

A promotional image for a gay-themed production. Two muscular men are shown from the waist up. The man in the foreground is shirtless, wearing blue jeans, and has a tattoo on his left shoulder. He is looking down and to the left. The second man is behind him, also shirtless, looking towards the first man. The background is a bright blue sky with white clouds. The title 'Our Piece of Sky' is written in a large, stylized font across the top. The name 'EDEN CONNOR' is at the bottom.

Our
Piece of
Sky

EDEN CONNOR

OUR PIECE OF SKY

Can friends become lovers? Absolutely. Can two men make a relationship when one is openly gay and the other firmly closeted? Happens every day. Manny Curtis is determined to drag his relationship with Joseph Gilante out of the 'friend zone'. When the big, Italian bull stud offers Manny a job painting a ceiling, Manny plots to seduce Joe. Two explosive court verdicts threaten to rip apart one small southern town and may slam the door on Manny and Joe's fragile new relationship. Can Manny use the threads of prejudice and hate to weave a stronger bond?

Love Has No Boundaries

An M/M Romance series

OUR PIECE OF SKY

By Eden Connor

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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OUR PIECE OF SKY

By Eden Connor

Photo Description

A tattooed man with a stubbled jaw peers at the viewer from under his raised arms, white tank caught around his elbows. At the bottom of the frame, green briefs with a white waistband are barely visible. He has stars on both pecs, and his left nipple is pierced. More tattoos are visible on the underside of both biceps, across his upper abdomen and below his navel.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

“I’ve wanted my best friend for years. He says I’m ‘not his type’ and we’re ‘just friends’. I’ve got plenty of friends but none of them act like he does—sitting so close, wrestling with me, wanting to spend all our time together... When we’re at the pool or when I stay over at his house, he just can’t keep his eyes off me. Well, I’ve had enough. If he’s not willing to admit he’s interested, I’ll make him look at me until he can’t deny it...”

I just love this guy’s sexy challenging expression (and of course, the great body/tattoos/piercings/beard!)—he looks like a confident guy who gets what he wants.

I want to leave it open to the author whether it’s friends-to-lovers between out guys or if it’s gay-for-you.

Enjoy, hope it inspires someone :)

Sincerely,

Willow Scarlett

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: friends to lovers, in the closet, religion, bears, blue collar, prejudice, hate crimes, kittens, labels

Content warnings: graphic violence; One cat had to be sacrificed to make this story work, but her death was an accident. Two brutal assault cases form the backbone of this story and both are vividly described.

Word count: 26,131

Author's Note

The two legal cases forming the crux of this story are real-life events. Both well-publicized assaults took place in South Carolina, but they happened a decade apart. It's long been on my heart to put the incidents side-by-side in one story, because of the stark similarities in the attacks—and the inexplicably disparate sentences for the perpetrators. I've changed the names of the victims, of course, and moved them to the same town, but the essential facts are correct as presented. I'd also like to take this opportunity to point out an underlying fact a few readers won't know, a fact that might affect your perception of this little tale. In 2006, Amendment One, the addendum to the South Carolina constitution banning gay marriage, passed by a state-wide margin of seventy-eight percent. Let that sink in. Almost eight out of ten people believe with their heart, with their soul, and with their voter's registration card, that being gay is “an abomination in the eyes of God”. Thank Heaven for the handful of naughty, rebellious liberals down at the coast, for their votes are the ones offsetting the ninety percent who voted for Amendment One in the upstate county where this story takes place.

I only try my hand at writing m/m for this group's wonderful Dear Author event, so thank you for humoring me in my effort.
~E

OUR PIECE OF SKY

By Eden Connor

Manny

I left Carmine House as I always do, by the back door. Also par for the course, I was seven hundred and fifty dollars richer, and in awe of the lengths people will go to in order to satisfy their need for kink.

If I had to describe the job I perform for Willa Seachrist, I'd have to say it's a cross between a fluffer and a body guard. You heard me right. Fluffer, as in the task performed on behalf of the porn industry—getting dicks hard for the camera. Although, there's no dick-sucking at Carmine House. Not by us, anyway. Not that most of Willa's Back Door Boys would object. That's what we call each other, the Back Door Boys. Willa calls us escorts. We do get dicks hard, but indirectly. Willa needs someone to get her little fillies all wet and ready for her male members to fuck—and what better way than by using men who don't want to fuck them?

Shoving the folded bills into my back pocket, I strode toward the staff parking area, whistling and dodging the peacocks roaming the grounds. At least Willa's pet of choice wasn't a yapping pack of Yorkies. She intimidated the hell out of me, but I did admire my employer's sense of style.

Sun gleamed off the hood of my old Ford pickup when I approached. Odd, since I haven't bothered with wax since an uninsured motorist crunched the side panel and I never got around to painting the junkyard replacement to match the rest. Squinting, I dug out my keys.

“Emmanuel Curtis.”

I could see my sunglasses dangling from my rear view mirror, but I couldn't see who spoke. The voice came from the other side of the pickup. “Yeah?” The guests know me as Curt. *So, is this guy household staff?* He had to be in tight with Willa if he knew my name, but all I could see was a dazzling burst of light.

A figure stepped forward. Through narrowed eyes, I made out a black tuxedo, spiky hair, and two-day beard, but not much about his face. The glad-rags marked this guy as a club member. It seemed odd for a guest to roam the grounds on Sunday afternoon, still dressed for Friday night's party, but, hey, rich people do some weird shit. The stranger moved closer. He seemed to be looking over my shoulder at the house. "It's like a shrine to getting what you want, isn't it?"

I didn't have to look back to see the massive home. The gleaming white structure—a mere three floors soaring more than sixty feet—was reflected in the side window. "Sure is."

The man moved around the front end of my old Ford. Now I could see his face. He looked sexy as hell, all big brown eyes and bronzed skin. Square jaw. Tall, but trim. Just the way I like a man to look... Well, to be perfect, he could've been bigger. I lowered my eyes to the keys in my hand. Willa had fired a few for failing to remember the rule. No one was to suspect the escorts were gay. Male competition for females was the backbone of her little setup, and the money I earned here underwrites my shopping habit.

"Hey, can I ask you a question?"

"Uh, sure," I replied warily. The guy seemed to set off a buzz below my belt. Every step he came closer, that tingle got stronger. I really need to get laid after these club weekends.

"If I say 'love', what's the first thing that comes to mind?"

So far, I'd managed to work in one semester of college. My psych professor asked the class to describe the body's reactions when you got pulled over by a cop... increased respiration, accelerated heartbeat, sweaty palms. When she had the entire class's agreement on the symptoms, she asked, "So, getting a speeding ticket feels like falling in love?"

The anecdote wasn't an answer to his question, so I shrugged and worked on opening my truck's balky door lock. "I got nothin'." Seemed to me falling in love wasn't hard. Going over that edge with someone who wanted to take the tumble with you was the trick. And not a convo I wanted to have with a stranger who'd popped out of the trees.

“You should go after what you want. That mountain is never going to come to you.” Stepping away from my truck, the man shoved his hands in his pants pockets, sauntering across the lot like he took his tux for a walk every day at sundown.

I stared at his reflection, puzzling over what he could’ve meant. It wasn’t like anyone *knew*. I’d never breathed a word to anyone about what I wanted... or whom.

The vinyl upholstery burned my ass through my jeans when I slid behind the wheel. First thing, I jammed on my sunglasses. The metal nosepiece seared the bridge of my nose, but thinking about Joe made me shiver. Liberating my cell from the console—we aren’t allowed to have them when on duty—I was stoked to see a message from the man himself. He had a job for me, painting a ceiling, but only if I could start first thing Monday morning and stay till the job was finished. My heart did a bad Macarena. Tomorrow was Monday. Tomorrow, I’d see Joseph.

Maybe reading the message from Joe while sitting in the shadow of Carmine House gave me the idea. Maybe the thought came from the stranger. Maybe the plan taking shape in my head had been there all along.

See, I’ve wanted my best friend for years. He says I’m “not his type” and we’re “just friends”. I’ve got plenty of friends but none act like he does—sitting so close, wrestling with me, wanting to spend time together. When we’re at the pool or when I stay over at his house, he can’t keep his eyes off me. Well, I’ve had enough. If he’s not willing to admit he’s interested, I’ll make him look at me until he can’t deny it.

I came back to South Carolina when I injured my leg. My big break, dancing backup for Brittney, and I fell offstage. Cloaked in failure, I checked out of the hospital and limped back to my ratty apartment to find a letter telling me I’d inherited my Aunt Myrtle’s house. The plan I made then was to come back, rehab my knee, and clean the place out. I had in mind to sell the ramshackle mill house, and maybe give Broadway a try. Nothing here had changed in the twelve years since I’d graduated high school. The town was as small as ever, and the mindset remained as narrow. God knows, I’d never been

able to get comfortable with my sexuality till I shook the red Carolina clay off my feet.

Six months later, my knee was fine, but I lingered here. Because of Joseph. I grew up across the street from Joe Gilante. What started as hero worship—he's six years older—had condensed into a simmer of just plain worship by my junior year, but Joe was straight.

Or so I thought. I left town, but I keep drifting back. If I were honest, I'd have to admit the big, Italian bull stud was the reason. Over time, the clues started turning up. He never mentioned girlfriends, just the gal at the jewelry store, Teague somebody. Listening closely, I figured out each had their reasons for letting people assume they were together, but they weren't *together*. I'd never met her. Didn't particularly want to. When I screwed up the courage to ask, Joe told me straight out he was gay, but he made it plain the hours from nine to five were off limits for his non-straight friends. That time was when he made his real estate deals or welcomed guests to his delicatessen, wearing his best hetero face.

Pursuing a dance career was damn near a farce at thirty, not to mention the fact that my career didn't seem to be going anywhere. Joe even offered to buy the house, but I turned him down. So, at the moment, my life was stuck in neutral.

Although we'd grown really tight, my relationship with Joseph registered firmly in the friend zone. *Dammit*. Puffing out my cheeks, I blew a harsh breath. One thing seemed clear. *He's never going to come to me.*

Cranking the truck, I reversed out of my space, looking over my shoulder for the stranger. Five big-ass male peacocks stood in a circle on the grass, tails spread, looking like they were about to fight—or have a gay gang-bang. But the weird dude was gone.

Tomorrow, I'll see Joseph. I headed for the mall. *That man isn't gonna be able to look away.*

Monday morning, I didn't waste time looking for a free parking space on the streets around the town square. Every spot was sure to be filled. Begrudging the cost, I turned into the parking deck, grabbed the ticket, and

circled till I found a space. Jamming my new ball cap on my head, I perched my equally-new sunglasses on the brim, grabbed my backpack, and started the short hike to Joe's new place. The sky looked like polished steel. Though it was late April, the breeze had teeth like October.

Swirling dust stung my eyes, forcing me to put on my sunglasses. Downtown buildings had been dropping like Legos for weeks. Every Sunday, just after dawn, four or five more went down. The whole block of South Church facing the quaint downtown park was being reduced to rubble, to make way for some fancy new building. The bright-orange safety fence edging the sidewalk didn't stop grit from peppering me. I jogged to the opposite end of the block, eyeballing the heavy equipment and grinning like a four-year-old with a new Tonka truck. The wind nearly took off my cap a couple of times.

It felt weird not to see the faded red-and-gold delicatessen sign, outlined in white neon, on the corner. How many times back in high school had I come downtown just to grab a roast beef sub and hope for a sight of Joseph? A backhoe sat in the spot where the deli's front door had once been, taking huge bites out of the piles of bricks and mangled metal. The thump and crash of debris falling into the back of a waiting dump truck echoed the hammering in my chest.

Crossing North Church at the corner of West Main, I spied a pickup. The left-side wheels were pulled onto the sidewalk in front of Joe's new restaurant, two blocks down. Joseph stood in the street at the rear of the vehicle, beside a couple. The woman wore one of those god-awful, floppy-brimmed, southern belle hats. The last time I saw one on an actual woman had been when my sister got married and foisted them on her bridesmaids. Her decision to overrule the darling pillboxes I'd urged her to choose made sense in a passive-aggressive way, since none of those conniving bitches liked my awesome, black, brother-in-law.

This gal clamped the baby-barf-colored monstrosity to her head with one hand and gestured with the other. The ivory-and-teal Vera Bradley scarf, tied into a drooping bow around the brim, did nothing to update the look. The Jay Gatsby-looking dude at her side leaned forward to say something to Joe. I felt

an instant's lust for his blue neon aviator-style sunglasses, but the hot shades paled in comparison to the thing I wanted most.

Joe had his legs planted wide, arms crossed over his chest. Even in wrinkled khaki cargo pants and a puce polo shirt, tucked under a ratty leather jacket, the man made my meter run. His dark waves brushed his shoulders. Under those clothes, I knew his chest was lined with the same dark fur. The man was an absolute bear stud. My mouth went dry, and I groaned aloud, moving toward the cobalt-colored awning, bracketed by a pair of aluminum ladders, holding the trio's attention.

"Was that ugly letter style on sale, Joseph?" I reached the group in time to hear the woman's demand. "Or free? Surely it was free. That's just about the most hideous sign I've ever seen."

"Shuddup. What's wrong with it?" Joseph demanded. "I paid good money for that sign."

Looking in the direction the outspoken woman pointed, I tried not to laugh. The sign crew perched precariously, trying to wrestle their unwieldy burden over the bowed awning. The name he'd given his new restaurant was as unimaginative as his previous one. Against a plain white background, lettering designed to resemble rough-cut lumber spelled out "Breakfast Nook". I pictured how the thing would look lit and tried not to shudder.

The woman continued her rant. "What were you thinking? Do you know what this sign says about this place?" Interested in how he'd respond to the criticism, I turned to look at Joe. Like I need an excuse.

"I was thinkin'" —Joe cut his eyes at me, nodding in greeting—"barnyard. As in chickens. You know, the animal that shits eggs?" Reaching to scratch his neck, he slid his index finger across the side of his throat.

Okay, so keep your mouth shut, Manny. Apparently, I wasn't going to get introduced. The sting on my cheeks wasn't from the brisk wind. The insult only enhanced my determination. He might not acknowledge me in front of his straight friends, but this week, this man *would* fuck me.

The blond man's shoulders shook, but I couldn't see his face. He hid his mouth behind his hand. I *could* see his point, and the woman's.

“Barnyard?” she drawled. Her oversized black sunglasses showed more sense of style than her hat. “That sign says ‘barnyard’ all right. It makes me wanna check the bottoms of my shoes for cow manure, not order steak and eggs.”

I wanted to join the conversation, maybe tease Joe and say the lackluster advertisement needed a couple of bare-assed cowboys in leather chaps, but I bit my tongue. That wouldn’t sell steak and eggs, either. Just steak.

“Why didn’t you ask me for help designin’ this thing, Joseph?” She balled up her fist and popped him in the abdomen.

“Teague, we need to get going.” The man I didn’t know grabbed the woman’s elbow.

The minute her hand shifted, the damn hat blew off. Ash blonde curls—the color money can’t buy—whipped around her face. She bent to scoop up the hideous accessory. When she straightened, she looked right at me, peering over the sunglasses. “What do you think?”

Holy shit. This was the woman Joe used to hide his sexuality. She was Joe’s beard, Teague Tillis.

And I knew her. I mean, I never knew her name, but she and I had met. My resentment over not being introduced evaporated, replaced by outright panic. I was terrified if I spoke, she’d recognize me. I shrugged, half-turning away.

