

A photograph of a wooden pier extending into a vast blue ocean. The sky is filled with soft, white clouds. The pier is made of weathered wooden planks and leads the eye from the foreground towards the horizon. The overall mood is peaceful and contemplative.

COUNT *your*
BLESSINGS

AMELIA MANN

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Love's Landscapes

An M/M Romance series

COUNT YOUR BLESSINGS

By Amelia Mann

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love's Landscapes* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

What Is Love's Landscapes?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what these authors do.

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's Landscapes*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

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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COUNT YOUR BLESSINGS

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Photo Description

The photo pictures two men holding each other. One looks into the camera with confidence while wrapping his arms around the other man in a protective manner. The other man supports himself on his boyfriend, looking away from us. Both are bare-chested, and a beach and the sea are clearly visible in the background.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

These two men have been partners for a while and have been through a lot together, having stood by each other through thick and thin. While they are strong, they are not afraid to show emotion or affection to each other. They are only just realizing what the other truly means to him. This story could be angst-filled, or filled with minor humorous trials and tribulations (or a combination of both), as long as they get a happily-ever-after.

Paranormal or sci-fi would be great, but not necessary. No incest or BDSM.

Thank you

Teresa

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: drama/angst, lawyer, book editor, illness (depression/impotence), established couple, marriage, men with children, reform Judaism, supportive sister, tearjerker

Content Warnings: brain death (secondary character)

Word Count: 55,925

Dedication

C.M. Roberts,

Everything I do, I do for you. You are the reason I exist.

Thank you.

Amelia.

COUNT YOUR BLESSINGS

By Amelia Mann

Chapter One

November 18, 2010

I had been working hard the last month, and the release was due for next week. With four new books in the pipeline, to reach final edition and print before Christmas, the workload as an editor at White Publishing had been increasing from insane to fucking hysterical. From when I got up early in the morning (reluctantly leaving a beautiful George still sleeping in bed, getting into my clothes, grabbing a cereal bar and leaving our apartment) to when I got home at eleven at night (totally trashed from exhaustion) all I did was work, work, work. We decided we couldn't go to my parents for Hanukkah at the end of November; there simply wasn't time to celebrate the Jewish holiday. Mom and Dad were very disappointed, as we hardly spent any time with them, and asked if we could come and spend our Christmas vacation with them at least. But George had started planning for us to go see his sister Becky and her daughter in North Dakota for Christmas, so we had to decline.

Our relationship actually came to a screeching halt due to our job situations. We only met in bed, and George was in the middle of several big cases at his law firm, so his mind wasn't really present either. At night, neither of us had the strength to do anything more than lie in bed beside each other. George would read a book, usually marked with the word "law" on it, while I watched some stupid show on the TV mounted on the wall opposite our bed. As we turned out the light, George always snuggled up against me, before he lifted his head to kiss me goodnight. The smell of his shampoo and the softness of the skin at the base of his neck were as intoxicating as always, and even though he was as tall as me and bulkier, he fitted my arms so perfectly. And we would fall asleep.

George and I had been partners for almost four years, and sometimes spreadsheets do put even the most passionate love on hold, pushing it slightly to the side to give space for everyday life.

I came home at ten from another hellish day at work, only to find the apartment dark and quiet. I could usually feel if he was home, even if he was in bed sleeping, but this was only cold emptiness.

"George?"

He wasn't at home.

I turned on the lights—kitchen, living room, bedroom. I checked my calendar. No special event. He should be home.

After making tea and some sandwiches and bringing them to the living room, I flicked on the TV. I checked my phone again. No message. I texted him.

Isaac to George: Late night?

At eleven I called him, and my call went to voicemail. At twelve I called him; still voicemail.

It wasn't like him not to let me know if he was working late. He'd been to San Francisco once for a conference; otherwise he stayed in Cleveland and never spent the night somewhere else other than home. Lately, he'd been working extremely long hours, just like me, and some of the lawyers actually stayed the night at the office, sleeping on couches or in chairs, finding no meaning in going home. George though, always came home to me, even if he only slept in bed three hours before he was up and away again. He must have stayed with the others this time.

The bed seemed too big without him. I tried calling his cell phone but only got voicemail again. I called his direct number at the office, but he didn't answer and I was redirected to the main number, telling me the office was closed for the day.

When I woke the next morning, I checked my cell for messages: it was just as empty as before. I tried calling his numbers again from home, from work, from the bus on my way back home again. Worried wasn't the word describing me anymore. Upset and frightened was more like it. I texted, I left messages. George would never consider going away without telling me. Something must have happened. My mind started flashing up pictures of him as a heap of meat on railway tracks, or I saw him in bed with another man. That thought hurt so much, I desperately dodged it. He had never showed any interest in other men since we became partners. He'd always seemed so content with his life, with me. George and I belonged together, or at least I thought so.

Suddenly the absurd picture of him captured by his dad, chained up in their barn, surrounded by cows on the dairy farm in Nowhere, Ohio, where George grew up, flipped through my mind. No, it was impossible, George would never go near his folks. He hated the ground they walked on, and he had cut all connections.

