A big sign said “support animals only.” Although he

was a retired service dog, Tibbs was now used for therapy in hospitals, detention centers, nursing homes, and so forth. Nigel hadn't been able to visit any of the institutions recently, and Tibbs needed to stay current on his skills. He slipped the little yellow vest on the dog and clipped on a leash. A big outdoorsy place like this, where people not comfortable with animals could easily avoid them, was perfect.

The three headed for a building that had a big sign saying, "Buy Tickits Here" in what looked like erratic hand-painted lettering. "Do you think they misspelled it on purpose?" Derrick asked.

Nigel looked more closely and saw that both letter "I"s were identical. The sign was professionally made. "Yes, of course. I guess they think all farmers are illiterate. I hate stereotypes."

They waited in line quite a while to buy tickets for the corn maze and hayride. Several children came over to pet Tibbs, most of them actually asking Nigel if they could pet his dog before doing so, which was great. He always said yes but reminded the children that service dogs should not be distracted while working. He explained that Tibbs was a support animal, though, which was different, and was not working but practicing. The kids were full of questions about what Tibbs could do. The attention helped the time pass quickly.

Once they had their tickets, the men waited for the next hay wagon. "Speaking of tractors..." Derrick pointed to a huge Ford vehicle approaching them, pulling a fifteen-foot wagon lined with hay bales.

"Just call me Jed." Nigel directed Tibbs to stand.

"I thought we clarified that it was a car." Derrick shook his head in mock disgust.

"Weren't they farmers? They had to have had a tractor."

"How would I know? You're the one fascinated by the show."

"Shush." Nigel glanced around and then squeezed one of his boyfriend's ass cheeks when no one was looking.

"Don't look but I think some guy is feeling me up," Derrick whispered.

“Feeling you down, more likely.”

“Either way, you might have some competition.” Derrick pretended to look for the culprit as they climbed into the wagon and sat on a bale of hay. Tibbs settled at their feet, leaning against their legs, out of the way of the other people climbing aboard. He put his head on Nigel’s knee.

Nigel petted the dog then leaned closer to Derrick. “You wish. Actually, your mom’s paying me to date you. She thought you were too perfect and wanted to be able to yell at you about something.”

Derrick burst into laughter and bumped shoulders with Nigel. “I love you.”

Nigel’s heart swelled. Those three words were the elixir of life to him. “I love you more.”

Derrick rolled his eyes. “Good grief, not that again. I love you infinity. There, I win.”

Nigel smirked. “I win, actually, because I get to have you loving me that much.”

Derrick groaned. “You are such a little girl.”

“On our first date you told me you love cheese. I’m just aiming to please.”

Derrick grimaced. “You have enough cheese to feed sandwiches to all the nine-year-olds in Washington state for a year.”

“Only the nine-year-olds?”

“Give it time. You’re still young.” Nigel felt Derrick’s hand squeeze his thigh. The simple touch sent shivers up his spine. “We’re here.”

They hopped out of the wagon and walked the two dozen yards or so to the entrance of the corn maze. The fake hand-lettered sign hanging nearby read, “Corn Maize.” They both groaned and looked at each other. Nigel loved that he knew exactly what Derrick was complaining about. He had never known anyone as well as he knew Derrick, not even his own family, and Derrick knew him that well, too. That closeness was something he had never had before and didn’t ever want to give up. The look in Derrick’s eyes seemed to

say the same thing. Nigel grabbed Derrick's hand and pulled him to the maze entrance before Nigel did something really awkward and embarrassing.

Another orange jacketed employee handed them a map of the maze with key spots marked on it. "Hey, the maze is shaped like a witch on a broom!" Derrick pointed at the paper.

"I wish we had a broom of our own so we could fly up and look at it from above." There were several paths to choose from, and they randomly chose one to head down. "Seems a little pointless to make it that complicated when no one can see it."

Derrick pretended to ponder this. "Maybe it's a signal warning off aliens: 'Beware of witches. Don't land here.'"

"Curtis would be very offended if he heard you say that." Curtis was one of Derrick's friends they sometimes played soccer with. He also happened to be Wiccan and loved to regale his friends with stories of dancing naked under the moon at midnight. They both figured he did it to get laid; all the witches in his coven were gay men.

"Curtis is offended by the very idea of a witch as a scary creature."

Derrick rolled his eyes. "Curtis *is* a scary creature."

"True. Oh, here's the first tag puncher thingy." They stepped into a little alcove off the main track. A post with a sign depicting a cat had a little orange hole punch hanging from it. Nigel used the tool to mark the cat image on the map. "One down, twenty-three to go."

They headed back down the path. A minute later they reached an intersection. "Which way, Mr. Sulu?"

Derrick looked up from the map. "Checkov was the navigator."

"You're just filled with trivia today."

"I spent about a billion years in school. Learning something was inevitable." Derrick turned the map to orient it in the direction they were walking.

"You didn't learn about Star Trek characters in college."

“Like hell I didn’t. At two AM there aren’t a lot of options. I needed something to occupy my mind while studying.”

Nigel nearly choked trying not to laugh. He knew Derrick was actually serious. “And cramming wasn’t doing it for you.”

Derrick looked at Nigel like he was turning into an alien biomimetic life form. “Duh.” He turned back to the map. “I think we go this way.” They soon found the next mark, which had a picture of a ghost. Nigel used the punch to indicate they had found the figure, and they moved on.

They continued to trudge through the thickest mud Nigel had ever encountered. The day was dry so far, but autumn in the Puget Sound area was more about rain than about sun. By the time their map was half punched, their boots and pants were caked with muck, and the poor dog’s legs were no longer gold but brown. “I like the color, Tibbs, but next time try dye. It will last longer and be more comfortable,” teased Derrick.

“I think we’re lost, Dare. We keep passing this same area.” They were standing at the terminus of a dead end. “Let me see the map.” Nigel moved up behind Derrick to look over his lover’s shoulder. “I think the path we thought was this one”—Nigel reached beneath Derrick’s arm to indicate a spot on the map—“isn’t really part of the maze but just a wide break in the corn that people have trampled.

“That could be.” Derrick pointed to a line on the diagram. “That would mean we haven’t reached here yet, so we’ve been turning too early.”

“Right. I also don’t think we went about this the right way. We’re way over here on the upper left, and we have all the punches from the left hand side. We’re going to have to backtrack to get to the rest of them.”

“Hmm. Well I think it’s time for a break, then.” Derrick leaned back against Nigel and rubbed his ass cheeks against him.

Nigel felt himself begin to harden at the friction. “Don’t start something you can’t finish.”

Derrick pushed back harder and wiggled. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Nigel groaned. “You’re a cock tease.”

Derrick twisted his head to look up Nigel. “Just giving you a little taste of what to expect when we get—” Nigel interrupted him with a hard and passionate kiss. He moved his hands to the top of Derrick’s waistband and slid the tips of his fingers inside. His lover’s body did things to him that sent reason flying away.

Derrick grabbed Nigel’s wrist before anything untoward happened. “Uh-uh-uh.” He turned around to place his hands on Nigel’s chest, his thumbs rubbing Nigel’s nipples through his thin sweater. “No touching until later.”

Nigel moaned. “What do you call that?” Not waiting for an answer, he bent to suck Derrick’s lip between his teeth. He let go and kissed along his lover’s jaw to his ear, where he nibbled on Derrick’s ear lobe. “You’re killing me here.”

“Glad to return the favor. I’ve been watching that hot ass of yours for an hour now, and I don’t know how much longer I can stand it.” Derrick took Nigel’s hand and placed it against his crotch for a few seconds before pushing it away again. “See?”

Nigel forced himself to take a deep breath. “Do we have to keep wandering around this corn patch?”

“You don’t want to finish?”

“I want to finish you more.”

Derrick mock grumbled and pulled away. “I’ve had enough cheese for today.” He grinned, to Nigel’s relief, and they headed back out to the path. “Well I’d like to keep going. Doing the maze, that is. I always finish what I start.” Derrick leered at him, a look which went straight to Nigel’s crotch.

“That’s fine, let’s just do it quickly. We still have pumpkins to pick.” He reached for Derrick’s hand and rushed back the way they had come. At the junction with the main track, he slipped and his arms cartwheeled for a moment before he caught his balance. When he looked back at Derrick, his lover had a terrified look on his face, one leg extended out in midair and his arms were pinwheeling around in an exaggerated motion.

“Are you mocking me?”

“Yes.”

“Just checking.”

When Derrick stilled, Nigel kissed him on his forehead. “You’re a dork.”

“But I’m your dork.”

“At the risk of being sued by Wisconsin for unlawful cheesiness, I have to say that you’re the only dork I’ll ever want.” Tibbs sneezed. Nigel thought the dog might be showing disapproval.

Derrick just shook his head. “I’ll let it go this time. Try to stay vertical please.” He headed down the track, and Nigel quickly followed.

They finished the maze as fast as they could, then rode the hay wagon back to the pumpkin patch. “You know, I’ve always pictured a hayride as a cart filled with loose hay with people sprawled on top,” Derrick said as they disembarked.

“I doubt that would be very comfortable.”

“It would if you were next to me.”

It was Nigel’s turn to roll his eyes. “Now who’s being cheesy?”

“I figure I owe you a few hundred thousand cheesy comments. I’ll stop if you stop.”

“No promises.”

“Fine. Let’s pick out some pumpkins so we can get home, and you can finish what you started.” Derrick set off toward the field where the pumpkins lay mired in mud.

“I believe you were the one who started it.” They reached the field and began rooting through the muck.

“Well, I’ll take it back if you want me to.”

Nigel jerked up and looked at his boyfriend in horror. “Don’t you, Dare!”

Derrick covered his face with his hands. “Puns now, too?”

Nigel laughed and reached for a white version of the squash. “This is cool. We could do something different with one that’s not orange.” He looked back at Derrick. “We are going to carve them, aren’t we?”