I was pretty damn sure Joe wouldn’t be happy to learn I’d done my best to get his little blonde buddy horny as hell. I recognized the man, too. Yeah, he’d bought her, although I’d have sworn the pair hadn’t hit it off. She’d been at Carmine House a couple of months back. She’d bailed early that Saturday, but Willa still paid me for the whole weekend. That’s why I remembered her.

Sweating now, I eyeballed Joe again. His heavy brows bunched. He looked like a kid who’d had his all-day sucker snatched away after about ten minutes of licking. I sighed. My mind wouldn’t get out of the gutter.

“Cameron?” Joseph demanded. My knees wobbled with relief that Joe was keeping me out of the conversation, even though, in my heart, I resented his slight.

The other man smiled blandly at Joe. “The words are spelled correctly. You can read ’em from two blocks away. That’s a win in my book. Does everything a sign needs to do.” I assigned him double brownie points for the show of male solidarity and creative lying.

“Pussy.” Teague swatted her man with the hat.

“McBitchy Tits,” he retorted, making me snort, “if you’re going to Charleston with me, get your fine ass in my car. My vacation starts *now*. See you later, Joe. And”—he offered me a friendly salute—“hello and good-bye.” He grabbed Teague by the arm, towing her down the sidewalk like a balky Golden Retriever.

She looked over her shoulder at Joseph like he was the fire hydrant she wasn’t allowed to keep pissing on. “Oh, yes, hello.” She barely gave me a glance, still fussing at Joe. “You’re really gonna let them mount that atrocity to the building?”

“I hope it rains like a motherfucker in Charleston this week.” Joe threw his big paw in the air, one finger extended. Ever seen a Saint Bernard pout? Yeah, heart-melting. I had to look away. The bastard was too fucking cute, but trust me, downtown Podunk, South Carolina is not the place to get a boner looking at another man. The sight of Joe’s raised middle finger drove that point home so hard, I had to fight to breathe.

“Me, too,” the pair chorused. Through watering eyes, I watched Cameron press a kiss to Teague’s cheek. I cut my eyes back to Joe in time to see his pout turn into a glower.

“Be back in time for the dry run! Thursday morning, ten sharp.” Joe’s deep voice carried easily above the sound of crashing bricks from the corner. Jealousy sliced through me as easily as the wind pierced my coat.

“Be sure to buy a doormat so I can wipe the manure off my feet,” she retorted, shoving the hideous hat into the back seat of a car parallel parked a couple of spaces down from the sign company truck. Apparently, he already had a doormat. Me. I hadn’t been invited to the test run for the new restaurant.

Joseph turned from looking at the couple, but stared at the sign, finally grunting a greeting. “Mornin’. Soon as they get this up, we’ll walk across the street and I’ll show you the job.”

From the corner of my eye, I saw Teague had slipped her leash. Dashing around the truck, she grabbed Joseph by the shoulder and pressed a kiss to his cheek. “Be careful,” she ordered, loud enough for me to hear. “Jillian says they’re gonna sentence those animals this week.”

Joe’s nod was abrupt. “Get your ass in that car. Go on. Have a good time.”

The same week I got back to town, gay rights made the front page of every newspaper in this bastion of conservatism. Random strangers called out a gay slur to an obviously effeminate young man when they saw him walk from the gas pump toward a convenience store. The nineteen-year-old gave them the finger. One threw a beer bottle, hitting him in the back of the head. Eight big men jumped him. Trey McDaniels might weigh a hundred pounds. The security cam footage of his assault had played repeatedly on the news. Several people posted the clip to YouTube.

I’d quit reading the editorials the first week after the incident. Religious nuts wormed their way out of the woodwork, making ignorant statements about God’s judgment. Like thugs do the Lord’s work? I’d swear that was the logic used by the KKK, a group still alive and well here. Watching Joe watch Teague walk away, I felt like one of Willa’s stupid peacocks, impotently waving my tail feathers. *Does he love her?*

Well, it wasn’t like I wanted to marry Joseph. I just wanted to stare at him while he fucked me. Trying to shake off the sudden chill curling around my spine, I stamped my feet. The job for Joe was supposed to be indoors. I’d worn shorts. I was ready to get out of the wind.

“Do we put it up, or what?”

“What the hell are you waiting for?” Joe snapped at the workman who’d asked the question. “Screw the damn thing to the building already. I got other shit to do.”

The man barked with laughter. “Usually, when the little lady says no, we have to put the sign back in the truck. So excu-use me for askin’.”

The other worker peered from beneath the brim of a Braves ball cap. “I thought you was datin’ her, Joe. Who the hell’s that other guy?”

“I ain’t paying you to think, Bobby,” Joe growled. “Put the bolts in that sign.”

Bobby’s smile was tobacco-stained. “Don’t growl at me, motherfucker. I got problems of my own. My mama’s out of work.”

Joe glowered at the Bobby dude. “Who the hell gets laid off at Waffle House? I thought they were always hiring.”

The guy yanked his drill from the leather utility belt hooked around his faded Levi’s, nearly losing his grip on the sign. The big belly overhanging his tool belt probably didn’t help his balance. “She says it’s age discrimination. What the fuck do I know? If you hear of a job, call me. I’d owe you, big-time.”

The other worker laughed so hard, I feared he might fall off the ladder. “Yeah, I’d owe you, too. She poured out the beer we keep in the fridge for after work. A whole fucking twelve-pack. But cheer up, Bobby. Your mama’s got her whole church prayin’ about it, after all.” He looked over his shoulder, eyes wide. “They say the Lord works in mysterious ways. What do I know? I’m just a sinner.”

Like a picture carved on a single grain of rice, this was my hometown in one image. If I’d forgotten, I remembered now why I’d left. Joe might be due more credit than I gave him for his skill in navigating the treacherous waters of Redneck River. The duo obviously decided I wasn’t worth including in their banter. For a man to wear pink here is the equivalent of strolling through vampire territory wearing garlic beads. Makes the straight boys uncomfortable when we show no shame. I smiled down at my new fuchsia Chucks, wiggling numbed toes.

In this neck of the woods, as they say, any man who complimented me on my shoes was communicating more than his taste in kicks.

“I do need a waitress. Is it worth the price of that sign to you, if I hire her?”

I kept my gaze on the sidewalk. How Joe ran his business was his business, but the last thing I’d want to see was this guy’s mother handing me breakfast.

“Damn right it is. I might throw in a free kiss for your little shadow.” I jerked my head up. Puckering my lips, I returned his insult.

“Fuck off, Bobby,” Joe growled. “I’m not listening to that shit. I hired your fat ass, didn’t I? If you think you can stop being such a dick, you can tell her to be here at ten Thursday morning. I’ll give her a shot. If she stays a month, you refund me for that sign.”

A month at two dollars and fifteen cents an hour... yeah, he’d picked the sign by price alone. Now I wanted to flog him with Teague’s hat, but I wanted to jerk that ladder from under Bobby more.

It took another ten minutes for the refugees from the movie *Deliverance* to fasten the sign to the brick façade. Joe signed off on the work order, spelling out their little side deal on the invoice, then yanked me by the sleeve of my jacket. “Job’s across the street.”

We dodged sparse westbound traffic and cut through Morgan Square. Crepe myrtles lined the small park, but they weren’t blooming. Even the pansies looked blue from the cold. The street-level windows and glass doors of the two-story limestone structure he led me to were covered with Kraft paper. While Joe pulled out a huge ring of keys and flipped through them, I glanced behind me. If I tilted my head just right, the slender trees obscured my view of the new restaurant sign.

He jammed the key into the lock. The wind nearly whipped away his words. “Opened my first savings account here. Place used to be a bank. Do you remember that?” I shook my head. “Now it’s Teague’s new shop,” he explained, jerking open the door.

Had I misjudged Joseph? He was sure as hell acting like a jilted lover. I was almost pissed off enough to tell him about handcuffing her naked ass to a luggage cart at Carmine House, but I bit my tongue. The damn thing was starting to feel like a pincushion.

He held the door open. I stepped inside, driving my fists into the slash pockets of my jacket. At least we were out of the wind. A scaffold stood in the center of the airy space. Drop cloths covered the floor. Buckets and cans of paint were lined along the front wall, to my left. Paint the color of cornflowers

spattered the canvas. Where they weren't wood-paneled, the walls were vanilla-tinted. I squinted at Joe in confusion.

He stuck out his thumb, driving it skyward. Tilting my head back, I tugged off my sunglasses. At least twenty feet overhead, a froth of plaster cornice about two feet wide lined the top of the walls and spilled onto the ceiling. Directly overhead, a massive medallion floated like an island of Mediterranean sand in a sea of blue. Squinting, I determined the paint hadn't been cut in around the elaborate plasterwork.

“Teague got this wild hair up her ass. She wants the ceiling to look like the sky, so me and Cam painted the base coat. She was supposed to do the cloud thing, but every time she climbs up on that scaffold and tips her head back to paint, she gets dizzy. We're terrified the little fool is gonna fall off and break her damn neck. Idiot won't admit she's afraid of heights. So we hatched this plan for Cam to drag her to the coast while I got you to paint the clouds. You can do it, right? She's got photos of how she wants it to look. There's a book around someplace with the technique.” His brown eyes looked anxious. When I tried to hold his gaze, he turned away.

“Sure.” I didn't know whether I was happy to be doing something for Joe or pissed off that he'd drafted me to make Teague's dreams come true. *Good grief, Manny. Need a Midol?* “Looks like you had some issues handling the trim work.” I drove my elbow into his ribs and turned my back. Anger ripped through me. Oh, yeah, Joe Gilante would fuck me this week, or I'd die trying.

Joseph

I tried to dial back my annoyance with Teague, but being pissed off at her was easier than seeing that come-on look in Manny's eyes. Teague needed a painter with an artistic bent. Manny always needed a job, but I already regretted bringing him in on this project. A brand-new, forty-dollar baseball cap shaded his eyes. The way he refused to bend the brims on his caps drove me nuts. He'd been mooning over those sunglasses propped on the top of his head for weeks, so I knew they'd cost a couple hundred bucks. What I didn't know—and didn't want to know—was where he got the money.

I knew more than one lonely old gay man who'd cheerfully fork out the cash to buy those goodies for a hot young stud, and goddammit, I didn't like the thought of Manny on his knees, sucking dick for designer duds.

What I liked less was the idiot's pink Chuck Taylors and cutoff T-shirt. Not to mention the bright pink rings lining the oversized holes in his ears. This wasn't Chicago, or wherever he'd limped back to town from this time, out of work and hurting. Apparently, if you fall offstage while dancing back-up for a famous pop diva, she sends flowers and a card with lipstick prints, not a check for the physical therapist. Manny seemed to see only the card, not the injustice.

He turned away, taking off his jacket before kneeling beside the buckets of paint. I tried to recall where Teague had left that damn book showing how she wanted the fucking clouds painted. I thought the whole project was stupid—a time-wasting hindrance to getting her shop reopened. Maybe one person in fifty would bother to look up. I doubted a fancy indoor sky was gonna pull any money out of her customer's wallets, but I wasn't sure Teague and logic ever occupied the same room at the same time. My conviction only increased my certainty her new boyfriend wouldn't be able to go the distance. Cam's a lawyer. Lawyers are logical. Teague was anything but.

“So, what is this place?” Manny asked. “I thought your little camouflage kitten owned a jewelry store. It'd cost a fortune to fill this place up with jewelry.”

“She's a sculptor, too. Got her big pieces farmed out all over. Now she can put 'em in her shop.” I had to grit my teeth at the taunt. There might be places where people were cool about being gay, but to me, those were kinda like the stories people tell you about their vacation to Aruba. You listen, but know you ain't never gonna see that place in person. And Manny knew nothing about my relationship with Teague. “She's gonna rent the loft space to some other business.” Spying the magazine on top of a draped display case at the back of the room, I strode across the large lobby to get it. No sense in getting started unless Manny thought he could do what Teague wanted done. Snatching the book off the counter, I turned and stopped dead in my tracks. *When did the little bastard get that new ink?*

Warning sirens were shrieking in my head, even while I stared at the designs decorating his biceps. Casually tugging his half-a-shirt over his head and tossing it on top of his coat, he grabbed a bucket of paint and began climbing the scaffold, all grace and steamy sexuality. The stars on his smooth chest had been there before, along with the holstered guns inked around his hips—those used to make me laugh. Beautiful boys like Manny rarely holstered their guns. They lived with reckless abandon, cock out, and careless of the consequences.

Can't go there. But I watched him ascend the ladder, cataloguing every smooth ripple of muscle and feeling like a bar stool with one short leg.

“Hey, Joseph, can you bring up those brushes?”

I wanted to throw 'em at him. Instead, I snatched up the row of paintbrushes Teague had lined up on an old newspaper to dry, trying not to read the headline in the wrinkled newsprint. Not looking didn't make no difference. The story was burned into my brain. I read the paper from front to back every day, because the restaurant is only one of my income streams. The other comes from figuring out the ebb and flow of this small town, predicting what areas would grow and when, so I could buy up commercial property ahead of the demand.

Trey's case wasn't the only assault being adjudicated this week. Two days before the McDaniels kid got the beat-down, another young man had been attacked on a downtown sidewalk of a small farming community on the outskirts of town. Racial slurs and a bottle had been tossed from a pickup truck full of white guys driving past a black kid talking on a payphone. The sixteen-year-old, Tyrell Foster, also offered a one-fingered salute. The driver turned the truck around. Although there had been no video, the result was the same—a five-on-one ass-whipping sent Tyrell to the emergency room. The kid got lucky. Three people witnessed the attack. One of the witnesses dragged the young man into her car and called nine-one-one.

The back-to-back incidences of violence caused this small town to rupture, splitting the tender skin of tolerance we're slow to grow in the South

You'd think a group who'd felt the boot of discrimination on their throats for two-hundred-and-some-odd years would be more fucking tolerant, but homophobia is a poisonous potluck dinner, served most often on Sundays, feeding all races and genders their fill for free. Despite the fact this town boasts more square footage in church buildings than in retail establishments, I'm still trying to figure out what the hell we think we're braggin' about.

Shoving the brush handles into my pockets, I put my foot on the first rung, knowing in my heart and in my head, the thing to do was to keep my goddamn feet rooted to the ground.

The scaffold was twelve feet long and barely three feet wide. When I got to the platform, Manny stood at the far end, looking up at the plasterwork. His fingers were laced behind his neck and the stupid pink shoes were braced against the rails. "It's gonna take a while, just to cut in around all this ornamentation."

I eyed the designer name stitched into the pastel waistband of his boxers. I dunno why what he wore pissed me off. Maybe I hadn't simmered down about Teague's comments. I mean, if she hadn't been so caught up in Cam, I'd have asked her to help me pick out the damn sign. I didn't ask Manny because the cute motherfucker could've talked me into putting wiggling, pink, neon piglets on the damn thing if he tried. "No point in getting started if you don't think you can do the clouds."

He turned and strolled toward me, giving me a slow, simmering grin. His dark brows lifted above heavy-lidded brown eyes. I tried not to look at those beautiful lips.

"I looked at the supplies she bought. I understand the technique. No problem. Reproducing the cracks is gonna take the most time. Looks like she planned to paint the clouds, then coat the entire ceiling with this white goop that dries clear, but the surface will crack. Then you have to go back and rub dark paint into the cracks. Gonna have to lay that stuff on thick to make cracks big enough to see from the ground. That step alone could take a day or more to dry."