He loved his sister, though. Maybe... Becky had helped him get an education when he was eighteen and his parents threw him out. She'd helped him get a scholarship for college, and later she'd cheered him on to enter law school, turning him into the successful lawyer specializing in intellectual property law he was today. Becky had lived in North Dakota with her daughter Emma for some time. Her company had relocated her, and we had never visited. The girl would be four years old by now, I guessed.

But I didn't think he could have gone to see his sister either, not without telling me. We had already made plans to stay with her and Emma for Christmas, why go now? I tried Becky's cell phone, but only reached her voicemail.

It all seemed so confusing.

Without my doing, my brain kept projecting these pictures of George smiling his bright smile and kissing someone else, and it kept haunting me and making my heart black.

At lunchtime the next day, I called his work and got hold of one of his colleagues. She was just as surprised as I was. George apparently left work the day before in a frenzy, and they hadn't heard from him since. They'd tried to reach him without success. She asked me for my number to put me on their family emergency phone list for the future, and apologized she hadn't called me. They apparently had a routine to call the family if a coworker didn't show, but George had never put any numbers on that list for some reason. His colleagues all knew I was his partner, and she knew my name, but she couldn't get my cell phone number off the internet. I told her both George and I had ex-directory numbers, to prevent his parents from trying to make contact. I don't really know why we bothered with it, they wouldn't call anyway, but George had insisted.

George's colleague promised to call me immediately if she had any news.

That night I lay in bed, listening for the sound of the key in the door. Every time I heard someone's steps walking the corridor my heart sped up from hope it would be him, only to sink back into agony when the footsteps passed our front door. I hardly slept at all.

Next morning, I was like death incarnate at work. My boss was a pain in the ass, and I snubbed her deliberately.

My colleague Cathy got me coffee every hour, on the hour, and listened to me spilling my fears while she sat on my desk.

“You tried calling work?” she asked.

“I have! I tried everything.” My voice came out harder than planned. “Sorry, I’m not mad at you. I’m just so fucking worried. Is he dead? Should I pack my bags because a new guy is moving in on Saturday? I try to be prepared for everything.” Which, in fact, was a lie. I’d called my parents and my sister five times already before lunch, asking them what to do, wallowing in their words as they tried to calm me down. My sister the psychiatrist told me, of course, to make a mental picture that I was going to be fine, whatever the outcome—to be prepared for everything—but the last time she said it I hung up on her.

Mom prayed for him to come home safe. That felt much better.

“Why don’t you call the police?” Cathy asked.

“I called the police. They said a person isn’t missing until after forty-eight hours. Missing kids and people with special circumstances could be reported earlier, but George, being a reliable middle-aged man... I have to wait.”

“Isaac, you know... You ought to try calling his parents...” she said. “Maybe they have news.”

“Of course I thought about it.” The thought had crossed my mind so many times the last twenty-four hours as the only reasonable thing to do, but I feared the call. “I know he doesn’t want me to speak with them. Besides, it’s a bad idea, calling them. He cut all ties, he’s not there. They won’t know anything. Fuck, I don’t know what to do.”

“This is an emergency. You have to call them—it’s the only thing you haven’t tried. And if something happened to George, don’t you think they’d want to know? They need to know he’s missing.”

“Nothing has happened to George!” My voice echoed through the office. “He is not missing!”

“Call them,” she urged me.

“I can’t.” No way. No fucking way.

“Call... them,” she said again and looked at me with a challenging gaze. With that, she got off my desk and went back to her chair.

I started over with my emails, but the letters kept jumping around and refused to make any sense. My phone rang and I grabbed it, but it was only my mother asking for the latest news. As I didn’t have any, the call was short.

Reluctantly, I opened my web browser and punched in the address for the White Pages, Norwalk. There couldn't be many Parkers in Norwalk, Ohio. After searching, I retrieved two Parkers. One was Steven Parker, registered on the same phone number as a Michelle Parker, Homestead Farm, 44857 Norwalk, OH. It had to be them. The phone number stood out on the screen, like it was highlighted.

I tried George's phone once more, only to be rerouted to his voicemail. I heard his familiar voice. He said he would like me to leave my name and number and he'd get back to me. On the recorded media, he used his official tone of voice—the same he used when he answered his phone at work if he didn't see it was me first, or for some strange reason every time he ordered at a McDonald's drive-thru, which always made me laugh. Now it made me want to scream.

I opened the browser again and found the number to his parents. It took less than ten seconds to punch in the number and press call.

Five rings went through. Ten. Obviously they didn't have an answering machine. Then someone answered. A male voice.

"Hello?" A dark voice on the other end of the line.

"Is this Steven Parker? George Parker's father?" I asked.

"Who's asking?"

"My name is Isaac Hahn, I live in Cleveland, and I'm wondering if you know where George is?" I hoped my heart beating like mad wasn't detectable on the other end.

"Why?" he said.

I'd guessed this wouldn't be easy. I hate when I'm right all the time. "Is George with you?"

"Are you from work?"

"No."

"Then, what do you want with him, and who the hell are you?" The dissimilarity to George's way of speaking stopped me point-blank. George had not once spoken aggressively to me.