“Hell yeah! Carving pumpkins is a highly skilled art form. We’re having a contest at one of the service centers I work out of. I’ve never even placed. With your artistic skills, I’m sure we can win this time.”

“I have artistic skills?” Nigel ruled the pumpkin too lopsided to stand up well and put it back down.

“Well, compared to me.” Derrick shrugged and picked up a big, orange, elongated globe. “This one is pretty smooth.”

“That does look good. Help me find one that has some interesting lumps. I have an idea for a witch that looks like Curtis but with warts.”

Derrick cracked up. “I cannot wait to see the look on his face when he finds out it’s him. I’ll get us a wheelbarrow. I think we’re going to need lots of practice.”

An hour later, they paid for their nine pumpkins and sixteen small gourds. Neither of them wanted to limit their choices at that point. That and they were having too much fun picking them out. At a store behind the ticket booth, they spent an exorbitant amount of money on autumn foods like fresh pressed apple cider and pumpkin bread. With anyone else, Nigel would think the food would last several months. With Derrick, the food would probably be consumed within several days. Just thinking about his lover eating all of that had Nigel hot and bothered. At the car, they wiped themselves and Tibbs down as best they could. Soon they were in the Prius and heading back toward Seattle.

They stopped at Marymoor Park in Issaquah to let Tibbs run around the huge off-leash dog area. Derrick loved to watch all the dogs romp around. Nigel loved to watch Derrick. It was a win/win situation, and worth putting up with Tibbs’s legs getting muddy again. Nigel tried to rub the gunk off, but this time gave up. Dogs got dirty, and he loved Tibbs. He could put up with a little muck. They finally just drove to the other side of the park where the picnic area was.

“How many people were you expecting?” Nigel watched Derrick unloading the lunch he had packed. A large bag of grapes joined a pile of sandwiches, chips, three different kinds of salad, two desserts, and several jugs of various drinks.

“Too much?” Derrick surveyed the spread.

Nigel laughed. “For me, yeah. You? Probably not. I have no idea where you put all that food in that little body of yours.”

Derrick glared at him. “I’m not little. Want to go a few rounds with me so I can show you?”

Nigel threw up his hands. “Hell no! We both know you could take me three times out of three. I just meant that you eat like a linebacker.”

Derrick shrugged. “Just lucky I guess.” Nigel wasn’t sure it was luck—it was expensive and time consuming to eat that much—but he enjoyed watching Derrick ingest his food. He made eating an art form.

Nigel moved behind Derrick and put his arms around his lover’s waist. “This looks delicious. Did you make it all?”

“Most of it. I bought the grapes.”

Nigel chuckled. “Lazy man.” He licked Derrick’s neck. “Let’s eat quickly so I can move from here,” he lapped at his lover’s neck again, “to here.” He briefly squeezed the bulge in Derrick’s jeans. His boyfriend trembled beneath him.

“Fuck yes. Sit! Sit! Now!”

Nigel laughed and pulled away. He moved to the other side of the table and sat, taking the plate Derrick proffered. He loaded it up and dug in.

Fifteen minutes later, he was stuffed, and Derrick was working on his third plate of food. More than half the feast remained. “Hurry up, Dare, you’ve got a lot left to go.”

Derrick shrugged and swallowed. “I’m doing my best.” Nigel smiled and indicated Derrick should keep going. He sat, watched, and listened as Derrick hummed and moved his body unconsciously, thoroughly enjoying his meal.

Nigel thought Derrick eating was incredibly sexy. He thought Derrick everything was sexy.

Another fifteen minutes passed before Derrick was done, and they packed up the leftovers. They moved to the grass where they spread a blanket on the ground and sat to watch a group of college students play Ultimate Frisbee. Derrick sat with his back pressed to Nigel's chest. The air was chilly and smelled of pending frost, but Derrick was warm, and Nigel relaxed with his arms around his boyfriend. The game players took a break, but the two of them stayed seated and watched the people in the park. They played "who's compensating for a small penis" for a while, but there just weren't enough candidates.

They switched to "who's closeted" and had a lot more people to choose from. The game concluded when both agreed on a winner: A nervous looking older man wearing a bright yellow sweater sporting rhinestone-collared cats was holding the hand of a slightly younger woman who made Janet Reno look like Barbie. Every minute or so, he glanced at Derrick and Nigel, and when he saw them watching, he quickly turned his head. What clinched it was that each time he looked, he licked his lips. "No contest," they said in unison.

They sat in silence, just people watching and enjoying their closeness. Nigel felt immeasurable joy sitting there with the love of his life in his arms, their dog stretched alongside them, their bellies full, his heart bursting with love. In a little while, he would get to take his boyfriend home and make passionate love with him. Their one year anniversary was only a couple of months away, and he had finally gotten up the nerve to ask Derrick to move in with him. The thought of waking up next to Derrick every morning—with the accompanying wood, no less—sent a blaze of heat up his spine.

Nearby a man was wearing a signboard reading, "THE END IS NIGH! REPENT NOW!" He accompanied the message with exaggerated gestures and loud vocal repetitions of his message.

"He's wrong you, know." Derrick turned to look back at Nigel.

"Good thing. I'm not done with you yet." He squeezed Derrick's chest and moved a little to see his lover's face better.

Derrick smiled and Nigel's heart danced. "Likewise. The end is forever away. It's the future that is nigh."

He nodded and pulled Derrick closer. "The future is right in front of us."

Derrick turned around so he was completely facing Nigel. He was breathing faster. He looked intense as he took Nigel's hands in his own. "The future is *Nigh*." He seemed to be trying to explain something that Nigel apparently wasn't getting. He listened as Derrick again said, "My future is *Nigh*. My future is *Nigh*."

Then he finally got it. For a moment he couldn't breathe. This beautiful, wonderful man thought Nigel was his future? Some days Nigel was scared that his boyfriend would know how beneath him Nigel was and fly away. But now Derrick was telling him that his future was with Nigel. He struggled with his emotions. He pulled Derrick as close as he could, wrapping his arms around him, and burying his nose against his lover's neck.

He was shaking, and he appreciated that Derrick didn't say anything, just gave him a minute to get himself under control. Finally he turned his head and brushed his lips against Derrick's ear. No words could convey what he felt but he tried. They came out in a whisper. "The future is us, together. I love you so much. I keep pinching myself to see if I'm dreaming."

Derrick pulled back to meet his eyes. "I love you, too, Nigel, more than I could ever explain." Then he laughed.

Nigel smiled. "What?"

"This." Derrick leaned back and opened his arms to take in Nigel and everything around them. "This is perfect. Life is perfect. I'm so happy right now." He laughed again and Nigel joined in. Soon they were howling so hard they fell over, and Tibbs was jumping around them trying to play.

They almost didn't hear the phone ringing, but it fell out of Derrick's pocket. Without the cloth to muffle the sound, the ringtone blared. Derrick fumbled to answer, his hoots turning to chuckles. "Hello?"

Nigel sat up and tried to still his own laughter. He gazed at Derrick and was filled again with his love for this man. He was watching when Derrick's

face fell. It was like slow motion, seeing his grinning, happy, loving, full of life Derrick morph into an unmoving rictus of agony and despair. He felt his heart fall out of his chest and roll away. That had to be what happened in order for him to feel this kind of pain, watching his lover fade away in front of his eyes.

Derrick wasn't saying anything except an occasional, "Okay." He mostly just listened. It killed Nigel not to scream, "What's wrong?! Tell me what's wrong so I can fix it!" but he didn't. Nothing that could make Derrick look that way was something he could simply patch up. He cursed whatever powers that might be that their perfect moment had been shattered.

He took Derrick's hand. It was like picking up a dead fish: heavy, lifeless, and unresponsive. Cold. Clammy. He rubbed the palm trying to warm it up. Derrick ended the call and continued to stare at nothing.

"Dare?" He whispered the words. Derrick didn't say anything. "Dare? Please. Tell me what's wrong." Just looking at his lover in so much pain was making Nigel fall apart inside.

Finally Derrick turned to him, his eyes dimmed with grief. "Cel—" He had to swallow and start again. "Celeste's—Celeste is dead. My mother's dead."

CHAPTER 9

Now: Derrick

This week has been hard, busy but not enough so. Relief flooded Edwina's face when Derrick told her he would take care of everything, including Ronald's memorial service, the will, and the estate. He gained a lot of experience when Celeste died only a little over a year ago. He is glad he is able to help. His father was surprisingly prepared and set up a lot of the funeral arrangements in advance. Derrick refuses to think about what that means. He isn't ready to face it, although it's confusing that Ronald didn't change his will. Maybe he didn't have time or the money to see an attorney. But Derrick found that when he completed the small number of things left to do, he felt empty, aching for another task to keep him occupied. He hasn't really found anything else.

Days have been spent either at the house, on the phone, or exercising. Bereavement leave has given him too much time to think, and he has tried to keep his mind clear by exhausting himself. At night, Nigel makes love to him, sometimes hard and dirty, sometimes soft and sweet. Derrick clings to his lover like a barnacle. If he lets go, he will float away and drown. It's a mixed metaphor, but it fits as he struggles to keep his head above the murky despair dragging him down.

Now the day Derrick's been dreading, the time for his father's funeral, is here. They decide to take the Prius again. The other car is too flashy in its way, too fun. He has to pull the seat forward to adjust for his shorter legs. It reminds him that he's not the one who usually drives this car, and he feels comforted cradled by a seat molded over time to fit his lover. Next to him, his boyfriend fiddles with the radio and finds a blues station. Nigel doesn't like this genre of music but Derrick does, and he's grateful for the consideration. The music is exactly what he needs right now.

Muddy Water's soulful voice croons from the speakers. A memory of Celeste playing an old vinyl record on an ancient console stereo drifts into focus. He'd forgotten that old behemoth. The look on her face whenever she closed her eyes and let the music fill her is one of his fondest memories. She

listened to rhythm and blues, soul and funk, and a lot of other sounds his friends thought were stupid. He secretly loved it and would hide behind the door to the den and watch her sway to the music, the beautiful voices filling his heart, too.