People like Manny and Teague amaze me. I mean, they can take plain old wall paint and make beauty. All I ever managed to make was money. The things I'd never be able to make kept me awake some nights. Yanking the brushes out of my pocket, I slapped a couple into his hand. "Then I guess we better get on it."

He knelt to pry the lid off the five-gallon pail of blue paint. The sight of his bare thighs, inked shoulders, and bent head riveted me in place. Running his fingers around the rim of the bucket, he swept his tongue across his bottom lip. Peeling up the lid, he grabbed a paint paddle off the floor of the scaffold. Looking up at me, he eased the piece of wood into the thick paint with one hand, so slow I forgot how to breathe. The little flirt slid his palm down his bare chest with his free hand, making goddamn sure he tweaked the bar impaling his left nipple with his thumb. Less than three feet away, I watched the small peak harden and felt my cock take interest in the sight. Imagining how the small balls on either end of that bar might feel on my tongue, I had to swallow hard. Though I wanted to, I was unable to look away.

I let the world assume a lie because it's convenient, but I don't lie to myself. The minute Cam told me he was concerned about Teague falling off this thing and cracking her noggin', I knew I'd be tempted to break my vow about not fucking Manny when I asked him to help out. I had good reasons not to touch him. Watching the slow stroke of his thumb, I couldn't remember what they were. Some part of me, in that moment, wished fiercely to be a woman, with about fifty dials to turn and tweak before the pounding rhythm of arousal replaces the strident, crackling static of common sense. Another moment passed, and all I wanted was to be a man, buried to my balls inside another man.

"You know what you're doing." I meant for it to be a question, but my words didn't come out that way. Mirth flashed across his face. The sardonic lift of one brow was a challenge and a taunt. To keep from grabbing him and pressing his face to my groin, I wrapped the fingers of my free hand around the safety rail. Twenty feet in the air, and all alone with this beautiful boy who wanted me, I felt anything but safe. Anger pulsed in my temple. The thrumming echoed in my cock. I was angry that, in the midst of the seething

stupidity around us, he'd paint a bull's-eye on his own back. I shoved the book into his face. "Be sure." I think I meant for him to be sure he could paint those clouds.

Manny flipped through the magazine until he got to a picture, a duplicate of one of the many Teague had taped to the scaffold. "Did you know Michelangelo was gay? Well, he might've been bisexual, but he wrote some pretty hot homoerotic poetry."

The image, *The Creation of Adam*, was a favorite of Teague's. Maybe the churning emotions I felt whenever I looked at the picture were caused by the sensuality of the almost-touch from the Creator. Maybe I reacted to the nude male figure, his posture so masculine—one leg drawn up to expose his genitals. Maybe I wanted to believe that God had, indeed, made all men in His image, gay and straight. I didn't have to study art or hang out with an artist to know the power in that picture was the gap between those two outstretched fingers. That slight separation was where the excitement lay; the tingling anticipation of touch. And from there, such a small leap for me to see those fingers as cocks, extended and aching.

It was hot this close to the ceiling, as if every molecule of heat in the place emanated from the man at my feet. Sweat sheened his chest and gleamed from slim, but sinewy, biceps. He just kept kneeling, head bowed over the magazine. My imagination hurled images at me, taunting me with what I had only to reach out to take. Me biting his lips, and tugging on that goddamn bar through his nipple. My hand sliding inside the loose waistband of his shorts, groping his cock and mauling his balls until he yelped. Bending him over the railing. Kicking his feet apart. Driving my fingers inside him. Sliding the greased head of my cock into him again and again, pulling out for no reason other than the pleasure of making him moan when I shoved inside him again. Leaning over his shoulder, spent, but reaching around him to milk his cock. Both of us watching him shoot onto the canvas below.

Rising to his feet effortlessly, he shoved his hair off his forehead. Kid hadn't had a haircut since he'd come home. "Not a problem. I got this. Hey, I think I saw a radio. Be right back." I expected him to squeeze past me, since I was blocking the ladder. Instead, he swung over the railing, forcing me to

watch him move from brace to brace. Grinning up at me from the halfway point, he worked his knees between his chest and the bars. I couldn't seem to stop watching the smooth muscle in his arms tighten and bunch. Barely turning to glance at the floor, he tipped his head back, catching me staring. I held my breath to keep from begging him to be careful. My heart stopped when he released the bar. His body arced backward, slicing through the air the way he often went off the diving board whenever we went to the YMCA together. Underneath those drop cloths, the floor was marble.

There wasn't a trace of pain on his face when he landed, only arrogant pleasure in his feat.

My brain seemed jolted into action by the slap of his pink shoes on the canvas when he sauntered toward the radio. I remembered why fucking Manny was a bad idea. I wanted him. I ached from want of him, but he was just passing through. The rational part of my brain wanted him to go. He wore a lot of labels, but the one he wore best was his confident attitude saying, "I'm gay. Get over it."

I couldn't bear the thought of anyone trying to beat that off him. I had more respect for him than to try to drag him into my closet, but goddamn, I wanted nothing more.

Manny

I knew I was getting to Joe when he came down the ladder and stomped out the front door, growling he'd bring me something for lunch. Chuckling under my breath, I locked the front doors behind him and shimmied back up the ladder. I took the time to really study the sketches Teague had made, once my distraction strode through the door beneath that ass-ugly sign across the street.

This gig was more interesting than most handyman jobs. I'd already fallen in love with the turn-of-the-century building. I had to admit, Teague's idea would give the place personality. From the scaffold, I peered into the second story that overhung half the ground floor, propped up by fluted columns made of green marble. A fancy bar and bar back lined one wall. I dipped the smallest

brush into the paint and began the mindless work of trimming around the plaster. Her sky would extend over the second floor area. Hauling sculpture up the staircase didn't seem practical. Maybe she planned to put the larger works on the ground floor and display her jewelry upstairs?

I'd trimmed around two-thirds of the ceiling and was on the east wall by lunchtime. Long windows looked down onto the street running alongside the building. The small lane had a name that made me laugh. Maybe there had been once, but I doubted there was one flowering tree left on Magnolia Street. There was a surprising amount of foot traffic, but after a second's reflection, I recalled there were a couple of restaurants in the shoulder-to-shoulder storefronts behind this building. A massive, newer office building occupied the opposite corner, so I assumed the people streaming down the side street were employees, headed to eat.

Only, as the hour wore on and I completed everything I needed the scaffold to reach, the number of people walking by seemed to increase. Few headed in the opposite direction, back toward South Main and the downtown jobs I supposed they had. One satellite van—the kind used by television news crews—turned the corner, then another.

I debated beginning the process of swiping white paint onto the ceiling and rubbing it off with a rag, or checking out what the excitement was about. My growling stomach made me wonder if Joe was hiding from me, or off fattening the cows he planned to slaughter for lunch. Excitement won when the third news van turned the corner. I stared at the familiar Fox News logo whizzing past. All the major news outlets hadn't come to a sandwich shop or an overpriced sushi joint for lunch. Something was up.

I was dying of curiosity, but I had no key. I couldn't lock the building and get back inside without tracking Joe down, and my instincts told me to let the man simmer a while. He'd be back. He was too all-fired worried about Teague's precious project to stay away.

On the far side of the stairs leading to the loft, a swinging door opened at the touch of my fingertips. I squeezed past display counters lined end-to-end against one wall. At the end of the hallway was a second door. My abrupt

entrance into a spacious, feminine, though still-empty room, made me back out quickly. In frustration, I slammed my back against the wall in the crowded hallway, glaring at the glass-topped cases. A moment later, I was sprawled on my ass on a small stoop, looking at the sky. Scrambling to my feet, I caught the door before it swung closed. Inching my way hurriedly back down the hall, I crossed the lobby, grabbing a small can of paint. If Teague felt comfortable enough to leave town with the side door unlocked, that had to mean nothing valuable had been moved into the place, I reasoned. Still, I didn't want to lock myself out and be forced to call Joe. I set the can so the door was only open about two inches and backed onto the stoop. Galloping down the few steps to the sidewalk, I turned north.

People crowded the sidewalks on both sides of the street. Halfway down the block, I realized everyone was heading for the courthouse, down on the next block. "Heard they took guilty pleas in both of them assault cases," an older woman confided. 'God is judging South Carolina', her hand-lettered sign proclaimed. Wind rifled her steel-blue curls, and I caught a whiff of permanent-wave solution. I wondered where He'd start, with the sinners or the saints?

A swelling throng blocked the wide walkway in front of the squat building. There was a line of people out the front door. Through heavy panes of glass, I could see the electronic security gates and moving wands wielded by security guards that were causing the bottleneck. Dodging people, I spied a larger crowd, clustered at the far end of the building. The satellite trucks were double-parked perpendicular to the parking spaces on that end of the courthouse, blocking traffic on Library Street. More than one city cop car drove past. Looking around, I saw several uniformed police officers on the grounds—not security, but city police. All had hands on their sticks and frowns on their faces. A man in a light-charcoal pinstriped suit, wearing a lemon-tinted tie that only made the circles under his eyes more pronounced, stepped away from a podium, ringed by cops.

Fear darted through my bloodstream, like tadpoles running from the shadow of a hungry bass. Dark faces were bunched together around the

podium. "Praise the Lord!" one woman cried. Many others echoed her sentiment.

Turning, I spied a man holding a cell phone that made mine look like it belonged in Special Ed. "What's going on?"

He cut hard eyes toward me. "Sons of bitches gave those animals that beat up Trey eighteen months. But those white kids that beat up that black kid? They took pleas this morning. One got sixteen years. Couple others got ten. The judge suspended the sentences for a couple down to thirty months, but some are gonna do six years in prison. District solicitor just finished his big speech, talking about how he struck a mighty blow against racism. Damn near broke his own arm, patting himself on the back." He raised his head and I saw tears brimming in his eyes. "What's the damn difference? Jus' 'cause they could charge them white boys with lynching, how's that make it different?"

It'd been hashed and rehashed in the news that this state didn't have a specific law against hate crimes. The only difference I could see was, at the moment, this was a better place to be a black man than it was to be a gay one. Both attacks were unprovoked outbursts of hatred and eerily similar in nature.

"It's 'cause that McDaniel's kid got caught forging a prescription for pain killers," someone suggested.

"*After* his attack," the guy holding the iPhone snapped. "Months after. So how the hell can that have any bearing on his attackers' sentences? That lawyer asshole might as well step up there and announce it's open season on gays. Bag and tag your limit, boys, 'cause felony gay bashing's not really a crime here. Good thing they didn't beat up a gay kid while robbing a donut shop. That woulda caused some real conflict, come sentencing time." He glared at two police officers striding past.

Hatred or fear was reflected in every pair of eyes I saw. I tried to absorb why the scales of justice could be weighted like crooked dice, looking away from the milling people, staring at nothing down the street. Maybe the sound drew me, but I swear, the inside of my skull sounded like someone kicked a hornet's nest, so I think the garish popsicles painted on the slanted hood of the passing ice cream truck caught my attention first.

Did eyewitness testimony trump surveillance video? That makes no sense.

I felt a hand on my arm and turned to look down into the concerned blue eyes of a woman it took me a minute to place. If not for the fact that the tinfoil notes tinkling through the speaker atop the ice cream truck weren't those of *Turkey in the Straw* or even *The Entertainer*, but *Jesus Loves the Little Children*, I might not have recalled the woman who'd hugged me and wiped away my tears in her Sunday school classroom, when I'd been about seven. I'd cried because the song made no mention of little brown kids like me.

"Oh, Manny," she said. "I'm so sorry." Crystalline crescents outlined her lower lids, smearing her eyeliner. I recalled her saying the same words that day. The unmistakable scent of Oscar de la Renta grabbed me by the throat. Despite the fact we stood outdoors, my eyes began to water. *She still wears too much of that damn perfume.*

I swallowed hard, looking at the harsh streaks of blonde starting about an inch from the part on top of her head. "Thanks, Mrs. Greer."

"I'll pray the good Lord in his mercy releases you from the grips of this abomination." Her hand tightened on my arm. "I mean it. I'm going to pray for you every day."

Staring at the woman who'd shown me pictures of a Jewish mother holding a child supposedly fathered by a yellow-haired angel, in a room decorated with colorful posters of the same babe as a grown man—a man depicted with skin whiter than hers—I blinked. What the hell else was there to say? *Does it hurt to be that stupid?* "I'll pray for you, too."

Turning away, I felt like a plastic soldier glued to a panorama of ignorance. Weaving my way through the thickening crowd, momentary whoops from a siren made my heart clench. Police were trying to get people to disperse. There wasn't going to be any announcement explaining the lighter sentence. The loudest statement of all was being made by silence.

We don't matter.

This was more than a hiccup in the justice system. I'd always let political talk filter through me like water through sand, but I pictured cigar-smoking, ultra-conservative judges and politicians congratulating each other on

successfully setting two minorities at each other's throats. I wanted no part of this fucking circus. Shock catapulted me past anger. I wanted to close my eyes to this, to turn my back, get in my truck, and run like a scalded dog.

But for some damn reason, the clearest thought in my head was that I was fucked with adding granulated sugar to my iced tea. The shit never dissolves, so I end up drinking bitter, brown water, unaffected by the sweetness clumped at the bottom of the glass.

When the reporter approached me, with a look in her eyes that said she was sure the only reason I was gay was that she hadn't offered to fuck me yet, I dunno why I gave her my name and agreed to be interviewed. Maybe because, at heart, I'm an attention-whore. I crave the spotlight. "This is Caroline Prentiss, reporting live from the county courthouse. I'm here with Emmanuel Curtis. Tell me, Emmanuel, is the gay community planning any retaliation for the verdict in the McDaniels case?"

What kind of idiot would answer that? I could tell by looking over her shoulder, the wind wasn't cooling anyone off. I couldn't see what good it would do for anyone to end up going to jail. I had no trouble picturing the mostly-white cops itching to throw blacks and gays in cells together, then turn their backs. Why help start a rigged game of 'beat-up-the-fag-for-Jesus'? I swallowed hard, fighting to keep a rein on my Latino temper. "I can tell you didn't get the memo. Our retaliation is to keep on showing people that love is love. How's that a threat?" I gave her a few more sarcastic bits before brushing past.

"Good job, Manny." A guy lifted a pink-clad camera to his eye. "Way to keep your cool, dude." I sorta recognized him from the local gay bar, and I knew damn well what that camera in his hand signified, so I paused to give him his shot before stalking through the crowd. My feet moved to one beat. *Staying is suicide.* Every police officer wore that 'fuck with me, please' expression. I didn't have the money to waste on bail, and I had a job to get back to.

I had almost got back to the job site when I saw the cat dart into the street. A kitten dangled from its mouth. The dump truck I'd seen this morning rattled

around the corner. The driver would stop... he'd stop. *Stop, dammit.* "Fucking stop!"

The cat was too close to the truck for the driver to see her. I broke into a run.

Joseph

Teague could kiss my hairy ass. She'd tried to talk me into buying new, but the reupholstered booths and chairs looked great. I paid the young couple who'd redone the old deli seating, and relocked the front door behind her and her husband. The restaurant was nearly finished. All that remained was for the crew to come install the wide-screen televisions. Those were due to arrive tomorrow. Since I no longer had a waitress to interview and hire from the pile of applications on my desk, my life would soon be back to business as usual.