I suddenly realized that the man who I was speaking with was technically my father-in-law. "I'm your son's partner."

“You said you weren’t from work.”

“Yes... No, I mean... I’m not that kind of partner. I’m his partner, his boyfriend.” Oh hell, I was already walking on dark marshes with this homophobic prick. “We live together, here in Cleveland... He’s more like my husband.” That he would get, at least. The line went quiet. “Hello? Are you there?” I asked.

“I have nothing to say to you. So, we’ll just end this call now.” His voice was cold and absolutely free of emotion.

You arrogant, arrogant bastard! I had to control myself not to burst out with my thoughts. But George was gone. I could even plead to his father, if it made him help me find my man. “Wait! I need to know. Is he with you? Or do you know where he is? He’s been missing for two days. Please.”

“No. He’s not with us.”

“Do you know where he is?” He couldn’t miss hearing how anxious I was. “Don’t you have any ideas where he could be? Does he have any friends I don’t know about? An old hunting lodge he goes to visit? Anything that could help me find him.”

There was another long silence until he answered. “No. I can’t help you.”

My cell phone disconnected. The bastard had ended the call.

Nothing. No George, not a trace. Cathy bobbed up over her computer display, looking at me. I shook my head.

The memories from the rest of the afternoon were dim. My boss forced me to take on yet another new writer, and we sat in a meeting until three o’clock. When that ended, I thought I might as well go home and wait. I couldn’t do any work anyway in my state. By eight that night, I could go to the local police and file him as a missing person. Mom called me on my way back on the bus, and I told her about the call and about his father’s reaction. She, too, agreed it was a strange way to react. She asked if she should call him, but I said absolutely no to that offer. When I got home at half past three, the apartment was empty. After trying George’s number one more time, I fell asleep on the couch, exhausted.

My phone rang at four p.m. The signal woke me up. I had placed my phone beside me, close to my head so I wouldn’t miss any incoming calls, and I saw immediately that it was George’s phone number. My fingers went numb, and I

couldn't find the correct button. Everything felt like it was running in slow-motion as I answered.

"George?" The line was quiet. "Hello?"

"Isaac." It was him.

"Where are you, George?" I wanted to be angry, but I couldn't. I was only grateful to hear his voice. "I was so worried... You won't take my calls. Are you all right? Where are you?"

"I'm in Williston." His voice was strange. Shaky.

"Why? Shit, George, you're scaring me." The name of the town rang a bell, but I couldn't place it. "Where are you? Where the hell is Williston?"

His voice was thick. "North Dakota." The line went silent again.

"Honey?" I asked into the silence. "George? Hey, are you there? Hello?" He was still quiet. I cried out in frustration. "Why are you halfway to the North Pole? And couldn't you at least have told me you were going?" With the first shock gone, the anger was obviously working, and it kicked in, full power. "I even spoke to your fucking parents, I was so worried. Your firm is sitting on needles, they think you're dead. Fuck, you scared us all! My parents worked themselves to a frazzle worrying for you and my sister is now preparing to call the FBI. Or CIA, or—"

"I'm at Mercy Hospital." His voice was strange; he was obviously trying to regain control over his vocal cords.

"Are you hurt? Oh, God, you're hurt!" My picture of him in some other man's bed popped like a soap bubble. He never did anything without good reason, that wasn't like him at all. Suddenly, it seemed unimportant why he was there—he might be injured and didn't have me there with him. "What happened to you? Are you okay?"

"Isaac." He clung to my name. "Becky won't wake up... And Emma... she's bruised but okay, and... Oh, Isaac." I sat with the phone to my ear, listening to him taking deep breaths, as he tried to calm down so he could speak to me.

I'd never heard him so upset. George was a cool guy, always happy, confident. Never unbalanced.

"I'm here, George. I'm here, calm down. I'm sorry I yelled at you. What happened? Can you tell me?"

“Her car—the police showed me pictures of her car. It’s a miracle Emma is alive. Becky, she... she is very... injured.” He paused, clearly pulling himself together once more before he could continue. “One of her colleagues called me at work. I’m listed as her only emergency contact.”

“And you took off without calling me?”

“You know how important Becky is to me. I didn’t think.”

“And you didn’t think to call me later, when you arrived?” I tried not to sound accusing. I just needed to know, because it didn’t make sense that he hadn’t realized how worried I’d been.

“Here at the ICU there’s no difference between night and day. All is just chaos. I need to be with Becky and Emma, but they’re at different wards and I have to move between them. I haven’t slept... It felt like I’d been here only a couple of hours but I only just now turned on my phone after the flight and it’d been two days. More than two days. I can’t give you any other explanation why... why I didn’t call...” His voice trailed off. I suspected he cried.

“You’re obviously tired and very, very upset. Are you okay? I need to know you’re safe.”

“I’m okay, but I can’t do this alone. I need you, Isaac. You have to be here with me... I’m so freaking lost.”

“I’ll come, George. Just let me get my computer and I’ll tell you the first available flight. I also need you to give me the details where I’ll go from the airport. I guess the town has an airport?”

“It’s Sloulin Field.”