The memory reminds him that not that long ago, he was attending another funeral, and his heart grows heavy again. No one likes memorial services, but the ones for the people that mean the most are the hardest. He rubs his chest as if he could dispel the ache there. He is thankful for the billionth time that day that Nigel is there beside him, tethering him to the moment. He remembers what someone in juvie once told him when he was starting to panic from PTSD; *“There’s only one thing you need to do right now: breathe. Concentrate on just that. Breathe in, breathe out. Focus on one step at a time. Breathe in, breathe out.”* He can do that. He does.

Then: Derrick

“Ronald, I—” He what? He had no idea what to say. What was there that would help a man cope with the death of his wife of thirty-seven years? Derrick had lost the only mother he had ever really known, but he was grown, twenty-nine years old in a couple of weeks. Ronald had lost the love of his life, the woman that made everything else matter. “Dad...”

Ronald laughed without humor. “You never called me ‘Dad’ before.” He swallowed the rest of his whiskey sour in one gulp and signaled the bartender for another. “You tell people I’m your father, but you never actually called me ‘Dad’ or anything like it.”

“I know. I’m sorry.” Derrick toyed with his ginger ale. He was queasy, and this high-end bottled brand had a lot of real ginger in it which was supposed to help. He didn’t think anything would help this kind of nausea. It had been over a month since Celeste’s sudden tragic death from a coronary, and he still found it hard to function sometimes. He couldn’t imagine what it was like for Ronald. Except, he could. Although they had only known each other about a year, he thought that if Nigel perished, when they were so in love and happy together, he would die. He didn’t think he could bear the pain. He shook his

head to clear those thoughts away—he had enough grief. “I should have called you Dad like Benji and Merry do. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. Word sounds weird coming out of your mouth. Too soft.” The bartender placed a new glass in front of Ronald, and Derrick told her to put it on his own tab. “Don’t fall in love, Son. It’ll kill you every time. Wait, I don’t mean that. I wouldn’t have traded my life with your mama for anything in the world.”

Derrick could tell his father was barely holding on. He had moved home to help Ronald with the kids, and his father was like a hologram of who he had been. He ached for his dad, but he had no idea how to help. He would do anything to make Ronald’s pain go away.

“I keep hoping you’ll find the man of your dreams, the one who stays there forever. And I pray he outlives you so you don’t ever know this kind of pain.”

Derrick put his hand on his father’s arm. “You don’t have to worry; I have found him. And I know that if he does die first, it will still be worth the time we have together.”

Ronald spluttered. “That lily white boy? He’s not the one. He’s just a thing you’re going through.”

Derrick was hurt until he reminded himself that Ronald was lashing out because of his own pain. “Let’s not talk about him right now, okay?”

“Why not? You won’t listen to me anyways so why does it matter if I talk about it?” Ronald drained his drink once more and signaled for a refill. “You haven’t got any idea what it’s like to be in love.”

Derrick knew it was wrong to engage his father, but he just couldn’t let that slip by. “That’s not true at all. I’ve been with enough guys to know that what Nigel and I have is truly love.” He ignored Ronald’s snort. “I’m sorry you don’t like him, but he’s not going anywhere.”

His father shook his head. “You just think you’re in love. You haven’t got what Celeste and I do... did.” His father closed his eyes a minute before continuing. “Even if you’re head over heels, that man isn’t. You know he’s

just slumming it. You're just a new play toy." He accepted his fresh drink from the bartender.

"Why do you keep saying that? Nigel has never been that way. You're just reaffirming the stereotype of the rich playboy. Nigel's not like that." Derrick felt himself getting heated, but he was sick of these comments. "His family's not like that. He wasn't born rich, at least not what most people think of as wealthy. His parents were with Bill Gates when he first moved Microsoft here in 1979, and they didn't make more than a good salary until the company went public a few years later. Nigel was in grade school when his family went from well off to affluent."

"His family has always had more money than you'll ever see."

"That's not the point. Nigel was born middle class—"

"Upper middle class." Ronald's third glass was nearing empty, and he was already waving for another. Derrick narrowed his eyes. Ronald needed to slow down.

"Okay, upper middle class, and he has the same values of hard work and education that you do. He isn't who you make him out to be. He dedicates his life to helping the same kids I do! You've said you respect my work." Derrick took a deep breath to calm himself. His father was grieving and drunk; Derrick should have left this conversation ages ago.

"I do. You're good at it partially because you know what it's like to be one of these kids. He's just doing it because of his white guilt. White people don't get it."

Derrick growled, "You're judging him because of the way a lot of rich folks treat people who don't have money. But Nigel is different. You need to stop talking about him that way. I know you're hurting, but you are being downright offensive. It's not all right to talk about anyone the way you do about him, and you know it." He leaned forward, "But it is especially not okay to talk that way about the man who shares my heart."

Ronald just rolled his eyes and shook his head.

Derrick growled, “Are you trying to lie and say you don’t like him because he’s white? That’s bullshit and you know it. Our family has almost as much white blood as it does black or Latino or anything else.”

The barkeep put another whiskey sour in front of Ronald, and his father quickly gulped half of it down. “Not that kind of white. I mean whiter than white, like white rich folks who don’t even know any black people except the guy who empties their office trash. If it isn’t white guilt, then it’s to keep streets safe for him and his white friends.”

“Ronald...” Derrick tried to reason with him. Reasoning with a drunk was always a bad idea. “Nigel does what he does because, like me, he cares about these kids. He does it because, also like me, he believes in proactive rather than reactive solutions. He does it because he’s an optimist and a caring person. At his core, he is radiant. I am in love with his very essence, just like you were in love with Celeste’s soul.”

“Don’t you talk such shit around me. He isn’t anything like your mama. He’ll never be like her.” Ronald was snarling now.

“Of course he won’t; he’s himself. But he is to me what Celeste was to you.”

Ronald swallowed the last of his drink and then swiveled to face his son. “I’m not gonna let that happen. You can’t see that boy no more. You’ll thank me later.”

Derrick barked out a laugh. “You forbid me? I’m twenty-eight, twenty-nine in two weeks. I’m a big boy now.”

Ronald wore a look Derrick didn’t like. “You aren’t going to see that boy, or you aren’t going to see your family no more. Which it gonna be? Him or us?”

“Ronald, don’t be foolish. You need me. You asked me to live with you to help with Benjamin and Marisol. It’s the drink talking. Let me take you home, and we’ll talk tomorrow.” He beckoned for the bill.

“It isn’t the drink. Been thinking about this a long time now. I gotta stop you before you make the biggest mistake of your life. He’s only gonna hurt you, and you are too precious to me. I’m not gonna allow you to get hurt.”

“Why do you keep saying that? Why do you hate him so much? You’re usually so tolerant.”

Ronald smacked his glass down. “Cause it’s folks like him who fuck people up. You know how many of these foster kids get moved around the system ’cause rich whites think they gonna save some little boy then soon as the kid shows any spirit, they kick him to the curb. How many times it happen to you?”

“I don’t think—”

“Yeah, you aren’t thinking at all. Rich folks set up those foundations to give away their money ’cause they’re too good to get their hands dirty. They think if they throw enough money at it, the problem will go way.”

“Nigel doesn’t just throw—”

Ronald growled. “Rich white boys sleep with poor folks just ’cause they can. Decide they’re gonna have some fun with a pretty young plaything, then they get bored and go back to their diamonds and champagne, and all they leave behind is just a broken heart in the dirt.”

Derrick’s irritation had changed to confusion. “What are you talking about? Nigel’s not—”

His words were ignored. “That’s where the word comes from you know: slumming it. Like I said: Rich college boys come home for the summer just to play with some poor girl they meet. Lie to her, tell her what she wants to hear, promise her a future all bright and shiny. Then come fall, they go back to Harvard, and she don’t ever see them again.”

“Nigel went to Berkeley.” Derrick knew the fact wasn’t particularly relevant, but then none of this made any sense.

“I don’t want that for you. He’s gonna hurt you; he’s gonna leave you rotting in the gutter when he gets tired of your life.”

Derrick was getting seriously pissed off. His father was insulting both him and his lover now. “Ronald, stop it. I’m not some poor, ignorant, street kid anymore. I’ve got a Master’s degree myself, remember? You convinced me I could do it because you knew I was smart enough. So why are you treating me like an idiot? I know what I’m doing. And FYI, I doubt Nigel has ever even touched a diamond. He’s too distressed about the horrors of blood diamonds.”

“I know his type!” His father’s voice was rising, and people were starting to stare.

“How? How do you know his ‘type’? This isn’t some Hollywood B-flick where everyone is a cookie-cutter caricature.”

“‘Cause I’ve seen what he leaves behind!” Ronald shouted. The silence that ensued was nerve-racking after the loud outburst. Derrick was horribly embarrassed and ducked his head while his father had another sip.

Slowly, the noise level rose again as the other customers went back to their drinks. Derrick held up a hand to show the bartender he had it under control. He waited for his father to say more, but he didn’t. Finally Derrick asked, “This happened to you?”

“God, no. I’ve never been that naïve.” Ronald scowled. “Your mama. When she was barely legal, some rich dickhead white boy from Harvard got some kind of internship or something in Dallas and met her at a festival. She thought she was in love. He said he loved her, too, and would marry her soon as he finished his education. When summer ended, he went back to school, and she never heard from him again. He never returned her calls or replied to her letters. She worried about him until she talked to his roommate, who laughed at her and called her nasty things. He told her the asshole never liked her and didn’t want to see her anymore.

“Even then she didn’t believe it. She kept trying until she got a certified letter from his attorney threatening a harassment suit. It took her a long time to fix what he broke. She was such a mess when I met her. Years later she found him on the Internet. He had been a lawyer for some foundation until he became a congressman, and at the time he was running for senator. Fucking

prick ended up marrying a woman he was already seeing when he met your mama. Everything he said was a lie, and he broke her heart.”