Leaving me little to do but think about Manny. Slapping two breakfast steaks on the grill, I sliced onions and threw them in a pan to sauté. A few minutes later, I had the sandwiches dressed with condiments, lettuce, tomatoes, fresh-sliced mozzarella, wrapped and ready to go. The day hadn't warmed much. It'd been a damn cold spring. Frigid air bit my cheeks when I stepped out the front door. The pawn shop owner from next door stood on the sidewalk, smoking his pipe.

Of all the times for Teague to be wrapped up in her own life. I gave the older man a friendly nod, heaved a sigh, and shoved the key into the front door, wrenching the lock closed. Teague had the personality of sixty-grit sandpaper, but I rely on her bullshit meter and brutal honesty. I was worried about Manny. The kid's mother had been dead about five years. Two years ago, his sister married a soldier, and she'd moved around a lot since. Once his Aunt Myrtle died, Manny looked... lost, to me. He tends to be naive about people. Making it easy for people to take advantage of him.

I didn't want to be one of those people. Sure, he keeps drifting back into town, but I figured mostly he came to see his mother's sister. If any man needed someone to nurture him, it was Manny. *There's a difference between nurturing and fucking.* Goddammit, I needed Teague to bitch-slap me back

across the line I was flirting with. My best friend wouldn't hesitate to tell me I was fucking up.

Troubled by my thoughts, I crossed West Main, shivering in my old jacket. I was anxious to see how much Manny had accomplished. This bright idea Cam and I had hatched would only work if the project was finished by the time they got back to town. Otherwise, Teague would micromanage the damn thing and waste another month. She didn't seem to grasp that the longer she fucked around with perfecting the old bank behind closed doors, the more likely her customers were to patronize another jeweler. Even loyal customers put their needs first.

Like I was thinking about doing with Manny. I was lonely, because Teague had someone in her life for the first time in years. My need for companionship wasn't a good enough reason to cross the line from friendship to sex with Manny. Manny needed a friend. He could bat his eyelashes any time and get a lover. So could I, for that matter. Manny probably already had one. The dude who paid for his pretties.

The faint, wailing bursts from a siren was a troubling sound, mainly because they came from the direction of the courthouse. The gay community was restless, worried, and angry about the McDaniels attack. The fucking town had the same tension as that space between the fingers in that Michelangelo picture, but whatever might be created from the friction would have far-reaching consequences, I feared. The last thing we need is for straight people to have another reason to shun us. This ain't the big city, where gays can simply form their own community. In a small town, you gotta rub shoulders with everyone, like it or not, and I own two people-oriented businesses.

I crossed the narrow park with my head down, lost in my worries. A line of traffic waited to turn onto Magnolia Street. On my side of Morgan Square, the street was two-way, but on this side, there was one westbound lane, designed to provide access to the limited on-street parking. There wasn't any construction on Magnolia to account for the holdup, so I took the time to walk down the side of the old bank, out of curiosity. Dump trucks filled with debris from buildings I'd once owned were lined three-deep. They'd be heading for the landfill, miles out of town. Their drivers were no doubt anxious to hit the

dump before it closed. I passed one idling truck, choking on diesel fumes, just as the bastard laid down on his horn. When I cleared the driver's door, I saw the problem.

Manny knelt in the street between two of the huge trucks. I started running. The driver of the truck behind him had stopped his rig, right in the street. The door to the cab stood open. An elderly man paced beside Manny, hands jammed into the pockets of his work jacket.

"What the hell?" I demanded, wincing at the sight of the bleeding, crushed cat. Manny seemed to be holding his chest. "Manny, you okay? You hurt?" I dropped to my knees at his side, trying to lift his chin. Through the shock of hair tumbling over his forehead, I could see tears streaking his face. I glared up at the workman.

"I never saw the fuckin' cat, mister." The driver turned plaintive eyes to mine, throwing his hands out. "You know this guy?"

"Yes, I know him. What the fuck happened?" I heard a shriek, but the sound wasn't from a siren, nor did it sound human.

"Damn cat committed suicide under my wheels, is what. I offered to pay him for it. It's dead. Ain't no trip to the vet gonna bring it back. I'm sorry, but it was an accident. I'll pay him for it. But he needs to decide what I owe him. I got a schedule to keep."

Manny didn't own a cat. He was the poster child for living without responsibilities. This was road kill. "For fuck's sake, Manny, what the hell are you doing?"

He stared at me, lips moving. I had to lean close to hear him over the rumbling trucks, siren blasts, and honking horns. "Don't you see, Joseph? It's a metaphor."

I saw a dead cat, and if the pitiful animal reminded me of anything, it reminded me of Teague. I also saw the horror in Manny's eyes. Looking up at the hovering driver, I demanded, "You got a shovel in that cab?"

"Yeah, sure."

“Give it to me, then go on about your business. You can’t fix this with money. You can pick the shovel up tomorrow morning, right here.” I jerked my thumb over my shoulder toward the bank, then put my hand on Manny’s shoulder. His skin felt like ice. Why the fuck had he come outside without putting on his jacket, at least? *Goddamn kids, thinkin’ they’re invincible.*

“Manny, I’m gonna bury the cat, okay?” There weren’t many choices for a feline burial ground. The park was a bad idea. There was surely an ordinance against putting road kill in the ground where kids might play and where downtown workers sometimes ate their lunches. The manicured grounds of the hotel development agency across the side street from the old bank looked enticing, but that was private property. The bank had no land. The building occupied the entire plot. There was a spot of dirt behind the restaurant.

He only nodded, but he let me help him to his feet. “You’re gonna catch your death of cold,” I scolded helplessly, shoving the bag of sandwiches under his arm. “Go inside. I’ll be back in a few minutes. Then you can tell me what the problem is.” Tender-hearted or not, grown men didn’t squall on public streets over this kind of thing. Did they? Maybe I spent too much fucking time with Teague. She hadn’t squalled in years.

“The baby. What about the baby, Joe?” He held out his hand. A tiny piece of white fur kicked and clawed with all four legs. The small animal’s tail had three rings of gray at the tip. “We can’t let the kitten die, too.”

Putting the cat into the ground was only one of my problems. I could tell from the look on Manny’s face, he—or we—had just adopted a helpless newborn. Reminding me again of Teague. Accepting the shovel from the trucker, I glanced over my shoulder to be sure Manny was going into the bank. “I’m sorry,” the older black man apologized again. “I didn’t see the cat.” He pressed three twenties into my coat pocket. Manny’s pink sneakers scuffed the ground when he stumbled toward the side door, tripping over the curb. I turned back to the driver. “My daughter raised a newborn kitty a few years back. That formula ain’t cheap.” Sincerity shone from his eyes. I thanked him and turned to scoop up the cat. I knew where he worked, if the formula turned out to be cheap. I could take his refund—*fuck, quit wasting time.*

I made the burial expeditious. “Hail Mary, full of grace... pray for us sinners... Rest in peace, cat.” Dashing out of the cold, I found a recipe for emergency kitten formula online. The restaurant pantry was fully stocked. With relief, I found I had all the ingredients. Hell, I even had a bottle. It only hurt for a minute when I ran upstairs and dragged the box out of the back of my closet. I almost threw the doll out when I moved, but I ain’t much for throwing stuff away. The doll bottle’s nipple was factory-sealed and still seemed pliable. I dumped the clutter out of a quart-sized strawberry basket, lined it with a fresh dishtowel, and hurried downstairs to toss together the evaporated milk, egg, and Karo syrup. Nuking the homemade formula while I sterilized the bottle, I’d only been gone about twenty minutes total when I relocked the restaurant and hurried across to the bank.

“Manny?” I squinted inside the dimming building.

“Upstairs.”

My hurried footsteps echoed in the lofty lobby.

Upstairs, where the bank presidents and loan officers had once looked down on the customers below, I found Manny on his knees again, this time in a pile of the sheets Cam and I’d had put down to protect the carpeting while we painted. To my dismay, not only was he still clutching the white kitten, but a black one and a gray one were making pathetic efforts to move through the tangled sheets.

“I propped the side door open. Joe. I guess that’s how the mama cat got in. There could be more out there. She was coming from the other side of the street.” He raised anxious eyes to mine. “They’ll die, Joe.”

Now I was supposed to search the grounds around the development company building? Yeah, I could see that was precisely what he expected me to do. “Gotta keep ’em warm. That’s a priority.” The odds of survival for these tiny strays was low. I was more concerned with warming Manny. His lips were practically blue. Of course, he was still half naked. “Teague’s got a space heater in her apartment downstairs. I’ll go get it.” Holding out the basket, I sighed. “The Internet says to feed ’em laying on their tummies, the way they’d

normally nurse. I'll grab the heater and then go look. You start feedin'. No sense in letting these die while we go off on some damn wild goose chase."

Manny

Joe was almost to the stairs when he stopped. I rubbed the leaking tip of the bottle nipple along the mouth of one kitten, the white one with gray ears the mama cat had been holding when she'd been killed by the truck. "You know you're about to spend four weeks, pretty much around the clock, and maybe hundreds of dollars, to save about fifty cents worth of cat, right?"

Below the kitten, I could see a blue-striped towel, folded so precisely to fit, and noticed the flaps he'd made to fold over. "Right."

"Just askin'. Be right back."

When he topped the stairs again, the heater dangled from one hand. Under his arm, he clutched one of those big pillow things with arms people use to sit in bed and read. I had my emotions under control. Until he plugged in the heater, sat it close to me, and put his big paw on my shoulder. "We'll do our best to save these, Manny. But how long since the mother got hit? The Internet said this would be hit-and-miss, but their biggest enemy is being cold. Newborn kittens can die in minutes from lack of warmth. Not much circulation. You gotta mimic the way a mama cat licks her babies to help their blood circulate." Then, he draped my jacket around my shoulders. My tenuous hold on my emotions broke like waves hitting the beach in a storm.

He knelt behind me. I felt his big arms reach around me, but he merely picked up the other two kittens. Through blurry eyes, I watched his big thumbs slide over their little tummies. He was trying to tell me, if there'd been more, they were dead by now. I leaned back, needing his warmth every bit as much as the tiny animals in his hands. "It's gonna take a few minutes to feed all three," I choked. "Can we just talk, Joe?"

"Sure."

The whole scene at the courthouse was still too raw, so I went straight to the other topic bugging me. "What's the deal with you and Teague?" He could

be bisexual, which was fine, unless he was sleeping with her *and* her boyfriend. I didn't like that thought one bit.

Joseph

This was the part I'd secretly dreaded. I always said Manny could talk me into anything. Now, when he had my head reeling, he cut right to the heart of my life. How could I raise my defenses when he looked so damn defenseless? Sliding my chin through his hair, I hesitated. When you share stuff like this, you're swapping out a solid door for a screen door, and screen doors suck at being barriers. "You hear the stories, but you don't *know* how it was, because maybe you were too young. Sixteen years ago, people were afraid. AIDS dominated the news, but ignorance was rampant. I mean, the community knew the truth, but straight people? They had their preachers tellin' 'em AIDS was God's retribution. Right from the pulpit, they said it." *Were still saying it.* I'd overheard conversations between ministers, for fuck's sake, begrudging the scientific effort toward curing AIDS. Men of the cloth, bitching that all that work and government funding could've been put to better use, like looking for ways to cure cancer. And people wonder why I don't spend much time in my restaurant. I know my limits.

I concentrated on the bit of squirming black in my hand, trying not to wonder how their soft fur might compare with stroking Manny's dark locks.

"I was nineteen. Had just signed a lease for the deli. Sank every dime into it and borrowed more. Letting people know I was gay would've been signing my new restaurant's death warrant. Wouldn't have mattered that I wasn't the one making the damn sandwiches. To this community, we all either had AIDS, or we were carriers."

"The guy I leased the deli space from owned the whole block, but he worked in his jewelry store, on the other corner. I got to know Jorge. His family fled Germany during World War Two, finding safe passage to Portugal. Jorge emigrated here when he was twenty-two. It'd sound crazy to anyone who didn't grow up here, but Jorge was Jewish, and that's why we got to be friends. When you're surrounded by Baptists, and you're not one, you gotta

stick together. Like his father, he was a watchmaker and a goldsmith. Teague worked in the store. Lived upstairs.”

I swallowed hard, blinking away the familiar shaft of pain. “She had Tara just after I moved in next door. Damn cutest little thing you’d ever wanna see.”

I rubbed the kittens, feeling their tiny bodies grow warm in my palms, glad to have something to hold besides Manny, but I’d have to be made of stone not to feel the way his back pressed against my chest. “Tara was born sick. Kidney disease. So lots of nights, I’d talk to her, or sing to her, just tryin’ to make that poor kid smile. Livin’ so close, it wasn’t hard for Teague to figure out I was gay. She saw the same guy leaving my apartment for about the third morning in a row, and she knew.”

I could still see that dingy corridor. Still heard her drawl, “Good morning, gentlemen.” Still saw the way the guy ducked and ran, leaving me standing at my door in my boxers. Still waited for condemnation and fear to darken her already-shadowed eyes. Still felt the cold ball of panic coiled in my gut, wondering when Jorge would come down to the deli and tell me I needed to find a new place to live. Still felt the hurt from wondering if I’d lost another friend.

“That evening, I knocked on her door. Might as well get it over with, I figured. When she opened up, she had Tara on her shoulder, kinda bouncing her.”

The little kitties seemed to grow fuzzier while I stared at my hands. “The smile she gave me didn’t look no different. But that’s the definition of a southern lady, their ability to be gracious, no matter what. So I still didn’t know what she thought.” I had to swallow three times to finish. “Till she took that baby off her shoulder and laid her in my arms.”

Such a small gesture. But the ramifications of Teague’s simple affirmation of me as a human being—and as her friend—still echoed through my life. I was sure my next words made it seem I was changing the subject, but I vowed, “We’re gonna save your kittens, Manny.”

Manny

Watching Joe's massive hands gently massaging those helpless bits of black and gray fur, I absorbed the story, trying to use it to beat back my hurt and anger. I felt his breath slide across my neck, collaring me with warmth.

"The truck driver gave me sixty bucks to help buy the formula. We can run out to that big pet store near the mall and get what we'll need. Once we get the kitties fixed up, then we'll work together on the ceiling, okay? I can fetch and hand you stuff, and we'll just stop whenever they need lookin' after. That basket's not gonna hold three. We gotta find something better."

His voice rumbled through my body like the purr of a tiger. I didn't want to go to the pet store. I wanted to stay right here, behind locked doors, with Joe's huge arms around me. I wanted to be held. I wanted to stop crying. I wanted to rub my tears into Joe's chest and feel his hands gripping my ass. I wanted to be alone so I could think.

The kitten I was feeding snorted a noseful of milk and sneezed. Joe slid the gray cat into his hand, beside the black one. He swiped the nose of the babe in my hand, then gently pinched its little sides. The baby coughed up more white liquid. He continued to run his finger along the kitten's spine, but it didn't seem to want to stop squalling long enough to eat. "Definitely a girl," Joe growled.

"C'mon, little one, you can do this," I urged, but all she did was cough and gag.

"Let me try," Joe offered. Gratefully, I swapped the kitten and the bottle for the pair he'd been holding. They were all making sounds that hurt my heart to hear. The black one had the loudest voice. The gray one would stop crying in favor of trying to get off my lap, then he'd drop his head and make pitiful squeaks, as though asking why I wasn't his mother.