“Okay. And where are you?”

“I’m at Mercy Medical Center.”

I went to my laptop and started it up. George waited on the phone. I heard the ragged breaths again and again, but they gradually became more even. He was calming down. “Okay, I have my computer running. I’m checking flights right now as we speak. There’s an available departure at six o’clock, I can make that, then one stop in Denver... that would make me come to Williston at... midnight. Is that okay?”

“It’s more than okay, I...” I suspected he was crying again. I’d never seen him cry; he’d never had any reason to. Only his family could send him off-

balance, and if something had happened to his sister Becky, I guess his world would crumble.

I hurriedly punched in my credit card number and bought the ticket. "I have the reservation now, I'll soon be there. You're tired and in shock. Try to rest."

"I'm sorry I'm such a screw-up." His voice was thick. "I'm sorry for not calling earlier. You must have... God, I can't do anything right."

"It's not like you to be so confused. You just hang in there. I'll be there before you know it."

I tried to say goodbye. George had a very hard time hanging up—he could barely speak, but I quickly realized he just wanted to hear my voice. So I told him what I was packing—one-handedly—talking into the phone, and he quietly listened, only humming once when I asked him if he needed his razor or if he would do with mine.

I had an hour and a half until my plane left, and I reckoned the train would be most efficient during rush hour—better than a cab. On the train I called my older sister, Rachel. She'd been a child psychiatrist for over ten years, working at one of the larger hospitals in New York. She'd treated several children traumatized in car accidents and told me to expect hell. I was told to call if I needed help.

The next call went to my mom. She thanked God that George was safe. She asked if I wanted her there. She could go on the next flight, if we needed her.

It was kind of strange that George hardly knew my mom, even though he and I had lived together for so many years. I'd had a hard time convincing him that not all parents were homophobic assholes—my family was the exact opposite—but he kept his distance, as if he didn't believe me. My parents waited for him to take the first step when he was ready. They knew it would possibly take some time, and they had opened the gate for him to enter our family at will. I kept calling my family in New York often, sometimes every day, so I would feel close to them even if we didn't go there. My big Jewish family was all warmth, respect, love and happiness—everything George had no experience of whatsoever from his childhood. Even though I often made jokes about my very energetic, sometimes too outspoken, sometimes overfriendly Mom, she and Dad were the most important people in my life, next to George and Rachel.

I told Mom we could wait and see. Maybe I would ask her to come. It all depended on the outcome.

I sat watching the landscape passing by under the red, sunset sky, and decided to make a third call. It was to the same Norwalk number I'd called at noon. No one should stay uninformed that their kid might be about to die. Not even a bastard.

"Hello?" It was a woman speaking this time. I just presumed it was his mother. I wasn't trying to be as kind as last time.

"Hi, I'm Isaac Hahn, George's partner. I spoke to your husband earlier today because I couldn't locate George. I have now located him and I'm on my way to the airport to go to North Dakota."

"North Dakota...?"

"Correct. Your daughter and your grandchild have been in an accident. Are you aware of this?"

"No... no, I'm not. Does Becky have a daughter?" She sounded like she didn't believe me. "What...?"

The train was rolling in on the platform, so I interrupted her.

"Your daughter is in the ICU fighting for her life and I wanted to tell you, because I know George never will."

"Oh, my God, oh my God... Steve! Steven!" she cried out loud. "Steven!!" Her voice cracked, and it sounded like she dropped the phone. I could hear him in the background approaching, and her agitated voice talking to him. The phone crackled, and Steven was on the phone.

"What are you saying? Is this a joke?"

"No, Sir, this is definitely not a joke. At least you can light a candle or something. Asking you to pray for her survival is probably too much to ask." I was mad. I had to bite my tongue not to call him a bastard.

George's father's cold voice told me his armor was bullet-proof. "Are you finished?"

"Absolutely."

I heard the woman's distressed voice in the background. "Ask him where she lives now. Steven, please, ask him where she lives now! Please, please..."

"Where does she live?" His voice was strong in my ear.

"In Williston, North Dakota. You don't know anything about your daughter, do you?" I was so angry it came out as a snarl.

George's father hung up. Obviously he couldn't care less.

My heart pounded in my head as I got off the train. She seemed to care at least. Maybe she would light the candle.

Chapter Two

The flight took forever, the wait in Denver felt like it lasted a whole day, and after landing at Sloulin Field, I arranged a rental car and went directly from the airport to Mercy Medical Center. It was pitch-dark as I went along the highway through what I suspected were endless fields. The dark, snowy countryside stood in stark contrast to the small town center in which I arrived, where the hospital was lit up like a candy store. Thankful for the easiness of small-town parking, I found a space right outside the hospital main entrance and I spotted George sitting on a low concrete wall.

His eyes caught hold of me in the car, and he walked towards me. I parked and got out, reached for my duffel bag on the passenger seat and locked the car. We met halfway on the sidewalk. I dropped my bag to the ice-covered ground and immediately cradled him in my arms. He clung to me, and I didn't care about people staring at us.

I felt him shaking.