“Shit. That’s horrific. Fuck, who could do that to Celeste? She didn’t deserve that.”

Ronald finally looked at him. “No, she didn’t, and you don’t, either.”

“You’re right, I don’t, and it isn’t going to happen. I keep telling you, Nigel isn’t like that.”

“How do you really know? You suddenly learn to read minds, boy? Whole world thinks he’s too good for a low-class boy like you, and he knows it. You’re a fool.”

Derrick didn’t know whether to laugh or hit something. Part of him believed his father was right; who was he to deserve the perfection that was Nigel? But he couldn’t let himself think about that right now because this was ridiculous. He grabbed Ronald’s arm. “Let’s go home before I kick your ass.”

Ronald wrested his arm free. “You aren’t in love with this boy. You said you’ve never been in love before.”

“I am now. Head over heels.”

“I told you: You don’t even know what love is.” His words slurred a little. “I’m finally drunk enough to tell you what I’ve been trying to get the balls to say for a while now. It’s gotta be him or us. You best figure it out.”

“You don’t want him to betray me so you’re going to hurt me instead? You want me to choose between my family and the man I love? I’m not doing that. You’re being ridiculous.”

“Decide, or I’ll have the locks changed while you’re at work tomorrow. You’ll find your shit outside.” Ronald’s face was hard.

“You’re drunk.”

“Maybe, but I’m finally done with this shit. Decide. Now.”

Derrick felt the blood drain from his face. “You’re serious.” Ronald’s expression didn’t change. “You’re fucking kidding me. Don’t do this, don’t ask this of me. You’re being an ass.”

Ronald shrugged. “Choose.”

Fear warred with fury inside Derrick. “Fuck! Knock it off, Ronald. Who I love is none of your damn business, and you don’t have control over it. Don’t you fucking dare tell me I have to choose.” Ronald’s face remained stoic, and he kept drinking. How could this be happening? “God fucking dammit to hell and back. I can’t make such a choice, and I won’t. I love both of you!” Derrick was shaking. He tried to calm down and try a different approach. “Please, Ronald... uh, Dad. Be reasonable.”

“It’s too late for ‘Dad’ now. You do what you think you gotta do, but my mind is made up. I’m not gonna change it. I’m gonna catch a cab. You choose him, don’t be bothering to come home tonight. I won’t watch you destroy yourself.” He turned and headed for the door.

Derrick started after him. “Ronald... Ronald!”

His father waved him off. “Decide, boy. You best be home by morning. You tell him you aren’t gonna see him anymore or say goodbye to me now. I’m finished with his games.” Ronald stumbled out the door.

Derrick staggered back to lean on his stool. Choose? How could he choose? He clutched his stomach and ran for the restroom. The ginger ale definitely couldn’t handle this kind of sick.

CHAPTER 10

Now: Derrick

On their way to I-5, Tully's Coffee beckons, and Derrick swings into the drive-thru. Reading the names of the frou-frou coffee drinks on the posted menu makes his stomach churn. He needs the caffeine, but anything other than black coffee is too much.

"Want anything?" He reaches for his wallet.

"I've got it." Nigel hands him a twenty he's already pulled from his billfold. "Just a black Americano."

The box squawks, and Derrick orders two of the watered-down espresso drinks made for American sensibilities. He declines the voice's suggestion of a pastry and pulls forward. "Did you know Patrick Dempsey bought Tully's?" It's useless trivia, and he doesn't really care, but it's something to talk about besides death. He can't face any more silence.

"The hot guy from *Grey's Anatomy*?" It's obvious from his body language that Nigel has no more interest in the subject than Derrick, but he, too, needs a distraction.

"Yeah. He beat out Starbucks."

"It's always good to prevent a monopoly. Does Dorjee still work there?" Nigel names a friend from their soccer team.

The car reaches the window. Derrick pays and put the drinks in the car's cup holders. "Where, Starbucks? Yeah, I think so."

There is nothing more to say on that topic. Derrick steers the car back into traffic, and the silence descends again, a painful reminder of where they're headed. A hand touches his knee and he takes it; Nigel says so much without words. They hold hands and drive on.

Then: Nigel

Someone was hammering on the door. “I’m coming, I’m coming!” The pounding was so insistent, Nigel felt panic well up. Something was horribly wrong.

When the door opened, Derrick’s fist was on the downswing, so he lost his balance and tumbled into Nigel’s arms.

“Whoa, easy. What’s wrong?” Nigel held his boyfriend up and closed the door. He then pulled Derrick toward the living room. “Sit down. I’ll get you some—”

“No, don’t leave me, not yet!” Derrick wouldn’t let go. He was shaking and cold to the touch.

Nigel felt his throat closing. He was terrified. “Derrick, talk to me. What’s wrong? What happened?” He reached for the blanket he had been curled up in reading and wrapped it around his shivering lover before dropping into the enormous armchair and holding Derrick’s face to his chest. His boyfriend’s breath was coming in gasps, and Nigel realized his lover was sobbing. Shit. He held Derrick tightly and put his legs around him, too. Although he was having trouble breathing through his own constricted chest, Nigel rocked his lover, kissing his head and rubbing his back until the crying eased a little. “Dare, please tell me what’s wrong.”

Derrick finally looked up and met his gaze. The agony Nigel saw there cut through his heart, and he swallowed the lump threatening to choke him. Derrick had to start three times before he could speak clearly enough to be understood. “Ronald... Ronald...” He hung his head shaking it. “That bastard is making me choose.” He lifted his head, tears still streaming. “He’s making me choose between you. He told me it’s either my family or you.”

Nigel felt like someone stabbed him. He only thought he couldn’t breathe before. Now his lungs refused to work. “Ronald said you have to choose whether to date me or not? And if you do choose me, he won’t let you live or hang out there anymore?”

Derrick shook his head, and his look stilled any hope Nigel had left. “I have to tell you I’m never going to see you again, or they’re lost to me forever. Or until Ronald dies, if he hasn’t poisoned the kids against me by then.”

“Why is he doing this?” Nigel couldn’t imagine having to choose between Derrick and his family. The very thought was horrifying.

“He says he’s trying to protect me for my own good. He says you’re just using me, and I’ll be horribly hurt when you decide to move on.”

Nigel gasped in shock. “I would never—”

“I know you wouldn’t.” Nigel wondered if that were true, if Derrick really knew that. “I wish he were dead.” Derrick blurted out the words, but he didn’t take them back.

It killed Nigel to see Derrick going through this. “No you don’t. You’re just angry and hurt. He’ll come around.”

“No he won’t, and you know it.” Unfortunately, Nigel agreed that Ronald was unlikely to change his mind. “What am I going to do, Nigh? I can’t lose you. But I can’t lose them, either.”

Nigel couldn’t bear the despair he saw on his lover’s face. He would do anything to take it away. “Derrick, I love you, you know that, right?” His boyfriend nodded. “I will always love you. It’s torture to tell you this, but you need me to say it.” He took a deep breath. “You never had a family until the Bryants. You told me you didn’t think anyone had ever loved you until they came into your life. All you ever wanted was a family. They’ve been that for you. You’ve had them for well over a decade, something like fourteen years, right?” Derrick nodded, uncertain. “You’ve known me less than one. You can’t give up your family. No one should ever have to. Family is everything.” The words were like shards of glass coming out of his mouth.

Derrick pulled back, his face reflecting an amalgam of concern, fear, and confusion. “Are you saying you don’t want me anymore?”

Nigel choked and pulled Derrick close again. He couldn’t bear that anguish. “No, oh God no, not at all.” He had to swallow several times before he could continue. “I love you. I ache just thinking about losing you.” He

closed his eyes. This was so hard. “It’s just that you have what most sexual minorities dream of.” Sexual minorities? He really was a twit. He brushed that off. It wasn’t important now. “You have a family who loves you and accepts you for who you are. They don’t simply tolerate your sexual orientation—” *twit, twit, twit* “—they honor it.” He was crying now, too.

“You have said over and over that Ronald rescued you, made you who you are. I know you’re the one who did that, but I agree that Ronald made the way available to you. He showed you what you were capable of.” Nigel gathered the strength to remove the despair on his face and keep only his adoration there. He pushed Derrick back so he could look at him again. He brushed the hair out of Derrick’s eyes. “He’s the person you most admire. He’s everything to you. I can’t be the one to make you give that up. I can’t ask that of you.”

Derrick grabbed the front of Nigel’s T-shirt. “You’re not asking it of me; he is. Fucking asshole!”

Tightly grasping Derrick’s hands in his, Nigel looked into those beautiful but tormented eyes. “True, but I’m not going to be like him and demand you choose me. You can’t do that. I’m not worth you giving up your family.” He kissed Derrick’s forehead.

“If anyone is, it’s you. I can’t fucking believe this. I can’t make this kind of decision! This is fucking evil.”

Nigel had to ease the pain he was witnessing. “You don’t have to decide. It’s a no-brainer. Your family needs you right now. I’m going to miss you so fucking much. You are the most amazing person I’ve ever known, the only one I’ve ever truly loved, the only one I *will* ever love. I have always and will always love you. Remember that.”

“Me, too. I don’t deserve you.” Derrick was crying again.

The statement was appalling. That Derrick believed it was even worse. “Dare, you deserve the best that’s out there. I want that to be me, but you deserve so much more, including a family. Your father is right about that.”

Derrick wiped the tears from his face with his jacket. “My father isn’t right about anything. I hate that you’re right about my family needing me. Will you make love to me one last time?”

Nigel answered by standing, still holding his precious Derrick. His lover wrapped his arms and legs around him. Nigel would make this the best sex he could and leave Derrick with something to remember him by. He carried his lover to the bedroom, and they fell into the pile of blankets together. They kissed and their hands roamed, trying to touch everywhere at once.