"This is the day's special, Wynken," Joe informed the white cat. She shook her head like a tiger. "Better drink up. Blynken and Nod look hungry to me, but since you're probably a girl, you get first licks." Joe cuddled the kitten against his chest. She drove the needle-like claws of one paw into his shirt, and

as though responding to the rough commands, opened her little mouth wide. Or, she argued with him, since she emitted a loud squawk.

The minute he brought the nipple close, she snapped her mouth closed, raising her nose. Something in the imperious tilt to her head reminded me of Willa. “Nice try, Joe, but that cat’s name isn’t Wynken.” I studied the silver fur lining her ears and the elegant curve to the threadlike whiskers, moving my gaze to the tiny tail, tipped by three circles of gray. “Chanel, tell Joe you’re gonna be far too fabulous to answer to Blynken or Wynken.” I pretended to scowl.

He kept poking the nipple toward her mouth, but he grinned. “Cats don’t answer to nothing. But, you’re right. She’s gonna need a big-time name. Ain’t got much else goin’ for her.”

Chanel turned her head toward me, eyes glued shut, but face screwed into a pout cute enough to melt steel. Joe kept sticking the bottle in her face and finally, she lapped the dripping liquid, not deigning to take the nipple into her mouth. Did the name transform her into a persnickety little queen, or was she born this way?

We shared a triumphant smile. He needed a shave. My heart missed three beats, just from looking at him. Not one recrimination about how fifty cents worth of cat was going to slow down this job? We’re about the same height, but he has thirty pounds on me. Nothing about Joe suggested he was a gentle man, but watching the careful way he held that helpless baby made me ache to kiss him.

“Where’d you get that bottle?” I asked instead.

“Bought a doll for Tara. Came with the bottle.”

Tara would have to be sixteen, based on his story. “I hope she won’t mind.”

His Adam’s apple bobbed several more times. “She won’t mind a bit.”

I wondered if he’d fudged the story, so he didn’t have to admit he’d fathered Teague’s child. Lots of gay men have relationships with women. Tried to be “normal”. Which would explain his attachment to Teague. “I’ve

dated a few guys who've had kids. Best of both worlds, maybe, if you can keep a good relationship with the mother."

His tone became fierce. "If I'd been her father, she might not be dead."

He wrenched his head away, looking toward the balcony. The planes of his face moved, like the earth shifting in a quake, but I saw no tears. He held out the white cat and bottle without looking at me. Chanel squalled at the sudden shift in her world. "She's done, I think. Don't seem to like my cooking. Here, feed the others."

Grabbing his hand, I picked up the gray cat and plopped it into his palm. "Keep him warm while I try to feed the black one. And it's okay to cry, Joe."

I shifted to sit cross-legged and tucked Chanel into the side pocket on my shorts. The black kitty latched onto the bottle right away. "There's your fighter," Joe assured me, his voice cracking. They were all fighters, I silently vowed. I knew I couldn't handle losing one, and at the moment, big Joe was looking pretty fragile, too.

Tiny nails pricked my palm. I turned my attention to the kitten, trying to decide on a name. "No one does black like Christian Dior."

He made a choked sound. "What's this one gonna be? Cartier? Tiffany?"

He'd hung with Teague for too long. The only designer's names he knew were jewelers. I glanced at the silver kitty. He wriggled onto his back in Joe's hand, stretching his back legs up around his ears. His tail disappeared from sight, curling around the edge of Joe's hand. "McQueen. His name is McQueen."

Joe dragged a huge forefinger along the exposed tummy. "As in Steve? I liked that movie *Bullit*."

Such a fucking guy. "As in Alexander." I could tell he didn't get the joke. "Icon in women's fashion design. Very gifted, openly gay."

"Gotta find something to put these guys in," he reminded me, shifting onto his knees.

"My backpack should work for a little while." Chanel was already curled up and sleeping on my upper thigh, chin propped on crossed paws. "It's by the

front door.” He placed McQueen on the opposite leg of my shorts. I felt the kitten’s tug on the bottle. I also felt the hesitant brush of fingers along my inner thigh, but the look in the man’s eyes wrenched my heart. He was fighting this mutual attraction tooth and nail.

The small distance between my mouth and his seemed to sizzle. He smelled like spearmint gum and cheap laundry detergent. His eyes said “no”, right up until he pressed his lips against mine. Then he closed them, but from the moan ripping through his chest, I knew Joe had lost his fight. His palm was hot and hard on the back of my neck. He pulled me closer. I marveled at the ferocity of his kiss, and wondered how such a big man got tripped up by such a little bit of cat.

Wrenching away, he croaked, “Be right back.” I had to smile.

Eager to get McQueen fed and all three down for a nap, I refilled the bottle. Joe came back, kneeling at my side. He unzipped the pack, spilling the contents. Spare T-shirts rolled across the floor, along with boxers. My shaving kit came unzipped, spilling razors, shaving cream, toothbrush, condoms. The bottle of lube rolled to a stop against my knee.

Leaning close, Joe raked his lips across my jaw, under my ear, around to the back of my neck. Goose bumps jitterbugged their way down my spine. I felt his cock grow solid against my side.

Oh, hell, yeah, was the only thought in my mind when he gripped my cock. He didn’t caress. He took, but the roughness was so masculine, so fucking needy. Joe wanted me. *Joe wants me.*

“Bottle’s empty.” His panted words penetrated the haze inside my brain. He yanked the dishtowel out of the small basket, quickly lining the backpack. After he gently placed Chanel and Dior inside the pack, I laid McQueen down. His small tummy was so rounded he had trouble worming his way between the others, making them cry. He rolled to his back again. Chanel put her chin on his throat. Dior curled into a ball by his side. I stared at them because I didn’t dare look at Joe, for fear he’d back out.

Scooping up the lube and condoms, Joe held out his hand, yanking me to my feet. He almost dragged me across the room, leading me behind the bar.

The long counter stood past my waist, but a narrow set of cabinets lined the bartender's side of the counter. A gooseneck faucet loomed over a brushed aluminum bar sink. Joe shoved the lever, letting the water run. Turning, he jerked at the button on my shorts. When he had my shorts around my ankles, he turned to the sink, washing his hands.

I kicked off the pants and stepped close. He pumped liquid soap into my outstretched palm. When I was done washing up, he spoke. "Sit up there." It was dim on this side of the room because there weren't any windows. I couldn't read the expression in his eyes, but getting on the counter was easy enough. He patted the higher counter. I obediently moved up. I braced my feet on the lower counter, trying to figure out where this was going. He ripped off his jacket and finally shed that ugly shirt.

I'd seen him in a bathing suit. A thick mat of dark hair covered the center of his body, spiced by a few silver ones. His shoulders and upper arms were bare. I'm into manly men, and he was a fine specimen. I leaned over for another kiss. Water from his hand dripped down the back of my neck when he pulled me closer. I wanted to kiss. I wanted to fuck. His kiss *was* fucking.

"Sit back," he gasped, "Hands on the counter. Don't move."

I saw it coming, but the first weak blast of water from the sprayer was icy. "Jesus," I hissed. My balls drew close to my body. He curled his soapy fist around my half-hard shaft, stroking slowly, root to tip. The sprayer was trained on my sac. The water warmed quickly. The sensations ripped through me, making me pump inside the tight, slick circle of his fingers. He didn't rush me, seeming to enjoy watching me harden. "Scoot forward."

The warm spray moved lower. I closed my eyes and leaned back on my elbows, giving in completely to the delicious sensation of the pulsing water. He abandoned my shaft. I felt a cool squirt of soap on my balls. The spray moved again, now sliding along the sensitive strip beneath my testicles. Joe's hand was warm and wet when he cupped my sac, massaging the soap into a lather while the water nearly made me go crazy. Then he slid his fingers between my ass cheeks, sliding over my puckered entrance.

He made me beg, damn him, before he rinsed me and took me into his mouth. The sonofabitch moved the sprayer, concentrating the water on my hole while he teased me, taking only the head of my cock into his mouth. His tongue pressed into the small slit, lapping up the eager drop of precum waiting. His groan ripped through me. When I was rigid and aching for more, he began taking me deeper, easing up and down with firm strokes and tight suction, until I felt his lips press against my groin. It was all I could do not to come.

Joseph

I can't wait any longer. Gripping Manny's hips, I urged him down to the lower counter. He laughed when I ripped the first condom, trying to get the damn thing on. Brushing my hands aside, he snagged a packet and tore it open. His eyes were locked on mine while he rolled the latex over my cock. "Snug fit."

A leather chair with buttons in the back surfaced in my memory. The chair sat in the same spot where I stood now, the day I was approved for my first bank loan. I felt the same kind of awe and excitement—and responsibility—looking at the check inscribed with numbers that seemed so large to me back then, as I did finally pressing inside Manny. He gripped my waist with strong thighs, locking his feet together at my back, pulling me in deeper. Perched on the edge of the sink, he wrapped his arms around my neck, giving me no way to hide from the intimacy of the moment.

I wanted to hide, to hold something back, to put up some kind of wall to protect myself. But I kissed him. Fuck, I could've kissed him forever.

"Wait," I gasped when he started to move. "Keep it up and this'll be over before it gets started." I had to dial back my excitement. It had been a while since I'd fucked anything but my fist.

"Okay," he agreed, giving me that sloe-eyed look I couldn't resist. "If you kiss me, I can wait."

I don't kiss many men. Not like I kissed Manny. There's a difference between mutual gratification and making love, and I couldn't seem to stop

myself from making love to Manny. The look in his eyes was so much like the look Teague wore for such a long time after her baby died, I couldn't save me without hurting him.

It wasn't hard to drag myself back from the edge. All I had to do was to remember the day the same banker turned me down for a bigger loan.

Patience restored, I began slowly thrusting, watching Manny's face in between kisses. When he wasn't tempting me with those lips, he was looking into my eyes, tearing me up with that devastating combination of provocative innocence and experience. He tightened around my cock, his smile knowing and self-satisfied. Then he raised his lips again, and I saw the flash of vulnerability—the need to get closer—when there was nothing between us but sweat. I tried to go slow, fighting for patience, but he had none. “Fuck me, dammit. Fuck me like a man.”

He absorbed every hard thrust and demanded more. I wanted to watch my cock slide into him, but then I realized I could see more by looking at Manny.

“Can't last much longer.” I managed to grab the lube, pumping some into his hand. He worked his fist between us, his knuckles raking my abdomen while he stroked his cock. I had to take over, because I wanted him to shoot on my chest and I wanted to feel it coming, so I could hang on that long.

“Joseph.” That ragged whisper tore me up. Then I couldn't think, couldn't do anything except strive for the perfect moment of jolting, wrenching, oblivion.

Guys I know let go after they get off, because getting off is the only point. Manny held on tight, and I didn't want to let him go.

When the sun dipped below the surrounding buildings, we kissed in the dark, until Chanel unleashed that bossy voice and woke her brothers. “Will you feed them? I wanna paint the sky,” Manny whispered. When I found the light switch, that just-about-to-break look was gone from his eyes.

I had to keep those kittens alive, no matter what.

Manny

Looking at Joe when the lights came on, I figured out why I'd had that stupid thought about the tea.

I wasn't going anywhere. My mother and father hadn't stayed together, mostly due to problems with my father's immigration status. He'd grown homesick and moved back to Mexico before I turned three, but I'd grown up here. Like one of the weeds my father had spent his time in America battling, I felt like a tender shoot that had to drive through concrete to reach the sun.

Joe, in his gruff way, was telling me he believed in picking the battles you thought you could win.

I wanted him, more than ever, but after what I'd seen at the courthouse, it was like I didn't have eyelids anymore. I wanted him on equal footing. I didn't want to be his rent boy. I didn't want a sugar daddy. I wanted a lover who'd see me as his equal. That meant finding steady employment instead of waiting for Joe to hand me odd jobs. Thirty was too goddamn old to keep dancing. I'd face the same problem of hit-and-miss employment if I tried to get into choreography. Despite talent, despite long hours in the gym and studio, I'd logged more hours as a barista than as a professional dancer.

I could understand his choice. I knew I'd picked a big battle. I was David, standing in the giant shadow of hatred. David at least had a rock. All I had in my hand was a trio of kittens that might not live the night.

Yeah, and there was still the uncomfortable, inevitable chat with Teague to be faced, about where and how we'd met.

Hiding my sexuality was out of the question. Hell, I'd just gone on record as being gay—you know, in case any blind folks had overlooked the message I put down. Not that I figured my interview would be seen by many people, even if it was aired. Why give the gay boy the air time when you could bleat about racism and pretend hating gays was different? Besides, I'd been interviewed before, only to have that bit of film end up on the cutting room floor. Even fifteen minutes of fame is harder to come by than people think.

Joseph

We'd worked all night.

Through the long windows, I watched the sun pop up over the restaurant, the golden arc making me squint. Wiping sweat from my forehead with an arm spotted with paint, I wondered how many more hours this part would take.

The job moved along faster than I expected. I thought he'd dab on the clouds with a brush, but he used the roller, smearing white paint in a blob, then he'd blot or wipe most of the paint off. If he thought the spot was too big, he'd just wipe on more blue.

"I think I'm done."

"Is that enough clouds?" I turned in a circle on the scaffold, looking at all the blue that still showed and thinking about how picky Teague was.

"Gotta let the sky show through," he explained, sliding his arms around my waist. Paint smeared from his skin to mine. "Otherwise, it's a cloudy day. Who'd want that hanging over their head?"

I suddenly understood Teague's idea. It wasn't dumb to have your own sunny day. Only a fool like me would need to see a circle of yellow to get the message the sun was up.

I realized something else, too, scanning the ceiling. Teague had let go of the dark. I understood why she'd been so fucking stubborn about not admitting her fear of heights. Some things were too important to let fear get in the way.

"Let's curl up and take a nap, lover. When we wake, you can help me roll on the crackle stuff."

I thought the cracks would fuck it up. I thought he was just like Teague, so caught up in a project he forgot he needed to eat.

We made a big pile of blankets upstairs. He plopped the kids on my chest and washed them with a warm rag. I dozed, contented, not really sleeping, but waiting for the kittens to cry.

I woke, heart hammering. The building was silent. Sunlight streamed through the upper, uncovered part of the narrow windows at my back. I stretched my legs, listening to Manny's even breathing, enjoying the feel of his

solid warmth at my side, while dread clutched at my heart. His head still rested on my shoulder. His hair was streaked with paint. The kitties started to mewl, and I relaxed. His eyes opened. I brushed his forehead with my lips.

“Gotta go let in some workmen. I’ll bring us back something to eat and make up some more formula. We can go to the pet store once we roll that goop on the ceiling.”

“Can you bring a big jug of sweet tea?”

Of course I could. After kissing him fiercely, I reluctantly got to my feet, wondering why I wasn’t exhausted. Bounding out of the bank, I jogged across the deserted street. Smiling like a fool, I scooped the newspaper off the front mat, shoving it under my arm.

The newspaper smeared black ink on my clouds. Above the fold, the headline screamed, *Teens Sentenced in Lynching Case. Good.* Since Teague took her coffee with Cam most days now, I’d got in the habit of sitting in a booth by the restaurant window to read the news. Reading about this attack, and looking out at the deserted street, it wasn’t hard for me to imagine how terrified Tyrell Foster had been when that truck filled with white boys turned around.