George looked exhausted and ragged, tired to the bone. His face was ashen and covered with dark stubble, more like a beard, telling me he hadn't shaved for days. He wore a heavy winter jacket I'd never seen before. It must have been borrowed.

"Isaac." His arms settled around my waist. "Thank God you're here."

"I'm sorry, George," I whispered against the side of his head. "How's your sister doing?"

"They're doing tests now. The doctors wanted me to leave. I thought I'd sit out here and wait for you."

"Aren't you cold?"

He shook his head. He seemed much more composed now than when he'd talked to me on the phone.

I started to lead him to what seemed to be the entrance. "Where are you staying?"

"I'm not staying anywhere."

"I brought you new clothes. Have you eaten?"

"No, nothing except coffee from the vending machine."

I reached for my bag, steering George towards the main entrance, and we went inside. The entrance hall was calm, as it probably always was in the night. A small group of people were talking quietly, sitting at a table in the food court area. Despite all odds, I found the cafeteria open, serving food.

“You need food,” I said. “And so do I. Or will Emma get upset if you’re not with her? Should we head for the children’s ward? Maybe she needs her uncle. We can bring the food...”

“She’s sleeping. Besides, the child psychiatrist is with her. She’s better at this than I am. I don’t have to be there.”

“I’m not so sure about that. You’re her family. Here, grab a chair and I’ll be back with something to eat.” George slumped down onto one of the chairs.

When I returned, carrying two plastic trays with coffee and burgers with fries, he sat staring with unseeing eyes. I sat down and put the tray in front of him.

“It will taste like hay,” he protested.

“It doesn’t matter. Eat.”

When he’d finished half of his food, he pushed the tray away. “That’ll have to be enough.”

“It’s something anyway,” I said, still holding my burger in my left hand. There wasn’t much left, so I pressed it into my mouth and dried my fingers on a paper napkin.

George shook his head, looking down at the table top. “Have you seen the landscape here? There are no trees. Why the hell did she have to hit one of the few fucking trees?”

I leaned forward and stroked his cheek. He leaned into my hand and closed his eyes. “I’m so, so tired.”

“I know,” I said.

“Thank God you’re here, Isaac.”

We sat quiet for several minutes, while I continued to stroke his cheek with my thumb.

“How’s Becky now?” I asked softly.

“The doctors can’t say. She won’t wake up. This is all so fucking awful, Isaac. Becky means so much to me, she can’t...” He stared at me and his eyes were bloodshot.

I moved to the chair beside him, pushing aside his tray with the stupid half-eaten burger so I could get space to reach him better. "Oh, honey, honey..." I sighed. I felt my tears threatening, but I blinked them away. I could hardly stand watching him in so much pain.

I circled his back with the palm of my hand. He needed to be touched, comforted.

"I'm scared," he whispered. "I keep telling myself I shouldn't be, that it's going to be all right soon. But it isn't, is it?" He looked at me, searching my face.

"I don't know." I reached closer and put my forehead against his temple as I caressed his shoulders. "Maybe not."

He straightened up. "I can't give up all hope. Not yet." He sighed, and I sat back, releasing my arms around him. "We should go back to the ICU."

"And Emma?"

"She's sleeping in the children's ward, and we'll see her in the morning when she wakes up. She's ten times braver than me."

George got up and went ahead of me through what felt like endless corridors. At the entrance to the ICU, George opened the door and let me in. A male nurse looked up over the counter of the nurses' station as we approached.

"George Parker," George said to him. "You have me on the list already—here's my badge. This is Isaac Parker. You have a badge waiting for him."

The nurse winked at me before he turned to George. "It's good he finally arrived. I'm sorry he lost his ID. Here you go." He handed George a visitor's badge, which he passed to me. It said "Isaac Parker". I gave George a confused glance.

"Thank you. You've been very helpful," George said to the nurse and pushed away from the counter.

George led me down the corridor. "Hospital visitation rules. No one but closest family at the ICU. You are my closest family. The rules don't count you as such. But as my brother..."

"Oh."

"Everyone already knows you're not my brother, so we don't have to play along in the farce. A hell of a lot of gay family members lose their wallets on their way here, apparently."

George was putting on a professional front when he greeted nurses he apparently knew, like he was walking the corridor at work.

We reached the hard-lit room: an open unit with two beds; no windows. Becky had been placed in one corner, and George made it more private by drawing the curtain separating the beds, even though the other bed was empty.

I froze in the doorway, trying to make my brain accept what I was seeing. I'd imagined her lying like a pale sleeping beauty in her hospital bed. I knew she'd been in a car crash, so intellectually I should have known better.

Her head was dressed in white bandages. Thick pads covered one eye, while the upper and lower eyelids of the other eye were dark blue-red, almost black, and swollen beyond recognition.

"Oh, my God," I breathed. "Oh, Becky. No." I felt tears rush to my eyes.

All the life-sustaining equipment filled the area around her bed, making it look like a spaceship. Monitors mounted on stands showed yellow waveforms and green numbers, blinking and quietly beeping. The ventilator connected to an incision at her larynx made a small, regular, huffing sound every time it pumped more oxygen into her lifeless body. Several IVs meandered from her arms connected to bags, some with clear liquid, some with red, hanging on stands by her side.