Nigel pulled back long enough to say, “You... I won’t forget...” The sentence dangled in the air, unfinished. They both knew that what they had would be gone come morning. Nigel fought the tears that threatened.

“Don’t cry, Nigh. Not yet. Make love to me. I want you.”

The words gave Nigel the fortitude he needed. This was their last night together and he was damn well going to spend every minute enjoying the beautiful man he loved. They hurriedly undressed. Nigel took a moment to drink in the sight of his lover. Derrick was always gorgeous but naked, he took Nigel’s breath away.

“I need you inside me this time, Dare. I need you to fill the emptiness I’m feeling.”

Derrick nodded and they both fell onto the bed. Their sex was frenzied. They rolled back and forth, each trying to get closer to the other, wanting to touch everything at once. The kissing was like fire on a fuse, everything rushing toward a great explosion. When Derrick reached for the lube, Nigel’s heart skipped a beat, and as soon as the bottle was in his lover’s hand, he quickly pulled Derrick back to him.

“Dare, hurry, I want you inside me. Now.”

The prep was rushed, and when Derrick entered him, the pain was crushing. But Nigel didn’t care. It matched the pain in his heart. Derrick paused to let Nigel adjust. He leaned forward and held Nigel like his very existence depended on it.

“You are so fucking hot. I want to stay right in this moment forever.”

“Hell, no—if you don’t move right now, I’m going to explode in the wrong way. Move. Move!”

Derrick smiled a bit then moved.

As Derrick thrust, Nigel pushed back. Their intercourse was ruthless and demanding. He would hurt badly tomorrow, but he welcomed it. It would be his last gift to Derrick, the memory of incredible lovemaking. They both screamed as they came. Nigel let the pain in his heart erupt, hidden in the cry of pleasure.

When the spasms ended, Derrick fell to cover Nigel, his weight a comforting presence. They were both breathing heavily.

You own my heart. Nigel felt like he was sinking. *How can I let you go?* They kissed again, gently this time, ending the powerful experience with tenderness and a different kind of intimacy.

Finally, Derrick slid off and turned Nigel’s head to cup his cheek, rubbing his thumb along Nigel’s temple. Nigel twisted to kiss his lover’s palm.

“I don’t know if I’m going to survive this.” Derrick sounded like he was choking. “The pain of losing you is already eating me alive.”

Nigel rolled to his side and pulled his lover into his arms. He was going to be strong for Derrick. Anything for Derrick. “You’re tough. You’ve been through so much and not only survived, but came out on top. You can do anything. You can do this.” *No, don’t do this.* “I need you to be okay. I’ll make it through if I know that you will, too.” *I hope.* “Tell me you’re going to be all right.”

Tears streaked down Derrick’s cheeks as he shook his head. Even frowning he was beautiful. “I don’t know how but I will. I know that life is about ups and downs, but losing you... The loneliness is going to devour me.”

“No, you are stronger than that. I feel the same way, but I believe in you.”

Derrick wiped his face with one hand. “I’ll live. I can promise you I won’t hurt myself or anything drastic like that. We’re not playing out some sick Romeo and Julius fantasy. It’s just going to take me a very long time, if ever, to heal from losing you. I need to know that you’re going to be okay, too.”

Neither of them made jokes about cheese this time; Nigel knew it was all too real for both of them, their hearts too raw. “I’ll make it. I’ll eventually be okay. I’ll just miss you forever.” He pressed his forehead against Derrick’s, and they lay there for a few minutes. Finally Nigel moved and grabbed the box of baby wipes from the nightstand, using the cloths to wipe away the traces of their lovemaking.

Then they lay together under the covers, Derrick’s back snug against him, Nigel’s arms around his lover, his nose buried in Derrick’s hair. Lover. Not for much longer. Anguish cut his heart. He tried to ignore it. They fell asleep that way, entwined, sadness weighing them down.

During the night, Nigel awoke to caresses and kisses. This time it was his turn to fill his lover, both of them on their sides with Derrick’s leg over his hip. When Nigel came, he made sure to appreciate the intense pleasure. He didn’t clean them off right away, instead smearing the spunk over their chests, reveling in the intimacy.

“I’ll love you forever, Nigh.”

“I’ll love you always, Dare.” Nigel curled in Derrick’s arms, bodies again pressed tightly together.

Sleep took a while coming this time, and when it did, Nigel’s dreams were filled with visions of Derrick dying or killing him. But he dreaded the dawn when his lover would head for home, leaving a broken and bleeding heart behind. He wanted to scream at Derrick, tell him not to go, tell him that they were meant to be together until the end of time. But he didn’t. Instead, when morning came, he put all his love into their final kiss. He clung to Derrick, holding him one last time, and then he let go and let the only man he would ever love walk out his door.

CHAPTER 11

Now: Derrick

“I don’t know if I can do this.” Their exit is approaching, and Derrick signals for the turn off the freeway. “There will be so many more people than have been at the house.”

“They’re just people, Dare. Everyone knows you’ll be there. Are you afraid of something specific?”

“No. Yes. Sort of. I don’t know. I don’t know if I belong there. I mean, I know Ronald’s not really there, but this is his memorial service. He was so angry with me. I can’t help but think this is disrespectful.”

Nigel brushes his fingers against Derrick’s cheek. “Funerals are for the living, not for the dead. You need to say goodbye. Your sister and brother want you there.”

Derrick is swallowing to stop his tears before they gush.

“He loved you, Derrick, you know he did. All he wanted was for you to be happy. If he knew how good we are together, if he knew how much I love and cherish you, I know he would have supported you in this. He was just a stubborn man who couldn’t face the possibility he was wrong.” Nigel brushes the hair off of Derrick’s face and strokes his head. “This is for you, not for him. I’ll be right beside you the whole time.”

Tears still threaten to escape, but Derrick holds them at bay. “What if I fall?”

“Then I’ll pick you up and carry you. You’re not in this alone, Dare. I’m there with you. I will always be there.”

Then: Nigel

Nigel sat in front of the fireplace staring at the immaculate interior. That had been Derrick’s doing. He had come in and cleaned and straightened Nigel’s fireplace, his kitchen, his home, his life. Nigel had been a mess before Derrick. He hadn’t realized it, hadn’t understood how lonely and boring his

life was until a nutty man with beautiful eyes and a goofy grin strode in and shook it all up. He still couldn't believe that what Ronald had said in a drunken stupor, the man was still holding everyone to a month later. Nigel had come to accept a couple of weeks ago that Derrick's father wasn't ever going to change his mind, and it was killing Nigel, slowly but very surely.

He felt empty now. He missed the smirk on Derrick's face when he pulled one over on Nigel. He missed the deep soulful eyes when his boyfriend told him he loved him. He missed his lover's warmth when they snuggled on pillows in front of the fireplace. He missed the weight of Derrick's hard body as he filled Nigel and made him scream. Most of all, he missed having him to call when he just needed someone to talk to, someone who knew him inside and out, someone who he loved unconditionally who loved him back. Someone he would give his life to save if it came to it. Someone who he was sure felt all the same things for him. He missed when Derrick needed him and he could be there to support the incredible man he loved. He loved being able to do things for Derrick, making sure his true love was happy, and his life full of joy. Nigel would find a way to stop the tides if that's what Derrick needed.

He stopped mid-thought. He was willing to do anything for Derrick, anything. He knew his lover would do anything for him, too. If he had left Derrick because his family forced him, would Derrick have just accepted it? No. Derrick would have fought Nigel's family and their injustice—fought for Nigel—until his dying breath. Derrick was the love of his life, and yet Nigel had just let him go. He was an idiot. Derrick was his, and he was Derrick's.

Nigel jumped up and grabbed his jacket, wallet, keys, and a leash. "Come on, Tibbs. Let's go get our man." He hooked the lead onto the dog's collar. "And no, you can't drive."

CHAPTER 12

Now: Nigel

“What is that?” Nigel stares up at the side of the church ablaze with color as Derrick pulls into a parking spot.

“I would think you would know what that was by now.”

Nigel sticks his head over the dashboard to see the other end of the rainbow flag hanging from the eaves of the building. “That thing has to be the size of our condo.”

Derrick leans forward over the steering wheel to see better. “I think you’re exaggerating.”

“That’s got to be a three or four story wall. The flag covers two-thirds of it. Is this a gay church or something?”

“Hardly.” Derrick smiles. “It’s my family’s church. They put that up when they voted as a congregation to be a Welcoming Church a year and a half ago. That means that they specifically welcome gay and lesbian families to be part of the congregation. And it’s a two and a half story wall on this side. The flag is something like sixteen by twenty-two.”

“That’s still enormous.” Nigel sits back and looks at Derrick. “This is your family’s church.” His lover nods. “So it really and truly wasn’t about me being a man—a gay man?”

Derrick frowns. “You doubted that?”

Nigel is embarrassed. “It’s hard not to. I guess I just don’t want to accept that it all was a class thing. I don’t want to believe the US is like that. That’s for countries with caste systems like India, or societies in history like Ancient Rome. I mean, there are the snobby uber-rich who have old money, but that’s not the rest of us.”

His lover shakes his head. “Believe it. It’s a much stronger line than you folks with money know.” That hurts Nigel, and he isn’t completely successful in suppressing his reaction.

“Oh, Nigh. I’m sorry. You know I don’t think you’re different. I didn’t mean to make a class judgment. I just was repeating the idea people have, and it came out wrong. My only residual feelings of that sort are my insecurities about not being good enough for you.”

Nigel pulls his boyfriend into his arms. He kisses and nibbles along Derrick’s cheek and then whispers in his ear, “Stop. Just stop.” He reaches down and lightly brushes his fingers over the zipper in his lover’s pants. “*He* knows how much I love you.” Said body part wriggles to concur. “For once, it’s right to listen to your little head.” That gets a laugh, and something inside Nigel loosens somewhat, allowing him to breathe a little easier. All he cares about right now is helping Derrick through this. Everything else can wait.