The outlying farm towns still pretty much roll up the streets at five-thirty. The state’s blue laws, governing what kind of business could legally open on Sundays, weren’t a concern there. Only a few restaurants even tried to do business on the day still set aside exclusively for church-going. At seven-thirty on a Saturday night, that kid had been damn lucky three people had been getting freaky in a car parked across the street. Five teens, bottle-fed mindless hatred from the cradle, fueled by a few beers, with a young girl along to show off their manhood for? I shuddered. Ten years seemed fair. They’d get off sooner with good behavior and community service, and maybe more than just those five people would be wiser.

I flipped the newspaper over. Another headline read, *Eighteen Months for Gay Bashing.* Anger ripped through me, hosing away my glow like the street sweeper creeping past the front door.

Before I could read the first of damn few words, I realized Manny's face looked back at me.

Folding the paper, I felt like I might throw up. Dropping my face into my hands, I pictured the video of the attack that had been shown on television. It had been dark, the wee hours of the morning. Trey McDaniels was a fuzzy image, barely visible at the top of the screen. He moved diagonally across the lines painted for parking, toward the brightly-lit convenience store windows. Something flashed at the bottom of the screen, arcing across the deserted lot, but I had to watch the film more than once to see the beer bottle. What I did see without any effort, were the people running toward those same bright windows, from the place the bottle was hurled from. The first time I saw the footage, I had the sound muted on the tube. I thought I was seeing a bread crumb being swarmed by ants at a picnic. Then I saw the hail of dark fists, the image made stark by the black-and-white security footage.

Someone tapped on the window. Two young men held a huge cardboard box. A third waved his toolbox. I scrubbed the back of my hand over my wet cheeks and got up on shaking legs to let the installation crew in. I couldn't absorb what I'd read, so I did what had to be done. My insides shook like they had the day I'd held Teague up while she looked at caskets and wreaths so small, I'd felt like some sick, twisted person was holding a funeral for their doll.

I wasn't in any shape for the good-old-boy routine. I yanked the door open and snapped at the fresh-faced, college-aged kids. "Hang one on each side of the room. Don't much give a shit where. Just be sure no one can trip on the wires and sue me."

"Yes, sir. No problem. We'll be outta your hair before you know it." *What would they say if I'd sent Manny to let them in?*

I had four big breakfast platters packed in the to-go boxes and was pouring the fresh tea into a jar when the one of the workers poked his head into the kitchen. "We're done. What channel you want 'em set to, sir?"

"One to news, one to sports. The twenty-four hour channels."

Jogging to my office, I grabbed the checkbook out of the safe and turned to dig through the top desk drawer for a pen. The sound of Manny's voice made me stop the hunt and hurry into the dining room.

He wasn't standing in the restaurant. His bare torso filled the big screens. Tension radiated from his posture and wind ripped his hair. His voice sounded choked, but his words were clear, despite the wind distorting the audio. "I can tell you didn't get the memo. Our retaliation is to keep showing people that love is love. I was born gay, so if God don't make mistakes, some people need to rethink their hate. Can't have it both ways. Either your version of God is twisted, or God messed up when he made me." He looked straight into the camera lens and smiled.

Who in their right mind could look at Manny and think he was a mistake?

He kept talking. "I believe the definition of God is an 'all-knowing being', but hey, if you gotta believe He messed up, to keep from admitting *you* might be messed up, well, they say hatred is fear. Our piece of the sky has a rainbow. Yours might have thunderclouds, or hail, or tornadoes, but it's all still weather. If you'll excuse me, I have a sky to paint." He punctuated his remark with a cocky grin and strode past the camera. The camera followed him for a moment before turning back to the strident blonde reporter.

"He's right. Dunno what the big deal is," one of the installers remarked.

It was a huge deal. That took guts. I didn't give a damn what anyone might think. I *knew* that took guts, to stagger under the blow we'd been dealt and not give in to hate. To turn around and try to save a life most would see as useless, at the very moment when instinct said to fight back. *Don't you see, Joseph? It's a metaphor.*

Shame smothered my ability to swallow, like that damn turtleneck Teague bought me for Christmas. I felt like a coward. I was sick of the feeling. Teague found the courage to trust. I couldn't expect to deserve Manny by hiding under my fucking desk. *Our piece of the sky has the rainbow. Our piece of the sky has the rainbow.* I saw Manny, speckled with paint. I saw us, together, underneath Teague's sky and suddenly, it pissed me off that she had sole claim to that kid's sky.

Then, in the next breath, I understood why she wanted those damn cracks. Not much different from hard sex, the kind that hurts—the kind I like. Need the pain to appreciate the pleasure. And that head rush afterward, well, it's from knowing you survived.

I understood something about me, too. Why I need Manny and Teague. To jerk me away from the daily grind of living and rub my fucking nose in the beauty, else I'd live my whole life never seeing any.

I knew beauty when it was shoved in my face. I knew truth when I heard it.

I knew how to kill three birds with one phone call. Shut Teague up. Tell Manny how much he meant to me. Tell the world to suck it up and deal. Only one of those things scared me.

Spinning, I hurried back to the office. Flipping through my cell, I found the number I needed by the Braves cap image. Inhaling till my lungs hurt, I stabbed the screen before I could change my mind. The fat bastard answered on the first ring. “Bobby, I gotta have a new sign. By tomorrow morning. I don't give a fuck what you charge me, but I gotta have it by eleven. Use the picture I'm sending.”

“A man just can't win an argument with a woman,” he said, sounding sympathetic. “I got your back, bro.”

My heart raced when I grabbed the pen and pad, but I knew—dammit, I knew—things had to change. I had to change. Teague would've laughed at my drawing, but I was pleased. Terrified, but pleased. I snapped a photo and stabbed the screen till the phone said the damn image went where I wanted it to go.

Manny

Teague strode through the propped-open front doors. I froze, watching her tip her head back and yank off her sunglasses. “Who did this?” she demanded.

“Well it sure as fuck wasn't me.” Joe's voice boomed in the empty space. “I guess I forgot to mention, you might not be the only artist I know.”

Cameron dropped the suitcase beside the door, hurrying to her side. “Surprise, princess.” He raised his head briefly to scan the ceiling, nodding once, before turning to look at Teague. His eyes had lines at the corners, and his forehead was wrinkled. “Is this what you had in mind?”

“No.” Beach-brightened curls whipped her face when she shook her head.

My heart felt like it hit the marble floor Joe and I’d gotten up at dawn to uncover. I’d played out this scene a hundred times in my mind over the last three days, but not one of those imagined meetings between me and Teague Tillis had started with her hating the ceiling.

“What? Why not?” Joe demanded. “Manny busted his ass on this thing, Teague.”

She turned like a skinny, blonde helicopter, still staring overhead. “Well, I dunno who the hell Manny might be, but this ceiling? It’s most assuredly *not* the way I saw it in my head.” Coming to a standstill, she curled her fingers under her chin and wiped her lips with her little finger. Jamming the other hand onto her hip, she drew her fingers into a fist.

Oh, fuck. I hadn’t realized until this very minute how much I’d been counting on Teague being blown away by my version of her sky. I’d spent too much time jumping ahead to the part where Joe found out I’d been her spank-daddy at Willa’s. In my mind, that happened right after the part where her boyfriend punched me in the face. My guts wrapped into a French twist.

She snapped her head down. Her eyes were narrowed. “I wouldn’t have made the clouds so... turbulent.”

Joe’s brows drew together. He drove his fist into Cam’s arm. “Does that mean she fucking likes it or not?” I clutched the scaffolding. My palms were so damp, my hands slipped on the smooth metal. Had I let my emotions come out in the job? I couldn’t look up. All I could do was peer over Joe’s shoulder at Teague, getting dizzy from holding my breath.

“Uh, you have a hernia or something, Joe?” Cam poked his finger toward Joe’s shirt. Joe’s very lumpy shirt. The one he’d stuck safety pins through, turning up his shirttail to make a sling for the babies.

“Kittens.” Joe roared like a Saint Bernard with a thorn in its paw. “And I swear, woman, if you don’t spit out whether you like the paint job or not, I might have a few more.”

Cam’s laughter struck the walls like machine-gun fire, but his forehead was still creased. He looked from Joe to Teague, then back to Joe, lifting his shoulders briefly. Teague said nothing, but she wandered toward the columns supporting the second floor, head tipped back. Like marionettes tied to the dangling strings on her denim cutoffs, we three males pivoted.

Three seconds crawled by, then five. Sweat popped out on my brow. She whirled so fast, I flinched. “It’s just fucking—”

“Yoo hoo. Anyone home?”

I jerked toward the sound of the new voice. The second tall blonde of the day stepped through the front door. This one didn’t need to take off her outrageously sensuous Prada sunglasses for me to recognize her. The crisp, white sleeveless suit, trimmed with black hound’s-tooth, the matching handbag and pumps—not to mention the kick-ass pair of opera-length, white lace and leather gloves—would’ve given her identity away, even if she’d been mute. I only knew a couple of women with the balls to pair a haute-couture suit with those kink-baby gloves, and Lady Gaga wouldn’t wipe her feet on this town. For the first time in weeks, my knee felt like it might give out.

Just... fucked without lube. Panic flushed through me. I glanced toward the door leading to the hall. Joe had shoved the display case in front of it so we could move the drop cloths. My heart started kicking like a one-man band trying to play the *1812 Overture*. I gauged the distance to the front door. *Four steps, maybe five. Soon as they all look up again...*

Joseph

The strange woman stepped into the bank just in time to save me from doing life without parole. She’d been back less than five minutes, and I already wanted to strangle Teague.

The unfamiliar blonde purred. “I know you’re not open yet, Teague, but I’m desperate. This morning, I broke my favorite plique-a-jour piece. You’re the only person I know who can fix it.” The overdressed mannequin held out a case covered in patchy green velvet. I guess she saw Teague still standing with her back toward the rest of us, staring at the ceiling, so she raised her head. Her painted lips fell open. “Oh... my God—”

“I know, isn’t it fabulous, Willa?” I wrenched my head around in time to see Teague spin. Her eyes sparkled, and the little shit grinned from ear-to-ear. “I’ve been trying for ten minutes to get Joseph to tell me who the hell he found to do this.” Teague raked her fingers through her hair, pushing untamable curls out of her eyes. “So I can kill ’em and take the credit for myself.” She had the nerve to wink. My tension melted like spaghetti in hot water, but I had to clench my fists to keep from snatching her baldheaded.

Beside me, I heard Cam’s loud exhale. He held out a fist at hip level, between us. I slammed mine down on top and glanced behind him. “She likes it,” I assured Manny. The kid was being shy, I guessed, hiding under the scaffold against the front wall. He seemed to be staring at the customer, so I turned back in her direction. I never saw Manny ogle a woman before.

“I do see why you’d want the credit,” the woman agreed. “It’s just... *exquisite*. Makes my poor li’l ole’ heart go pitty-pat.” Lowering her head slowly, she slid her ridiculous sunglasses down her nose and arched light brows, raking me with a look from my big feet to the end of my nose. “Kind of like your friend here. Hello, darlin’. My friends call me Willa.”

Teague burst out laughing and hugged up to my side. Sliding her arms around my waist, she laid her head on my shoulder. I felt her swat my ass. Her nose was sunburned, and her eyes danced with mischief. “This is Joseph Gilante. I’m afraid I can’t share him with you, but he is fixing breakfast for the whole crowd in just a few minutes. Please, won’t you join us? I gotta warn you, though. He only serves plain coffee, nothing fancy. Joe, I’d like you to meet Willa Seachrist.”

I recognized the name. I knew this woman pumped a lot of money into Teague’s accounts, because I do Teague’s books. “Be glad to have you join us

for breakfast, Ms. Seachrist. It's a test run before my new restaurant opens on Sunday."

The woman pushed out her lower lip. "Teague, you already snatched Cameron right out from under me. Don't you dare tell me this one's yours, too?" The bold blonde turned toward Cam, throwing her arms wide. He stepped forward to embrace her. Even kissed her on the cheek. I shuddered. Teague had her man-hating moments, for sure. This one? She ate last night's lovers for breakfast, I'd bet my last egg. "I'd be delighted to join y'all for breakfast, thank you." Over Cam's shoulder, she batted thick lashes. "Plain old coffee's fine by me, if it's strong enough."

"Oh, hello Curt." Teague sounded like she was choking on a fur ball. "I guess you drove Willa? You're welcome to join us for breakfast, too. Joseph's place is right across the street. Let me see the piece, Willa. I'm glad for the chance to do plique-a-jour. Not many even know what it is these days."

Teague's never met Manny. That's why she thinks he came with this woman. She hadn't looked at anything except the ceiling—and me. But... why'd she call him Curt?

Willa slapped the box into Teague's outstretched hand. Then she spun on her stilettos. Manny was trying to slip through the door. She drove her fingers into his sagging waistband, yanking him around like a Raggedy Ann. I felt my mouth fall open. He hunched his shoulders, looking like he'd just got caught jacking off in public. She shook her finger in his face. "Emmanuel Curtis, how *could* you? Thank you *so* much for savin' me from having to hunt you down like a dog."

Paint fumes? I did a fast add of the money she'd spent with Teague in the last six months. Being filthy rich *was* a kind of insanity. I looked to Cam, mystified, but he was staring at Willa and Manny, and for some damn fool reason, his shoulders shook with silent laughter.

He threw up a hand. "Hello, Curt... er, Manny. We saw the clip on the news down in Charleston. Good interview. Willa, honey, you're wasting a perfectly good hissy-fit. Until Teague swore up one side and down the other the guy on television had been her escort, I had no idea I'd ever seen him

before. Seriously, he coulda walked up to me on the street and kissed me, and I'd still have no idea we'd met."

What. The. Hell?

Teague piped up. "You can't fire him for being gay, Willa. That's gotta be illegal."

Willa rolled her eyes. "Could I get fired for outing myself as a woman if I had a drag queen gig? Hell yes, and this is the same thing."

I threw up my hands. "Okay, I thought maybe the paint fumes had gotten to you people. But now, I think I need to take the kittens out for a breath of fresh air. Don't want 'em catchin' whatever brain damage y'all brought with you."

Manny peered at me when I stabbed a hand at the front door, a plea in his dark eyes. "I can explain, Joseph."

"Oh, for heaven's sake," Willa snapped. "You're gay, too? Pussy just ain't the commodity it used to be, goddammit."

"Can I just say how delighted I am to know you're gay, Manny?" Striding out the door, I looked back to see Cam grinning and pumping Manny's hand like he was waiting for it to spit water. Teague doubled over, shrieking with laughter.

I stomped across the street, ignoring the honking horns.

Manny

Teague finally seemed to catch her breath. She threw slim arms around me, brushing Cameron aside and blocking Willa's baleful glare. "I adore the ceiling, Manny. It's gorgeous. Much bolder than I'd have had the guts to make it." She pressed her lips to my cheek before releasing me and turning into Cameron's arms. "Thank you." She interspersed her words with noisy kisses, covering his face. "The whole ride back from the coast, I was miserable, dreading having to tell you and Joe to paint the damn thing back white."

He grinned at me. "I guess you just saved my ass. Joe bitches like an old woman when he has to paint. Thanks so much. How much do we owe you?"

I had no idea what to charge. “Ask Joe. He hired me.”

Willa grabbed my arm. “Looks like you’re escortin’ me to breakfast.” Her expression was stern. I didn’t think refusing was one of my options.

Teague finally pried up the lid on the jewelry box and picked up the dragonfly pin nestled inside. The light streaming through the front doors illuminated lacy wings, filled with translucent colors that reminded me of Willa’s peacocks. Two sections inside one delicate wing were empty.