My sister was right. This was hell.

George went to her, sat down on the green uncomfortable-looking plastic chair and took her hand. He held it against his cheek as he watched her face.

"Becky? Isaac's here now."

There was no response. Her swollen features gave no sign of life. I doubted she was able to hear him.

George turned to me, still holding her hand. "They say she feels no pain. She's stable, and all this equipment helps her breathe. Come closer. Here," he showed me to another chair by the bed, "we'll sit with her and keep her company. There is not much else we can do. Nurses will be coming in all the time and the doctors check on her regularly."

"Have you spoken to her?"

He slowly shook his head and looked at Becky when he spoke. "She's been like this all the time I've been here. No change." His mouth twitched.

I had to force myself to walk closer. Finally I sat stiffly on the edge of the chair by her bed, and I took George's hand, connecting to Becky through him. We didn't talk. We only listened to the beeps and the rhythmical huffing sound coming from the ventilator. It wasn't possible to know if it was day or night; it was like we were in a bubble.

I looked at George's deeply concentrated profile, suddenly understanding why he hadn't called me. One minute in here could just as well be one second as ten hours. Signs with the forbidden cell phone icon were everywhere. I knew George well. Worrying for Becky, he wouldn't dare violate the rule, risking anything happening to the equipment.

Nurses entered to check Becky's status and suck her ventilator free of phlegm. George seemed to know all of them on a first-name basis. He told them who I was, and they all greeted me, as if they were expecting me. They were kind and offered us blankets if we were cold. Apparently they were used to working with relatives in shock.

George asked a nurse if she could check how Emma was doing, and she went out and made a call, returning saying she was sleeping and that everything was okay.

George was on his third day now without sleep. His voice sounded rough from the exhaustion when he suddenly spoke. "I keep seeing her exactly like she was the day she swept out through our apartment door holding Emma in her arms—her smile, the glitter in her eyes. She was so happy. It is a second of my life, frozen forever. It plays in my mind again and again."

I stroked George's back with slow, comforting strokes. "What did Emma say when she saw her mother like this?" I asked.

"She hasn't seen her..." George replied hesitantly.

"Is it your decision or...?"

He shook his head. "I let the experts make the decisions." His voice came out only a little louder than the sound from the machines. "Do you believe in a god?" He didn't wait for my answer. "Because if there is a god, he sure fucked this up."

I squeezed his hand.

An alarm went off. Louder than the beeps I now already regarded as normal. I got up to see if I should do something, but George held on to my hand,

wanting me to stay on my chair. In less than a minute a young male nurse appeared, worked efficiently and quietly by Becky's bed, adjusting the big tube piercing her windpipe, touching the screen and resetting the alarm. Like an auto mechanic, skillfully and impersonally, as if Becky were a car with a flat tire, he fixed her up in less than two minutes and left us with a nod.

We went back into our bubble. The machines kept making their unremitting noise. In the corner of my eye, I saw George sway where he sat.

"Honey, aren't you feeling tired? When did you sleep last?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. What time is it?"

"Two-thirty."

"In the day or night?" He stared at me with empty eyes.

I let go of his hand and reached for the alarm button and pressed it. Somewhere outside an alarm went off.

"What the hell did you do that for?" he said, sitting up on his chair.

"We need rest," I said. "You can't go on much longer."

Firm footsteps sounded, and a nurse entered and silenced the alarm. She took a quick glance at the monitors to check the vitals were stable.

"Hi," I said to her. "I called. Do you know if we will get any test results tonight?"

She shook her head. "Her doctor returns at nine in the morning."

"I think we need a break," I said.

George shook his head. "No, I need to stay..."

The nurse answered me. "You go rest for a while. Your friend here looks like he really needs it. There's a hotel opposite the hospital. And don't you worry, we're doing everything to keep Becky comfortable. If something happens while you're gone, we'll call."

"Thanks." I got up from my chair. "Hey," I said, turning to George, shaking him out of his almost vegetative state. "We'll leave for a couple of hours and put you in the shower and to bed." I more or less pulled him up from the chair. "You heard. They'll call us."

"You go sleep," the nurse confirmed to George. "You won't help her one bit if you don't take care of yourself."

I supported George with a hand under his elbow as he stood up, and he swayed as we left the ICU.

We got four hours of sleep. The hotel room had two single beds and a bathroom. Standard, practical. Before we went to bed, George had almost panicked with his contact lenses. He'd worn them for three days and they wouldn't come off. All the pressure made his patience nonexistent, and he tried to get them out with his nails, crying out loud in pure frustration. I had gone to him and helped him remove them, talking soothingly. George wore his glasses now; this morning he couldn't stand putting the contacts back on.

We had to override the visitation rules at the children's ward, too. Just in a different way.

"You're Isaac?" a nurse asked me as we arrived. "George said you'd be coming, I re-arranged the hospital visitation rules a bit. Here, on the line where you write relation to the patient, you write 'uncle'... Good. You don't have to sign in every day—just show this badge." I took the visitor's badge she handed me. "So, now, come with me."