Then: Derrick

Dinner was awful. Not just the food, although it was bad, too—his sister was a terrible cook and it had been her turn—but the atmosphere. Derrick didn’t feel like talking. He didn’t feel like smiling. He didn’t even feel like eating. He just pushed the food around on his plate. Nineteen days, eleven hours, and—he looked at his watch—sixteen minutes since he’d said goodbye to the best thing that had ever happened to him.

“Got somewhere you got to go?” Ronald was clearly annoyed.

Derrick remembered how he used to have somewhere to be. He just shook his head. Marisol asked him to pass the green beans, and he did so without looking at her. Benjamin started kicking a table leg, making the plates vibrate.

“Benji, knock it off.” His sister slammed her hand down on the table next to Benji’s plate.

“Daaaad, Marisol is bossing me around!”

“Am not, you were being—”

“Stop it, you hear me?” Their father waited until they were quiet. “Marisol, you’re seventeen years old. Stop acting like you’re five. Benjamin, stop kicking the table.” He sighed. “Everyone needs to say something nice for a change. You all tell me something good about today.” Derrick curled his lip.

Nothing good had happened since he'd walked out on Nigel. Even his birthday a few days ago had been agonizing. He was sure he would never have a happy day again.

"I got a gold star for my story about the robot that beat the monster and then went to the moon and then had grilled cheese and chocolate cake and then never went to bed." Benji giggled and showed the food in his mouth.

"Dad!"

"That sounds like a good story, Benjamin. I'd love you to read it to me tonight. Chew with your mouth closed. Marisol?"

Marisol slouched in her chair. "This is stupid." Derrick agreed but didn't bother to say anything. He just didn't care enough.

"There isn't anything stupid about looking at the good side of things. Sit up."

She rolled her eyes but straightened. "Umm... Oh, yeah, according to Laticia, Marcus told Luanda that Jorge said he likes me! I told Laticia to tell Luanda to tell Marcus that I like Jorge, too, so he'll ask me to prom." A month ago, Derrick would have laughed and teased her about such a convoluted way of asking someone out.

Ronald grimaced but smiled. "That's real nice, Marisol. Who is this Jorge?"

"Oh my God, Dad, you never like anyone I'm interested in!" *Or that I am*, thought Derrick.

"I didn't say that. I just want to learn something about him. I like to know who is looking at my little girl."

Marisol looked only somewhat mollified. "Um, well, he's really musical. He's on the hip-hop team and in choir, and he's got his own band."

Her father nodded, a forced smile on his face. "Uh huh. And what is he learning in school?" Derrick resisted the urge to snort in derision.

"Geez, Dad. We're not in college. He's learning what everyone else is: math, English, social studies. You know." She rolled her eyes again, then

focused on Derrick. “It’s Derrick’s turn. Why don’t you bug him?” Marisol smirked.

“That’s a good idea. Derrick? What’s a good thing that happened today?”

Derrick mumbled, “My day sucked.”

“I’m sure there was something posi—”

“There wasn’t.” Derrick glared at his meatloaf.

His father sighed and put down his fork. “Son, you need to stop your moping. Mary Harper at the church told me about this speed dating thing—”

“Are you for real?” Derrick looked at his father this time.

“They got one for gays. I got all the info, and I wrote it down for you. Mary said her cousin went, and he found himself a good man. It would be good for you to go. Find someone. Get out there again at least.”

Derrick put down his fork carefully and turned to face his father. “Ronald, I don’t want to ‘find someone’. There isn’t anyone out there for me. There is only one man I want, and you forced me to throw him away.” Derrick felt like he was going to vomit. Why did he give up the love of his life? How could he?

“Now, Son, I know you’re hurting, but the best way to get over a crush is to move on.”

“Are you kidding me?!” Derrick picked up his silverware again and threw it onto the plate, making a loud clatter. “He’s not a ‘crush’ I need to ‘get over’. He’s the man of my dreams, and I can’t believe I let you talk me into leaving him.”

Ronald was starting to get riled. “I didn’t make you do nothing.”

“You told me if I didn’t leave him, you would never talk to me again, nor let me near my sister and brother. You made me choose between you!”

“You know as well as I do: he isn’t the one for you. He was only us—”

“He was what? Using me?” Derrick stood and threw his napkin on top of his fork and knife. “For what? To treat with respect and love? To hold me in

the middle of the night when my PTSD overwhelms me, and I'm a puddle of fear? To make love to me—"

"Gross!" Marisol looked horrified.

"What does 'make love' mean?" Benjamin asked at the same time.

Ronald shook his head. "You don't got to be such a drama queen."

Distantly Derrick heard the doorbell ring, but he was too upset to pay any attention. "Drama queen? You think this is me being a drama queen?" Derrick realized he was yelling.

"Yeah, you're confusing puppy love with something real."

Derrick was incredulous. "Puppy love? *Puppy love?*" He heard his voice getting even louder. "Are you kidding me? I'm twenty-nine years old! I know what real love is."

The doorbell sounded again. "I'll get it!" Benji jumped up and headed for the door.

"Benjamin! You can't answer the door, especially at night." Marisol stood. "Don't mind me, I'm just the slave around here." She hurried after her brother.

Now his father stood. "You don't got any idea what real love is. I do."

"Don't you dare bring Celeste into this. I only moved home to help you with the kids. Don't you even try to use my mother to manipulate me." Ronald started to speak, but Derrick cut him off. "No, I don't want to hear it. I made a mistake when I chose you over him. He is my Celeste, my one true love. You have no right to tell me who to give my heart to. You're as bad as the homophobes out there. I don't care what you say, I'm going to try to get him back whether you approve or not. I just hope it's not too late. I told him this once, and I'm going to tell him again: I love him with everything that I am."

"Dare?"

Derrick froze. He knew that voice. He loved that voice. He slowly turned. "Nigel?"

"Yeah." Nigel was standing there, an unsure smile frantically trying to overcome the sorrow on his face.

“What are you doing here?” Derrick tried to fight the tears that welled. He felt like he couldn’t breathe. He fought the hope that bubbled within him.

“I told you that family was more important than anything and has to come first. You hold fast to them and don’t let go.” Derrick didn’t like the sound of that. What was Nigel doing here? “Well, the thing is, you and I? We are family. You’re my family, and I’m not letting you go without a fight.” His chest heaved. “Please come home.”

Home. He let the tears fall. Didn’t some Roman philosopher once say, “Home is where the heart is”? Yeah, he was going home, all right. “Nigh!” He sprinted toward his one true love and jumped into his outstretched arms. Derrick wrapped himself around Nigel and squeezed him as though he would disappear if Derrick let go. He buried his face against Nigel’s neck.

“I’m here, Derrick, I’ve got you.” Nigel’s voice was thick with emotion. He hugged Derrick back just as tightly, kissing his neck, his warm breath ruffling Derrick’s hair.

“Please take me back. I’m so stupid; I made the wrong choice. I never wanted to hurt you—I love you.” Behind him, he heard his father yelling, but Derrick ignored him. He didn’t care what Ronald had to say.

Nigel leaned back so their eyes could meet. “You are never stupid. You just love too much. It was a horrible decision you were forced to make. I, too, love you with everything I am. Please don’t leave me again.”

Derrick shook his head. “Never again.” He leaned in and their mouths met in a long overdue kiss.

“Out of my house, both of you! I never want to see either of you again!” Ronald’s voice cut through their moment. Nigel finally set Derrick back on his feet. Derrick loved that Nigel could hold him up like that and hated being put down.

Sorrow still filled Derrick’s heart. “Ronald, I love you, but I don’t know who you are anymore. Merry, Benji, I love you guys, and I’m not leaving you. You can call me anytime, and I’ll be there. I will try to see you—”

“Like hell you will!” Their father roared. “GET OUT!”

“Fine. Goodbye Ronald.” He turned back to Nigel. “Let’s go get my stuff and get out of here.” He grabbed Nigel’s hand and pulled him toward the stairs. “Then we’re going home.”

CHAPTER 13

Now: Nigel

They get out of the car and head into the building. Inside the door, Nigel pauses and has to take a deep breath.

“Nigh? You don’t need to worry. You saw that the congregation is okay with us. And at the house, no one knew about the argument and my leaving.”

That is true, but churches never make him comfortable. Growing up, religion didn’t exist. It just wasn’t part of their lives. His exposure has almost exclusively been homophobic rants in the media. He has never needed religion, and it makes him uncomfortable. But he’s agreed to come for the memorial service to support his lover. Now, though, what Derrick said in the car has come flooding back. Nigel swallows as he looks around and realizes he is so far out of his element he isn’t even in the same country.

The people milling around the community room are primarily working class. He can tell from the style of dress, the mannerisms, the word usage and grammar. These are the people who work their asses off to make enough money to survive until the next paycheck, the ones whose occupations aren’t valued as highly as those that pay more, despite how vital the jobs are to the economy and community. He feels what Ronald would call “white guilt,” and he now understands what Derrick’s father must have meant by that. It really isn’t any better to know that Ronald didn’t hate him for his skin color or being gay. He feels sick.

Nigel works almost exclusively with very poor kids. He’s used to being judged—they’re teenagers after all—but now he’s aware that he stands out here, from the cut and fabric of his clothing to his expensive haircut. While he doesn’t spend a large amount of money on these things—he certainly doesn’t buy Armani—he does pay more than these people can afford, and he is embarrassed by his ostentation. He wonders if there is time to run to the Fred Meyer around the corner and buy something that wouldn’t stand out so much.

Before he can make up his mind, Derrick is pulling him through the crowd toward a couple of tables lining the back wall. An array of cookies, cakes, and

pies are flanked by huge coffee and hot water urns. Despite the enormous Americanos they have both already consumed, Derrick is pulling a tap and filling a mug with dark liquid. The realization hits Nigel that, on the way here, they spent enough money caffeinating themselves to fund the coffee in these tanks, with cash left over for several more urns' worth. He feels guilty and is glad he left the remainder of his drink in its logoed paper sheath in the car.