“Sure, I can fix it. Just gonna take me a day or two. I’ll send it back by FedEx.” Returning the piece to the fitted case, Teague snapped the lid closed. Need to lock this in the safe. Let me show you around, Willa. We’ll be along, Cam. You and Manny go on over and see if y’all can unruffle Joseph’s feathers, will you? I can’t stand when he pouts.”

I felt like a pinball, bouncing off these people. I suspected Teague was gonna try to get Willa to change her mind about letting me go. I thought Cam was right. Willa’s sex fantasy auction is the ultimate sexuality litmus test. She lines up a row of naked women. The fluffer’s job is both to provoke the men to bid for those women and to stop those with a couple of drinks under their belts from getting out of hand. Any man who could pick me out of a lineup afterward was definitely gay. The Back Door Boys joke that before the auction began is the best time in the world to pick the pockets of those rich guys. Right before Willa does—that was the punch line.

Willa couldn’t risk fanning the flames of homophobia, though. That would upset her whole, amazing, ballsy scheme. More than one of my assignments had confided in me. The women who go to Carmine House put a great deal of trust in Willa, letting her sell their bodies to strangers. She gives women a safe place to act on their fantasies, and goddammit, I wasn’t ashamed of helping anyone figure out their sexuality.

I didn’t, however, look forward to explaining my part in Willa’s auctions to Joe. Since I’d been Teague’s fluffer, that conversation would be like telling your lover you fucked his sister, but he was the better lay. Maybe Cam would help. He seemed to have the gift for cutting through bullshit. He sure looked like one happy motherfucker. We waited for a car to roll past. “It’s a small

world, isn't it?" Jamming his hands in the pockets of his shorts, he looked ready to bounce out of his Docksides.

"Small town. I don't suppose Teague has told Joe about the... way you two met?" The sun seemed to be shining on every dog's ass but mine. Looking up and down the street at the quaint downtown shops, I realized my three-day fantasy was over. Reality struck like a pissed-off copperhead.

"No, we couldn't. But we lied to keep Willa's secret, not mine and Teague's."

If Teague and Cam saw my interview in Charleston... Thanks to my big mouth and need to be in the spotlight, I'd painted more than a ceiling. I'd painted myself onto a slippery rock in the middle of Redneck River. The video of Trey McDaniels' attack flashed inside my brain, accompanied by an imagined announcer, like one of the guys hawking cheap cutlery on late-night cable. Sixteen seconds from "Hey, faggot!" to a furious flurry of fists, and all for the low price of eighteen months, if you place your order from a South Carolina area code.

There were several people in the restaurant when we entered. A woman sat at a table in the center, opposite two men wearing suits. Her dark hair was straight, and so glossy I could practically see my reflection. She held Chanel against her embroidered, white sundress. Formula dripped from the bottle while Chanel did her picky routine. One of the men had McQueen lolling in his palm. I wondered where Dior was, but my mouth felt too dry to talk. Cam took a seat at the adjacent table, so I followed him, pulling out a chair.

"How was Charleston, Cam?" the brunette inquired.

My heart was hammering, but I heard his reply. "Fucking awesome. Not one nail, hammer, can of paint, or jar of putty have I seen for the last week." He tugged a laminated menu about the size of a church bulletin from several pinched in a huge clip in the center of our table, knocking over a squeeze bottle of ketchup.

The dirty-blonde haired man at the table with the brunette groaned loudly. "Rub it in, Calloway. Then sign me up for two weeks. I dream about a place free of hammers, nails, and spackle."

Cam peeked over his menu. “The Carmichaels are restoring a two-hundred-year-old house. Jillian, Dylan, Wentworth Morgan, this is Manny Curtis. Jill, you’re gonna die when you see what Manny did with Teague’s ceiling.”

An older woman, wearing a mustard-colored uniform so ugly I winced, lumbered in our direction. I’d guessed right about the Bobby dude’s mother. *I guess it takes a gay man to hire a waitress for something besides her tits.* Joe needed Willa to explain that a straight man wanted to eat breakfast and fantasize about doing nasty things to the pretty, young waitress while she poured his coffee. He’d never take my word for that.

“I know you,” the man holding my kitten stated. Gently, he placed McQueen into a plastic pail I hadn’t noticed at his feet. McQueen staggered under the weight of his full belly, tripped over the wrinkles in the mass of blue-striped towels in the bottom of the pail, and landed on top of Dior. Leaning across the aisle, the suited man extended his hand. “I was at the courthouse Monday afternoon to file a brief. I thought the place might explode. Then Fox News starts broadcasting your interview on that big screen on the side of their truck, right? Just defused the whole thing. Never saw anything like it.”

The waitress stopped on the other side of the table, pen poised over a pad. I turned back to the lawyer. He quoted words I’d almost forgotten I’d said while he squeezed my hand. “I believe the definition of God is an ‘all-knowing being’, but hey, if you gotta believe He messed up to keep from admitting *you* might be messed up, well, that’s fear, too.” His smile looked genuine. “Brilliant. Awfully nice to meet you, Manny. I’m Wentworth Morgan.”

“Oh, that *was* you,” Jillian exclaimed. “I must’ve watched that clip fifty times. I was so proud someone pointed out the obvious and deflected all the hate. Usually they find the biggest redneck in the bunch and put them on television.” Her smile reflected in her cinnamon-colored eyes.

An older man seated alone in the booth to my right stood up. We all turned to watch him stride down the aisle and out the front door, leaving his barely-touched platter of steak and eggs, and a pipe.

“Wish I could go with him,” the waitress muttered. “You’re wrong, mister, is all I got to say. You’ll see, when the good Lord comes back to judge us all. You’ll see. Men ain’t supposed to lie with men. It ain’t natural.”

I gaped, realizing I’d seen her before. The scent of ammonia was gone, but her caustic words filled in for the stench. I recalled her sign. *God is Judging South Carolina*. It was plain she thought she could fill His shoes till He arrived. I pictured Willa’s peacocks again, standing in a circle, waving their tails. Hundreds of blind eyes, seeing nothing, but ready to fight.

“Dylan, keep feeding this baby.” Jillian ordered, handing off my kitten. The light-haired man accepted the tiny bit of fur and the bottle, but his blue eyes were trained on the waitress. He wore his two-day beard better than George Michaels. His burgundy tie reeked of authority, but at the moment, his handsome face was slack-jawed.

The clatter of silverware and low hum of conversation came to a standstill. Glancing up, I saw every head was turned our way. I felt like... fifty cents worth of cat and that dump truck just kept coming.

Jillian jumped up, snatching the pad and pen from the waitress’s hand. “I’m the fucking Wish Fairy. You wanna go? Go. You’re fired. Go get your stuff and don’t come back.”

“You can’t fire me,” the woman protested, her powdered face turning red in blotches, right up to her steely cap of sausage curls. “You didn’t hire me. Joe did.” Her wrinkled face screwed into a snarl. “You can’t fire me for bein’ a Christian.”

Jill jabbed the pen toward the waitress. Her tone dripped with saccharine and honey. “No? Then you’re being fired for being rude to a customer. We don’t discriminate here. Anybody who’s hungry is welcome to come eat—unmolested. Go on now, get out.”

The waitress jammed pudgy hands onto her wide hips. “No, I won’t. If Joe wants me to go, he needs to say so. I don’t work for you, lady.” The obnoxious woman tried to take back her order pad, but Jillian held tight.

“Damn right, you’re fired. You can take *my* word for that.” The waitress spun. Her rubber-soled shoes squeaked loudly on the polished floor tiles.

Apparently cowed by the sight of Teague's flashing eyes, she stormed past Jillian, waddling down the aisle. *On her way to tell Joe. Which way will he land?* Teague yanked out the chair at my side. "Good job, Jill. The nerve of some people."

I knew which way he'd land. He'd run for the closet.

Jill waved the pen like a scepter. "Lucky for Joseph, I was waitressing at the breakfast joint around the corner when Dylan and I met. My husband's not the only one who's tired of paint, nails, and spackle. I guess I can fill in till Joe can find a new server." The brunette beamed down at me, tipping her head so the long mass of hair swung behind her shoulder. "What'll it be, Manny? I recommend the steak and eggs. Don't forget, breakfast's on the house. A man your size might wanna have two steaks. They're small."

"I need to come to town more often," Willa stated, lowering her frame into the seat across the table from Cam, with the grace you'd expect of a former beauty queen. "I had no idea this place had gotten so excitin'." She shucked off her gloves, then plucked another menu out of the holder. "But at the moment, I'm praying that fine southern tradition of disguisin' delicious food with a tacky sign, so only the locals know about it, is in effect here."

"See? I told you that sign was ugly!" Teague exclaimed. I couldn't look. I knew those dark pants striding down the aisle covered Joe's legs.

"Already ordered a new sign, McBitchy Tits. It ought to be here any minute." Joe slid platters off his arm, plunking one after another onto the red-laminated table in front of Dylan and Went, and one before Jill's empty place. He held out his paw for the order pad. "Sam and Greta kicked me out of the kitchen. Thank you, Jillian. Sit down and eat, honey. I'll take orders if anyone else shows up. Which one of you peed in the waitress's cornflakes?"

Jill waved her hand, wagging her fingers. "She oughta thank me. I saved her from being skinned alive by Teague."

"You ordered another sign without me?" Teague whacked Joe on the thigh with his laminated menu.

Joe heaved a loud sigh. "Didja like the ceiling, Teague? I managed that without you."

“They’re like... siblings.” Cam whispered. “But they’re both only children. Think I could buy ’em boxing gloves and sell tickets?”

“Who’d pay to watch what we’ve been seeing free for years? What about the ceiling?” Jillian demanded, flouncing back into her seat.

“Here, let me feed Chanel while you eat. She’s a fussy eater.” I held out my hands to take the kitten from Dylan.

“Uh... okay.” His smile seemed genuine, too. “They’re cute little things.”

“Chanel?” Willa demanded. “I’d bet my last dollar you named that cat, Manny, you delicious little label-whore.”

I appreciated her attempt to turn the conversation and include me—validate me, even, although she’d just fired me. “You’re one to talk, dressed head to foot in Coco’s finest.”

“Oh,” Went chimed in, confusion darkening his expression. “I thought Joe said the solid gray one was named Chanel?”

“Whichever one is Chanel had best be the smartest one.” Willa pointed her menu at me. “Else Coco will come back to haunt you.”

I nudged the kitten’s tiny mouth with the nipple, feeling Teague’s gaze. “The gray one’s name is McQueen. This is Chanel. The black one is Dior.”

“Purrrfect.” Willa cracked up the small crowd at the two tables, rolling her r’s. “Joseph, I’m gonna need a towel to soak up all this grease.” She poked out her lower lip. “Where’s the fruit?” She flipped the menu to the back. That side was blank.

Joe sighed loudly. “We got steak, bacon, sausage, eggs any way you want ’em, hash browns, grits, and toast or biscuits. Oh, and sausage gravy. No fruit. Unless you want jelly.”

Shuddering, Willa closed her menu. “Coffee. Black. Steak. Rare.”

I felt like I’d gone to a multiplex cinema and blundered into the theater screening a comedy when I’d bought a ticket to see the blockbuster drama, but I had to grin. I was going to miss Willa.

Joe scratched down Teague and Cam's order, then mine, and stalked toward the back. I watched him go. Feeling someone's eyes on me, I looked up to see Willa scrutinizing me through slitted eyelids, much like Teague still did. My heart took one rapid, guilty leap, then I remembered... then I remembered Joe would expect much the same code of behavior from me as Willa. Teague looked away, reaching over Willa to offer Jill her cell phone. I thought Chanel was full. I placed her in the bucket, in an unoccupied spot. She promptly woke McQueen and Dior, climbing over them to get on top.

Jillian tilted the phone. "Oh, my God. That's gorgeous, Teague. Your own personal sky."

Teague shook her head. She stretched an arm across the table and laid her hand over mine the second my ass hit my seat. "No, I got my own piece of Manny's sky. He did the work. I'm just awed by how beautiful that sky is."

I wanted to like Teague. I did like her, but at the moment, I was too focused on the way "my sky" sure as hell didn't reach across the street.

Or maybe I didn't mean enough to Joe. Not yet. I tried to fight the wave of despair. I'd known how he was before we became lovers. Too late to cry over that now. I'd made any relationship he and I might have harder for him with my interview. To be seen with me left no room for doubt. If I'd had the cash in my pocket to pay for the four days my truck had sat in the parking deck, I'd have left. The friendly chatter from his friends washed over me, but I couldn't tune it out.

Nodding emphatically, Jillian asked, "What did you decide to with the balcony?"

Cam interrupted. "Hush up, Jillian. My vacation isn't technically over. I'm not ready to go another round with Teague over that second floor. Not yet. The topic is off-limits until Monday."

"Poor bastard. I feel you, brother," Dylan muttered, raising the thick china mug to his lips. Went sawed off a bite of steak, grinning but saying nothing. He seemed to be watching the silent news show playing on the wall to my left.

"Dylan wants Teague to rent the space," Jill explained. I assumed she spoke to Willa. I tried to smile, but the way Joe was able to act as though there

was nothing between us was hammering me between the eyes. The gulf between *here* and *across the street* seemed to yawn under my feet. Could I handle this? “Teague wants to display her sculpture up there.”

“Well, I know I can put them downstairs,” Teague exclaimed, “but only so many businesses would be interested in second-floor space. He just doesn’t seem to get that. Dress shops never make it downtown. It’s easier to go to the mall and have several stores to choose from. And they’ll want window space on the ground floor. I need that. He wants me to run an ad and just take whoever will sign the lease. I keep telling him, the customers for this other business will be coming through my space, too. And what if I hate the person? This isn’t like renting an apartment. You can see into that space from my shop. It can’t be... *tacky*.”

“God forbid.” Willa intoned.

Cam tapped the table with his spoon. “Teague, what day is it?”

“Thursday,” she retorted. “But I’ll feel the same come Monday.”

My thoughts echoed Cam’s statement. Reality had crashed my party too soon. I studied the lacquered oak trim around the edge of the table.

“I hate these damn televisions,” Teague burst out.

“I agree,” Willa wrinkled her nose at the beautiful widescreens on either wall. “But he’s gonna make a killing. This is the ultimate he-man’s breakfast nook. Once someone draws him a map about the waitress thing. Seriously, Jillian, you should make him hire you.”

Jillian waved a hand. “He really needs college girls, or just a bit older, not someone my age. But I am getting restless. I’m almost sorry I sold my bridal-photography shop. I need a place to hide from the never-ending project.”

“Jill and her husband are restoring a house almost as old as Carmine House, Willa.” Teague explained. Joe returned with mugs of coffee. He wouldn’t meet my eyes.

Dylan dropped his fork and made a big deal of slapping his back pocket. “Just checking for the flames, darling.” He turned a sad face to our table. “Every time she gets bored, my credit cards start smokin’.”

Went dragged his gaze from the television. “Waitress? She won’t even bring us chips. I wanna know what Joe has that we don’t.” He flashed a roguish grin. “Besides Teague’s teeth in his ass.”

I was sure they didn’t realize every word they said made me feel worse. Willa was absolutely right. He’d opened a man-cave that served the ultimate man-food, the lumberjack breakfast. This was ground zero for don’t ask, don’t tell.

Joseph

Maybe later, I’d laugh with Manny at the way Jill called herself the Wish Fairy. But I could see he wasn’t in a laughing mood. I was afraid he didn’t get Teague’s personality. I peered through the front windows, looking for the sign company. My palms were wet, and I damn near fumbled the pen.