Here, everything was different from the ICU. Where there was color and brightness, the ICU had been all darkness and solemnity. Even the nurses looked different. At the ICU they had all worn blue scrubs and severe faces, while here the nurses smiled and wore white sweats and bright yellow polo shirts with big prints, saying "Hello, how are you today?" with a happy face drawn like a smiley.

"How is she?" George asked the nurse.

"She slept well." She turned to me, seriously explaining to me, "All the other children have a parent present, but we all understand why George can't be here with her all the time. It's good you're here now. The child psychiatrist, Dr. Julia Smith, tells us Emma is very confident around new people, probably from being raised by a single mother without any supporting family close by. She's spent a lot of time in day-care facilities and with babysitters."

We'd begged Becky to come and live in Cleveland, near us. But she'd refused. That was far too close to the town where she grew up, she'd said. A year ago, she'd moved from Austin to Williston, still with the same company, and we'd hardly seen her since. She was an oil drilling engineer, perhaps a rare profession for a woman, but she had twice the spunk the men working in the oil fields had.

“Wasn’t Becky unconscious when they found her? How does the psychiatrist know anything about Emma?” I said.

“We called Emma’s day-care center to find out more about her. No one else can tell us anything, since her mother was single and they just moved here. There is no registered father—you know that, I guess?”

I peeked in through the doors to the rooms we passed. I saw IV stands and monitors just like Becky’s, and there were kids with bandages around heads and arms and legs, oxygen masks and IVs. Still aware of the shock I had from first seeing Becky yesterday, I steadied myself so I wouldn’t get too emotional when I saw Emma.

“But she doesn’t know me,” I protested. “I only met her a couple of times. I could be just anyone to her.”

The nurse shrugged her shoulders. “You’ll learn the ropes. And you’re family, not one of the staff. That means everything.”

She had me there. *Family means everything.*

We stopped at the last door on the corridor. George squeezed my shoulder as he went past me into the room. Emma sat on the floor looking small and fragile in small yellow sweat pants and a small yellow sweater. Her long, brown hair was put up in a ponytail and bared her face, revealing blue, almost lilac bruises on her chin. I registered she had no bandages. No casts.

A middle-aged woman sitting beside her looked up. Dressed in black twill pants and a colorful blouse, she looked like one of the parents, not staff.

Emma looked up too as we entered. I got a lump in my throat as I noticed her big green-hazel eyes, reminding me so much of her uncle’s.

“We’ve been playing with the horses,” Emma told George. “Do you want to see? They all have riders.”

George got down on his knees beside Emma, and the woman came over to me. “I guess you’re Isaac? George told me you were coming. I’m Julia—the child psychiatrist. We’re all glad you’re here now, not least for George. He needs the assistance. He’s been here during the day, and with Emma’s mom during the nights—running in between wards for every test and evaluation. I’m amazed he’s still standing.”

I turned and looked at George and Emma, huddling together on the floor.

“I think things will be much easier for George now that you’ve arrived. You couldn’t come earlier?”

I shook my head. "He only called me yesterday."

She looked surprised, and lowered her eyes to gaze at George and Emma. "Well... it has been a very turbulent couple of days. Maybe he lost track of time, it's easily done in situations like these. You might have to take care of him. Support him."

"Of course I will. But no one needs to take care of George. He's the most independent person I know."

"I wouldn't be too sure if I were you," she said to me, before turning to George and Emma, giving them a friendly smile. It must all have been for show. How someone could smile in this situation was beyond me. "How are you doing with those horses?"

George spoke softly to Emma and pointed at me. "Emma, here's Isaac."

Emma raised her head to look at me, and I got down on the floor beside her and George. The linoleum floor was hard beneath my kneecaps. We were surrounded by little plastic horses with matching plastic riders. "Hi, Emma. You remember me? I'm Isaac."

"Where did he come from?" Emma asked, turning to George.

"He flew in last night to be with us."

"Do you want to see the horses?" she asked me and showed me a small, stylized, plastic, gray horse. "This one has a rider too."

I got down on the floor beside her. "My sister Rachel took care of a horse one summer when we were growing up. It was white." We had to speak about something, and Rachel had always loved horses. It felt like a comfortable subject.

"Like this one?" She picked up another, and a third. "Or this one?"

"More like that one over there. It had a gray mane. I helped her with her horse sometimes."

"Did it have a name?" she asked, now interested.

"Yes it did, because all horses have names. She was called Freckles. She had freckles all over her..." Rachel had said *ass*, but I couldn't say that to a four-year-old, "behind."

Emma gave me one horse after the other, and while we played with the toys, George and the psychiatrist moved aside to talk. On returning, he asked me quietly, "Isaac, what if you stayed here with Emma today?"

My first reaction was to say no, absolutely not. George shouldn't be alone down at the ICU. Logic though, said that if I could do anything to help Emma, it was going to be the best way to help George too.

"Of course I'll stay." I turned to Emma. "Is it okay if I stay here with you?"

She nodded and handed me a shabby plastic horse, played with by hundreds of kids before Emma. I was accepted.

The late autumn morning sunshine came in through the window. Emma talked about the horses and other toys, and she sat close to me and George. Not once did she ask for her mother.