“Nigh, are you okay? Is something wrong? You’re staring off into space.”

“Nothing’s wrong.” He smiles. “I’m fine.”

“Knock it off. I can’t deal with you sparing me right now. I need you to be one hundred percent here with me, and that means being honest.”

Sheepish, Nigel kisses Derrick’s forehead. “I’m sorry. My issues are stupid and inappropriate.”

“Tell me.”

“It’s just that I’m suddenly aware of how much I must stick out. I feel like a jerk shouting ‘I have money, neener, neener, neener.’”

Derrick genuinely laughs. “Is that insecurity I hear coming out of the never-ruffled mouth of Nigel Rutherford?”

“I’m plenty insecure, but I try not to let it run my life. Usually I do okay. Anyway, it’s all trivial compared to my fear of losing you. I think that’s where this is coming from. Why didn’t you tell me I was dressing inappropriately?”

Shaking his head, Derrick says, “There is so much wrong with that statement, I don’t even know where to begin. But let’s start with the weirdest. I gave up my family for you. How can you think I’d leave you?”

They move away from the table so others can fill their cups. Nigel tries to find the right words. “You second guess yourself all the time. You’re always—Shit. This isn’t important right now; we’re burying your father. This isn’t the time or place. I’m sorry I—”

“Finish what you were going to say. Everything about us is important. Now is fine.” Derrick’s look is penetrating, but Nigel isn’t sure what the emotion is.

Nigel moves them to a corner behind a partition covered in photos and mementos of Ronald. “Well, ever since you chose me over Ronald, you’ve talked about how you don’t know if you made the right decision. It’s been worse the past few days, and that makes sense. But I’ve been worried all along that one day you’ll convince yourself you made the wrong choice again and leave me for good to return to your dad. I—” He chokes up for a moment and is grateful Derrick gives him a few moments to get himself back under control.

Nigel begins again. “I’ve been uneasy the past few days, knowing this is a very emotional time for you; you’re processing a lot, and nothing is clear anymore. I’ll give you anything you need to get through this, and if you need me to step back for a while so that you can reunite with your family and work through this, I will. But it scares me that if I do let you go, it might become permanent now that you have your family back.”

Nigel is opening and closing his hands in his distress, but he forces himself to maintain eye contact. It’s hard when his soul is reflected back at him. “When you told me in the car about the class/money thing, I got a horrible feeling. Walking in that door, I realized that I’m out of place here. I’m terrified that you’re going to realize that these are the people you want to be around, and that I just don’t fit into your life anymore. I can’t—”

He swallows repeatedly but he can’t stop tears from welling up in his eyes. He should be embarrassed—guys don’t cry—but right now he doesn’t care. “I can’t lose you. I love you so much. You’re my everything.” The teardrops fall, and he doesn’t wipe them away; his fingernails digging into his palms are what is keeping him from disintegrating. He didn’t realize how emotional he is. His guilt intertwines with his fears; putting this on Derrick now is not right.

Derrick’s eyes are filled, too. Interestingly, Nigel never questions his lover’s virility when he sees him crying. “Nigh, you are what I need to get through this. You’re what I need period. I am so sorry that it never occurred to me how my neuroses affect you. I questioned my decision, but I never questioned us. It was always about what I could have done to have both, and whether I deserved you, whether I was what you wanted and needed. I can’t lose you, either, and I won’t. I can’t believe you ever doubted that, and I am so sorry I let that happen. You are my everything, too, just the way you are. I’m

going to reconnect with my family. We've been split apart too long. You were the one who pointed out that you and I are family, too. I will bring all of us back together, including you. Don't you dare step back."

And then they are hugging and crying and holding so tightly to one another Nigel can feel Derrick's heart beating against his chest. Derrick kisses his throat, and Nigel rubs their cheeks together. They stand there for several minutes before his lover pulls back.

Still holding Nigel, Derrick looks at him and says, "I love you, Nigh, but you're an idiot sometimes. Moving on to the second thing wrong with your sentence: Do you realize that you are the one making class judgments now? No one here cares what you're wearing, or who you are, or how much money you have. There's a guy over there somewhere named Ted. You'll probably notice him because he's wearing ratty jeans and a monster truck T-shirt to the funeral. He owns several car lots and is rolling in money. He has to wear a suit all the time, and he hates it. He says that he shows respect by being himself, by not putting up some fake image someone tells him to.

"The money thing? That was my dad's issue, and it came from a specific incident. These are people. You're a person. They will judge you on how you treat others, nothing more, nothing less." He moves forward to rub against Nigel again. "I think you look amazing, and that's why I didn't suggest you wear something else, never mind the fact that it's your business what you wear and no one else's. When we get home, I'll show you how much. But right now, I have to go mingle or people really will start to talk. Thank God they'll think our crying is just grief." Nigel laughs at that.

Derrick kisses him one more time then pulls away. Nigel follows him a few feet before they are accosted by a large woman wearing the biggest hat Nigel has ever seen. The bright yellow contrasts beautifully with her dark skin. She leans in to kiss his boyfriend on the cheek, and he can't believe she doesn't topple over from the weight of the thing.

"Derrick, darling, I was so sorry to hear about your father. He was such a good man. You poor, poor thing." She rubs the side of Derrick's head with her thumb, then rests her hand on his shoulder. "How are you holding up?" Her

accent is Southern, maybe Georgia. Who moves from sunny Georgia to overcast Seattle? Nigel loves the weather, but he's in the minority.

"I'm doing okay, Millie. It's hard but we're getting through it."

"He was so proud of you, my boy. He talked about you all the time; he constantly bragged about your success with those poor children. 'Millie,' he'd say, 'that boy of mine has the best success rate on the West Coast.' He'd go on and on."

Derrick looks uncomfortable. "He was exaggerating a tad."

"Oh go on, you. Too modest. Just like your father." She turns to Nigel and her face lights up. "Oh, you must be Nigel! I've heard so much about you. Benjamin's always talking about his Uncle Nigel." She leans in and kisses him on the cheek. She's wearing a lot of perfume, and he fights off the urge to sneeze. He is confused and exchanges a glance with Derrick, who appears to be as baffled as he is. Was she confusing Nigel with someone else? "Ronald told me all about that great program you started with the dogs." So, not someone else.

His smile is half grimace as he says the first trite words that come to mind. "All good, I hope?"

The woman's eyes get big. "Oh yes! Of course! He thought it was the greatest thing since sliced bread." They never buy sliced bread preferring Artisan loaves or Whole Grain Goodness from Great Harvest Bakery, but he gets the point. It's okay that they buy a few hoity-toity things—Derrick says Nigel's okay just as he is, right? And he loves hearty handcrafted bread. He knows he's going to have to keep reminding himself that he's being too insecure. He brings his attention back to the conversation. "The stories he told about what those dogs can do. That dancing dog thing? That had my nephew in stitches. What a brilliant idea, helping kids and animals at the same time. I am so impressed."

She turns back to Derrick. "He said that's how you two met? You got the kids to the program, and Nigel got them training the dogs? That's so romantic. What did he call you again? Oh yeah. He said you were like peanut butter and chocolate: 'good apart, great together: perfect.'"

The world shifts beneath Nigel's feet. He wonders if he just crossed over into an alternate universe. He can't say anything because all he can think of is, "Two great tastes that taste great together," and he figures that wouldn't be appropriate. Fortunately, Millie continues without him. "My, Ronald went on and on about how many kids y'all saved. He was so proud." She looks like she's proud, too. "Oh listen to me go on. This room is full of other people who want to talk to you." She kisses them both again then moves off.

They stare at one another for a moment, eyes wide with shock. "Did she say—" Derrick is interrupted by an elderly gentleman and a college-aged young woman who is introduced as his granddaughter. Nigel and Derrick listen to a repeat of Millie's story except in different words and with other participants.

"I was totally hoping I'd get to see you both today. Mr. Bryant showed me a picture of you two together and I about died. You two are, like, the cutest couple, ever!" The girl is practically bouncing. Apparently the Valley never left Seattle.

After the pair move on, Nigel looks at Derrick to see his mouth gaping, his eyes narrowed, and his brow furrowed. He is pretty sure the expression mirrors his own. They blink at each other. Derrick looks like he's about to say something, but his mouth opens and closes as though he's about to say something and deciding it's not right. Nigel chews on his cheek.

More people descend on them, expressing their condolences, regaling the men with stories of Ronald's great deeds, and telling them how proud Ronald was of their work. It sounds almost like all Ronald did was brag about Derrick and Nigel. The two are still reeling when everyone is called into the chapel for the service.

Then: Derrick

Nigel unlocked the door and swung it open. Derrick started to walk through, but his lover's gentle touch stopped him. He waited nervously for the words telling him the timeframe before he had to find his own place, the rules for living there, maybe that Nigel had changed his mind and wanted Derrick to go back home.

"I know this was forced upon us since you've been kicked out of your home, but I've been meaning to bring this up for a while. It's time, I think. Dare, will you move in with me?"

Derrick laughed in relief. "God you're slow. I wanted you to ask ages ago. I couldn't very well invite you to live with me in my rooming house, or later when I was living at my father's. I thought it would be a bit presumptuous to suggest it when I didn't have a place of my own."

"Is that a yes, then?"

Nigel grunted as Derrick's elbow hit his ribcage. "Duh. Yes. Please. God yes, already, take me home, I'm yours. Does that answer your question?"

Nigel's response was unexpected. He scooped Derrick up in his arms and carried him across the threshold.

"Careful or you'll rip my veil. My daughter will be expecting to use it one day."

"Veils are sexist and out of style. The wedding is off." Nigel kicked the door closed behind them.