A young black girl stepped through the door. I’d never seen her before, but the hunk of gold around her neck looked familiar. I wanted to end the practice run, but I couldn’t do that now without appearing rude—or something worse. “C’mon in, sweetheart. Breakfast is on the house today. Take a seat anywhere.”

“I need to see the owner or manag—”

“Oh, my god, that’s my necklace!” Teague pointed at the newcomer.

Willa piped up. “No doubt about it.”

The girl had a massive purse over her arm, just about the ugliest pocketbook I’d ever seen. Her other hand flew to her throat. Her eyes went wide. She took a step back. “No, this is mine. I have the receipt to prove it.”

Willa got to her feet, holding out a hand. “What a world we live in, when a lovely young woman like you thinks we’re accusing you of stealing. Please, sit with us, dear. What Teague meant was that she made the gorgeous piece you’re wearing. What I meant was I recognized her work. I’m Willa Seachrist. What’s your name?”

“Cynda. Cynda Foster. I’m so sorry. I misunderstood. It’s just—”

Willa strutted past me down aisle. She took the black woman's hand in one of hers. With the other, she stroked the top of the frightened girl's hand, petting her like a kitten. She steered the frightened woman toward Teague, Cam, and Manny's table, where I stood. "It's just that people need to spend more time getting to know one another, so we don't measure each other by the wrong yardstick." Teague stood and pulled a chair from the empty table behind her, smiling and nodding.

Damn, she's smooth. "We have steak, bacon, sausage, eggs any way you want 'em, hash browns, and biscuits or toast, and sausage gravy. Coffee, o.j., sweet tea, and water."

The young woman lifted her face to smile at me. "Then you need some fruit."

"See?" Willa demanded cocking a brow at me. "I happen to agree. He needs some fruit."

The girl pried her big purse open. "Maybe you need an exclusive, gourmet, organic peach, grown right here in the county?" She lifted a mason jar. The fat halves filling the jar had wide cranberry centers, barely edged in gold. "I'm taking advance orders for this year's crop. Brought a sample. They sure are good right off the grill, brushed with honey and brown sugar."

"I'll have a double order of those." Willa smiled at me this time, eyes flashing. "Hold the sugar."

"Oh, I'm thinking you need the sugar," I retorted, taking the jar. "Grilled peaches, coming right up. I might be interested in ordering some, if these guys like 'em," I promised. "How do you want your eggs, ma'am?"

"Cynda," she repeated. "I'm really just here to take orders for the peaches, but I appreciate your kindness."

"Did he just call me... *sour*?" Willa demanded.

"He sure did," Cam crowed. "You should whack him with a menu."

"Hrmpf," Willa growled, flopping into her seat. "He'll be lucky if I don't whack him with my car."

Manny

Willa nailed the problem, I felt. People here needed to see gay men as... men. Not as swishy men, or feminine men, or men-on-the-make, out to turn straight guys, but just as guys who happened to like guys. Joe would be good at that. His coming out might cost him personally, but I wondered if he knew how many he might help. He'd been a part of this community forever.

That wasn't a sacrifice I could force on him. When Joe disappeared, I gulped my coffee, thinking that Teague's remark, and Cynda's reaction, had sketched a picture on another grain of rice.

I felt Cynda saw herself as fifty cents worth of cat, too. Not because she believed she was worthless, but because, like me, she'd stared into too many eyes that couldn't see her.

A loud thump sounded from the front of the building. I jerked around in my seat. The sign company truck was double-parked out front. Bobby wrangled an extension ladder between two vehicles, bumping into the parking meter planted between them.

"Oh, this I gotta see." Teague jumped up. "I swear, if this sign is as ugly as the last one, I might whack him with your car, Willa. I'll be right back." She strode down the aisle, and shoved the front door open, nearly knocking Bobby over.

I turned back to see Willa slide a finger over the heavy gold collar around the black woman's slim throat. "Is that a peach pit?"

The woman's smile lit her face, transforming her from pretty to beautiful. "My boyfriend had it made special. Your friend cast it from the stone of one of those peaches I brought."

The genuineness of the black woman's smile got one from Willa in return. "You're clearly special to him. I have a few of Teague's pieces. Tryin' to buy all I can before some movie star takes a stroll down the red carpet in a Teague Tillis original and I have to settle for her scraps."

“She got a shop down on King Street to take a couple of things on consignment.” Cam crossed his arms over his chest, turning in his seat to look out the front glass.

“She’s thinking too small,” Willa snapped, raising a brow at me.

Cynda nearly whispered. “That’s what Daniel tells me. He’d be mad if he’d seen how I acted. He says if I expect to be treated small, most folks gonna treat me small, because I make it easy for ’em.”

Willa flicked the golden peach stone dangling from the necklace, setting it swinging. “You can take it from me, he’s right. It’s harder for folks to look down on you if they gotta climb up to your level to do it.”

The necklace was made from a wreath of gold leaves. I was amazed by the craftsmanship. Pink-gold flowers peeking from between the leaves looked almost real. I leaned close. Squinting, I figured out Teague had coated rose gold with translucent pink enamel to make the etched veins in the tiny peach blossoms show up. “Teague’s really gifted,” I murmured. I’d worked for a few pop stars. Most wouldn’t know my name, but I’d slept with their wardrobe consultants and *they* still took my calls. *If Teague wants to pay a commission to sell her work...*

Cynda’s hand on my arm interrupted my thoughts. “I guess you know that already. I saw you on television. If that young man was your friend, I’m so sorry. Even if you don’t know him, I’m still sorry. That verdict was wrong.”

“Joseph!” Teague’s voice rang out. “You miserable little thief!” When I cranked my head around, I saw she was leaning against the opened front door, laughing. Joe was never going to get heart disease, I figured. Hanging around Teague was like fastening one end of a pair of jumper cables to a battery, and the other end to your tongue. Joe strolled around the corner, bearing a large tray.

“You can’t lay claim to the whole thing, McBitchy Tits,” he informed her, apparently unperturbed. I understood the nickname much better now. He slid the tray onto the table in front of Jillian, Dylan, and Went. “Grilled peaches for everyone.” He lifted a plate and turned, plunking a white stoneware platter in front of Willa.

Finally, the man looked at me. He extended his hand, like he wanted me to take it. “Come see my new sign, Manny.”

Okay, maybe Joe will clamp those jumper cables to my tongue. My heart sure needed a jump to get going. Hesitantly, I slipped my hand into his. Squeezing so hard I thought he might crack a bone, he yanked me out of the chair. I had to hurry to keep pace. He dragged me down the aisle and out the front door. The sign with the lumber letters leaned against the building façade. The pair of men leaned over the back of the sign company’s pickup.

I saw a flash of white, a thin curve of black, then a spot of blue. They heaved the sign over the truck rail. I blinked.

“Prettiest damn sign I ever saw,” Joe stated. “You be sure and charge me double, Bobby.”

Thick, plain letters were outlined in black. They spelled “Sky Breakfast Nook”. The insides were filled with vaguely cloud-like shapes that could’ve been drawn by a five-year-old.

Joe grabbed my other hand, yanking me roughly around to face him. His brows were drawn together. His Adam’s apple bobbed a few times. He cleared his throat. Shuffling his feet, he managed to bring his big work boot down on my toe. Muttering a curse, he gave me a pleading look. “Manny, I need you to paint me a better sky,” he barked.

I was chocolate in sunshine, practically a sticky stain on the sidewalk. *He’s going to kiss me.* The one-man band took another shot at playing the *1812 Overture*, using my ribs for the percussion. I sensed others crowding the sidewalk at my back, but all I saw was Joe’s face coming closer.

“What are you two waiting for?” I heard Teague demand, just as Joe’s lips touched mine. “I don’t have all day to stand out here and supervise.”

Then Willa piped up. Her drawl rang through my head. “Get that sign screwed to the building and quit rubberneckin’. My goodness, you two boys never saw anyone kiss before?”

I felt as though we’d set a pair of lionesses loose on the Christians. Joe took his sweet time, kissing me till my head spun.

“Gotta go talk to the lady about her peaches,” Joe said, when he raised his head and dropped his arms.

I couldn't quite speak, so I bobbed my head. But it was time to see if I could make my own sky. “Willa, you owe me a severance package.”

“Oh, I do, do I?”

The small crowd shuffled back into the restaurant. “Teague, how much do you want for the mezzanine space?” I asked as we retook our seats.

“I was thinking maybe two-seventy-five a month.” She retook her seat and scooted her chair under the table, assisted by Cam. Willa sank into the seat next to hers. Joe set a plate with two ruby-toned peach halves, striped with black grill marks, in front of Teague. Joe continued passing out plates, but I could tell he was listening. “What were you thinking about putting up there?”

“A coffee salon.”

“Oh!” Jillian jumped up, dragging her chair to our table. “Go on, Manny. A coffee shop sounds nice, Teague.”

I shook my head. “No, not just another coffee shop. A coffee *salon*. Picture it. Comfortable, armless sofas around the walls, upholstered in rich, Renaissance-style tapestry. Every few feet, there'd be, like a television tray, for lack of a better term. So people have a place to sit the coffee. But they're topped with clear, acrylic boxes about the size of a shirt box, and the base slides under the sofas. They'll be lined in velvet, and each box will feature a piece like Cynda's necklace, which is to-die-for, by the way.” I smiled at the young black woman.

Willa picked up her fork, cutting off a bite of her fruit.

“Well, you're going to pay me commission for every piece I sell, and honey, I can sell that.” I pointed toward the fabulous collar. “And I'm going to sell coffee, but the real draw will be the conversation. I can deliver the gay crowd, Teague. Let your customers mingle with us. We don't bite.” I turned to the young woman who'd inspired my plan. “And Cynda, your coffee is always on the house. Bring your friends. Let's get to know each other.”

Cynda's smile just made me want to smile back.

“I want to be a hostess, Manny,” Jillian demanded. “For these conversations. Are you thinking a monthly topic? We’d talk to people every day, of course, but if you focus on one topic a month, I think that could have a huge ripple effect. Something held in the evening, right after work hours, maybe? When you order those to-go cups for the coffee, get plain, unprinted ones. I can design sleeves advertising the topic and the date everyone’s invited to the open house for a conversation.”

“May I suggest the need for a hate crime law in this state for your first topic?” Dylan leaned forward.

“Oh, yes,” Cynda’s voice was low, but it throbbed. She sat straighter and squared her shoulders. “I’d love to hostess for that, too.”

“I can get a few lawyers knowledgeable about the history and the effect hate crime laws have had in other states to join in the conversation, Manny. It’s a helluva an idea,” Went offered.

“Just like the Paris salons of old.” Willa finally spoke. “I’d love to be your partner, Manny. Silent, of course. But I’d be honored to hostess, along with these two ladies.”

I doubted Willa was ever silent, but she influenced a powerful crowd. Even better, she knew their kinky secrets.

“Miss Cynda, I’m going to need about twenty... make that thirty bushels of these peaches.” Joe dragged a chair to the shrinking table, wedging it beside mine. “When do they come in season?”

“You know,” Willa drawled, “best way in the world to get people to show up is to feed ’em. How many acres of these magical peaches do you have, Cynda? Y’all gotta taste these.”

Cameron clapped me on the shoulder. “Hell, yes. Joe, you got a lease agreement handy?”

Joe grinned. “I sure as hell do.”

Four months later

Manny

I paced in the small park, tugging at my collar.

“Now you got your neck thingy all crooked.” Joe tweaked my cravat. I wasn’t worried. I knew Willa waited inside, ready to pounce and groom me harder than Chanel grooms McQueen.

“I’m nervous,” I admitted. Emmanuel’s Coffee Salon had been open a month, but tonight was our first “conversation”. Even now, I still got dizzy, thinking of the way the plan had come together. Joe’s friends had taken me in without question or reservation, and all our hopes rested on the evening going well. “The mayor’s coming, Joe.” My voice was barely a squeak.

“He puts his pants on one leg at a time, same as you. If I had to guess, I’d say he’d suck a dick, too, if he could find the courage.” Joe put his huge arms around me, squeezing me tight. Over his shoulder, I stared at the sign. Not the gorgeous, naked cherub sign, lettered in gold leaf, that Teague designed, hanging on the bank building to my back.

The one across the street, advertising “Sky Breakfast Nook”. Every time I saw it—and I saw it often—I recalled the magical day when the plan for the salon was born. The day I sometimes felt I’d been born.

His voice vibrated through me, rough as Dior’s purr. “Some people make money. Some make art. Some make trouble. But damn few can make a difference, Manny. I love you.” Dropping his arms, he stepped back, tugging something silver from his pocket. “I brought duct tape to slap over Teague’s big mouth, just in case.”

Laughing helped calm me. *He looks so handsome in his new suit.* When he pulled his hand free, I saw the silver thing wasn’t duct tape, but a box. “I thought you needed your own Teague Tillis original.” His big shoulders lifted slightly.

Heart thundering, I removed the lid, tugging out the velvet box with clumsy fingers. The ring was easily three-quarters of an inch wide, and so heavy, I thought it might be platinum. Each deep channel ensconced one

skinny, elongated cat, stretched out and chasing his tail. Translucent enamel floated over sculpture so fine, I could see every tiny hair. I stroked one spine. My breath caught when I realized the cats were weighted somehow, so the slightest motion made them spin around the ring. The gray figure representing McQueen, in the center, faced and turned in the opposite direction from the other two. In the back, they darted through a solid tunnel. A mother's ring, I decided immediately, designed with a father's love. I didn't dare think Joe's gift could be more.

"I love you." I was so choked up, I could barely get the words out.

"Ain't much." His tone was gruff. "But don't blame the artist. She only had about fifty cents worth of cat to work with, and you know they never sit still." The warmth in his eyes belied his words. He pushed the ring over my knuckle of the ring finger of my hand... my left hand. His hand clutched mine. "Go give 'em a piece of your sky, lover."

THE END

Afterword

I have a confession.

Teague and Joseph first appeared as supporting characters in my story, [Breaking Glass](#), about Dylan, Jillian, and Teague's journey into their ménage arrangement. Willa and Manny helped Cameron and Teague get together in [Forceful Negotiations](#), the first story in my Carmine Club series. Cynda takes center stage in the second book of my Devilish De Marco Men series, [Wildly Inappropriate](#). You won't believe what Cynda's man can do with those peaches. (m/f, kinky, erotic romances)

What can I say? My stories are primarily set in one very small town. It's only natural these characters would trip across each other from time-to-time. If you enjoyed meeting this wacky cast, they'd love to tell you their love stories, too.

You might even figure out who the mysterious man was, loitering on the grounds of Carmine House, in the beginning of *Our Piece of Sky*. If Willa doesn't kill him first.

~Eden

Author Bio

Eden Connor graduated from Converse College with a degree in Psychology so long ago, her sheepskin is chiseled in stone. She's been a graphic artist, a bridal photographer and an antique restorer. Since the death of her true love, she raised two children to adulthood and now has the time to return to writing. She writes primarily contemporary erotic romances, the odd bit of erotica and an occasional paranormal piece. Most of her writing is set where she lives, in South Carolina, so expect the handsome stranger to come equipped with a slow drawl. Addicted to hazelnut creamer, baseball and cranberry glass, she likes the music of Motown and when not writing about adults behaving badly, she takes a stab at the occasional needlepoint canvas.

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