Derrick found something close to a giggle threatening to emerge and was mortified. He forced it down. "I think you have the procedure backwards. You're supposed to marry me, and then carry me through the door. Also, Celeste wore a veil, and she was always incredible. But as long as you agree to have your way with me tonight, we're good."

"Been there, done that." Derrick found himself in the bedroom, still in his lover's arms. Nigel deposited him on the bed. "I need to bring your stuff in." He turned to go.

"I can help with that. I'm short, not weak."

“No kidding. But stay there where you belong: in my bed.” The twinkle in his lover’s eye assured Derrick that Nigel was teasing. Two could play at that game, or three or four, depending on the fantasy.

“Well then, big man, hurry it up. My biological clock is ticking.”

Nigel fell against the door jamb, laughing.

“I’m waiting.” Derrick managed to keep his emotions off his face as he tried for a bored expression.

“Mustn’t keep the diva waiting. The luggage can wait.” The bed groaned as Nigel launched himself across the floor and landed atop Derrick with a thud.

“Oof!”

“Change your mind? Am I’m too much man for you?”

“Let me see.” Derrick rolled him onto his back and shoved his hands down Nigel’s pants. He groped around, feeling his lover swelling to his touch. He shook his head. “I think I can handle it. Am I too much for you?”

“Never.” Nigel flipped Derrick back over and began stripping off their clothes. “Ready for the time of your life?”

Derrick smirked. “Bring it on.” Nigel did; he so very much did.

CHAPTER 14

Now: Derrick

In front of the pulpit, a table stands draped with thick green velvet and a hand embroidered white on white cotton tapestry. The cloth is simple and understated, the needlework more about texture than visual effect. Atop sits an unassuming wooden urn. Derrick has learned from several parishioners that it was made by a good friend of his father's, a church member who is a wood artisan. The vessel is made from reclaimed lumber native to the dense forests of Washington state. Many differently hued woods were layered together creating a slight gradient of color, then the subsequent block of wood lathe-turned into a globe and hollowed out. The result is both simple and rich, a basic shape made up of an intricate yet effortless variety. Both it and the tapestry fit the complex man that was Ronald.

Another churchgoer who is a professional photographer has taken pictures of the display, which she will send to each member of the family. The urn itself will be interred in a vault in a nearby mausoleum. Derrick doesn't really care about any of it. The gifts are a kindness, but Ronald is gone. His father would have hated for such elaborate work to be wasted on something that would only be seen for a few hours. But as Nigel said, this was for the ones left behind, not the deceased. This part, the simple altar and its presentation, was all done by the church community who loved him. This was for them, and for his siblings, who would get the tapestry.

He remembers Reverend Angelica's sermon at Celeste's service as being just the right length and tone. He is relieved that she again delivers a very short sermon on love, life after death, and Ronald's impact on the community. She then invites people to share their memories of his father. Most of what is said mirrors what Nigel and Derrick have been hearing all afternoon. Ronald bragged about Benjamin and Marisol, too, and the stories about the family together throughout the years are both heartwarming and painful.

Derrick is even more confused than ever, and he's comforted by Nigel's arm around his shoulders. He feels his boyfriend's reassuring warmth against his thigh, hip, and side, and he grasps Nigel's other hand, holding on to this

anchor in his emotional storm. As the words wash over him, he is reminded of his boyfriend's admission earlier. That Nigel might be insecure about their relationship has never occurred to him. He berates himself for taking his lover for granted and vows to spend more time reassuring Nigel of his love and desire.

But he is also secretly relieved. He realizes it's a little twisted to think so, but knowing Nigel is actually worried about losing him to the point of insecurity almost eradicates his own fear of losing Nigel. All he needed to know was that Nigel truly needs him as badly as he needs Nigel, and instantly he felt more secure.

The testimonials are winding down, and finally, the minister leads them all in prayer. The congregation files out, and just he, his lover, his siblings, his aunt, and her husband Carlo remain. He had never met the man before this week—it's his aunt's fourth try at marriage—but he's been gentle and kind so far, and if Carlo has a problem with homosexuality, it hasn't shown.

Edwina says a prayer, and Derrick pretends to follow along. Nigel squeezes his hand, and he returns the gesture. When they are finished, his aunt places a rose on the table in front of the urn. Marisol and Benjamin move up to the makeshift altar. His brother acts bored but Marisol is crying. Derrick stands and hugs them both then steps back. He isn't yet ready. His sister places her rose next to the other, and Benjamin follows suit.

Carlo leads the children away, but his aunt stops and turns to Derrick. "What all those people said is true. Ronald was very proud of you. He blamed himself for you leaving. He just couldn't face you. He was terribly afraid you would reject him, and he would lose you forever." She sighs. "By not dealing with it, he could say it was just a fight that would be resolved soon, and he wouldn't have to face the possibility that you wouldn't forgive him." She looks at her feet for a moment and then back at Derrick. "I am the only one who blamed you. The only one. And I am sorry." She nods once, then moves to catch up with the others.

Derrick is in shock. He wonders if maybe he has gone crazy and is in a padded room somewhere hallucinating all of this. The tenderest of kisses

brushes his nape and gentle arms encircle his waist. His eyes close as he leans back against the solid reassurance of this man who owns Derrick's heart and soul. As Nigel gently turns him, the kisses continue, soft and loving, tracing his jaw, temple, forehead, chin. Soon Nigel is in front of him, and Derrick slips further into his lover's arms.

He rests his head against Nigel's chest. "Will you sing to me? Just for a minute?"

If Nigel is confused by the request, his voice doesn't betray him. "What would you like me to sing?"

"Whatever. Something vaguely appropriate."

A long moment passes, then Nigel's sweet tenor begins,

"Swing low, sweet chariot,

Coming for to carry me home,

Swing low, sweet chariot,

Coming for to carry me home."

Derrick smiles and closes his eyes. Nigel still isn't fond of much of Derrick's music, although he's sweet enough that he tries to pretend he does. Etta James rendition of this song in 2000 is beautiful, but it is the version sung in 1960 by his childhood crush Harry Belafonte that's his favorite. Derrick put it on an MP3 playlist of music he listens to when he is relaxing and Nigel is doing something else. He is surprised and touched that Nigel thought of the song; he couldn't have heard it very often. Nigel sings the rest of the song and finishes with a kiss.

Derrick tilts his head up to look into his lover's eyes. "I am so completely in love with you."

Nigel smiles back. "I love you, too, Dare."

It is time. Derrick turns and takes a step toward the urn, in his hand the rose his aunt gave him before the service.

“This is a moment between the two of you.” It’s both a statement and a question. Derrick turns back, looks at Nigel’s loving face, and nods. “I’ll be just outside the chapel, Dare.”

Derrick watches him go, then steps up to the table. It is strange to look down upon his father’s physical remains.

There are no right or wrong words, so he just opens his mouth and lets his heart out. “Ronald... Dad... You fucking asshole. Why didn’t you reach out? Why didn’t you tell me it was okay? I sent you letters telling you I was willing to talk whenever you were. I texted you. Why didn’t you just pick up the phone?” The words are almost a wail. He closes his eyes and calms himself. “I never wanted this to happen. Maybe, like you, I was too afraid that you would reject me, so I didn’t try harder.” He opens his eyes and reaches to finger the tapestry. “I miss you so much. You were the greatest man I’ve ever known. You are my hero. I don’t know if I ever thanked you for everything you did for me. Without you, I wouldn’t be where I am today; I’d be nothing.”

He laughs. “I can hear you now saying, ‘Son, I just helped you figure out what you could be.’” He imitates Ronald’s voice, but it comes out as a caricature, and he laughs again. “But I needed that. Maybe it seemed like a small thing to you, but no one had ever believed in me before. I swear I didn’t mean it when I said I wished you were dead.” Derrick has to take another moment to get himself under control again.

“I must say this afternoon has been quite a shock. I wish you could have gotten to know Nigel personally, but I’m so glad you understood our bond after all. He’s the other greatest man I’ve ever known. You brought me to where I am, and he’s taking it from here.” Words fail him for a moment. He rubs his face. “Nigel is helping me soar. I love him more than anything, and it means more than you could have ever known how much your... your blessing means to me.”

Derrick touches the urn this time and strokes its smooth surface. It really is a work of art. “I don’t know what I would have said, or how I would have felt, if I hadn’t had the opportunity to talk to these people, to finally know that you

didn't hate Nigel, that you saw how good we are together. I'm just sad I had to hear it from them."

With his other hand, he places the rose on top of the others. The red flowers, white embroidery, and green velvet remind him of Christmas, a happy time. He smiles. "Goodbye, Dad. I love you." He turns and heads back up the aisle.

Nigel is waiting at the doors, his eyes moist.

"Nigh, what's wrong?"

His lover swallows. "It hurts to see you in pain."

Derrick smiles for Nigel. "I'm better now. I think I've finally gotten closure." He pulls Nigel closer. He thinks about how much they've held each other this week, and how he's ready for an embrace about something other than pain. "Take me home and show me just how much you love me like you said you would."

Nigel pulls back and grins. "There is nothing I want more right now."

They turn, and arm in arm, they leave the chapel, Ronald's ashes, and the worst of the sorrow behind.

THE END

Author Bio

S. H. Allan has been a therapeutic foster parent for almost fourteen years, focusing on teenagers— which is a lot like herding cats, but a lot more rewarding. Dogs make her happy, and the senior dogs for which she provides hospice have to tolerate a giddy younger pup or three. Whenever possible, she ignores them all in favor of reading smutty gay love stories. S. H. knew writing was her destiny when her classic, Mr. Cuke and Mrs. Tomato, was put in the school library in third grade (coincidentally, along with the stories written by all her classmates). Politically active and socially conscious, with a useless M.A. and over twenty-five years working in high tech, S. H. fits in well in her beloved Pacific Northwest, except for that healthy eating silliness. Tofurkey is one thing, but she says, “Seriously, no donuts?”

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