A nurse offered us all breakfast, and Dr. Julia joined us. At nine, George was preparing to head back to the ICU and Becky. He'd somehow turned off most of his emotions.

"You will call me if you need me?" I said.

"Cell phones are not allowed. I'll probably see you for lunch. Or, if I get the test results, I'll swing back here and look in on Emma and you. Tell you what's going to happen next."

"Okay," I said. We were alone, so I stroked his cheek tenderly and kissed his lips. George didn't respond. "You take it easy, you hear? And if you need me, ask them to call me immediately."

George gave me a sad smile that didn't reach his eyes. "Okay," he said. He withdrew from my touch, and he was gone.

Emma called for attention, tugging the leg of my trousers. I stood watching the empty doorframe. "Uncle Isaac?"

I lowered my eyes down to her. "Mhm?"

"I'm thirsty. Can I have some water?" she asked. She smiled at me mischievously. "And they have ice cream. In the kitchen."

I tried to smile back. "Let's go and find the kitchen, and we'll see what they have in the fridge."

With Emma's little hand in mine, we found water. We even found ice cream. Afterwards, we went to the playroom and I picked out a book. We sat down on the couch to read. She settled beside me, cuddled into my side, and I put my arm around her.

We didn't get to finish the book.

George appeared at eleven. Very pale, he froze in the doorway, looking at us. I saw it in his eyes. *Oh, God. His desperate eyes.* Everything told me we were in for a freefall.

“George? Hey, what’s the matter?” I asked. “Come, sit here.” I moved to make room, and Emma followed me like adhesive tape. George slumped down with Emma in between us. She looked up at him worriedly. She sensed something was wrong, too.

George took off his glasses and wiped his face with the palm of his hand. I saw his hands shaking as he put the glasses back on. He leaned back on the couch, letting his head fall backwards on the rest, blinking. “They have the test results.” He paused, then raised his head, his eyes swiveling to focus on me. The pain was tremendous. “They’ve measured the electrical brain activity three times. The results all show the same.”

I reached for his hand. He met me halfway and grabbed me desperately.

“There’s no activity.”

Emma looked at our joined hands in front of her.

“They’ll turn off the ventilator. That way she’ll stop...” He looked down at Emma, who didn’t understand any of this. I saw it clearly in her eyes. “Stop being with us,” George finished.

“Are we going home?” Emma asked, peering up at George with hope in her large hazel-brown eyes, clearly not understanding. “Will Mom and I go home today?”

George’s eyes were dead.

“Oh, honey. You can’t go with her,” I said instead.

“I want Mom!” Her voice raised a notch.

I released my hand from George’s, flexing my fingers a couple of times to get the bloodflow back, and let my fingers trail her ponytail. “Mom is very, very ill, honey. She will have to stay here.”

“No!” came her answer as an explosion. “No. No no no no!” She broke away from me and jumped down onto the floor. “I want to go home with Mom.” She stared at both of us.

George buried his face in his hands and sighed. “Two o’clock. They will turn the ventilator off at two o’clock.”

Emma stared at George, unable to understand any of this. Not our words and not our feelings. She stood swaying from one foot to the other.

“Come sit with me, Emma,” I said and, much to my amazement, she crawled up into my lap. I was someone to hold on to.

“Shall I stay here?” she asked. I knew she must have meant here at the ward.

“No. You’ll never be alone.” I had no better answer, I had no idea what would happen to her. Strangely, she seemed satisfied, and didn’t ask any further questions.

I reached out and put my hand on George’s arm. “Honey?” He looked at me. His eyes behind the glasses had a blood-red rim underneath from exhaustion. “What will happen now?”

“They want us all down there.”

“Emma too?”

“All of us.”

Emma was now clinging on to me so tightly, it were as if her arms were made of steel. “Hey, munchkin, it’s a bit tight.” My hands felt big and rough when I tried to carefully loosen her grip a little so I could breathe. “Are we leaving now?” I asked George.

With his thigh pressed alongside mine seeking physical contact, I extended my arm and tugged him closer. With Emma clinging to me, I sat a bit awkwardly.

“I signed some papers. They will need to wait until the afternoon... to get the operating room ready.”

“You signed...” I didn’t want to say the words in Emma’s presence.

“They asked for my consent. It’s her last kindness. I know she would have liked helping someone else to live. It wasn’t a hard decision to make.” He shuddered.

Dr. Julia returned. “I’ll follow you down to the ICU now, if you would like me to come with you.”

“Yeah,” I said. “I think that would be a good idea.”

“Yes, we ought to get going,” George said. He got up from the couch, stiff and weary, as if he were a hundred years old.

“Emma,” Dr. Julia gently caught her attention. “We’re going to see Mom now. She’s having difficulties breathing, so she has a machine doing that for her. Mom’s ill and she can’t hear us, but we should all talk to her and say that we love her. You can hang on to Isaac if you feel scared.”

Emma didn’t say anything, but she clung to me even harder. I felt her body tense up and her heart started racing like a pigeon’s.

“Okay...” George said under his breath and swayed as he got up. I got up too and steadied him.

Dr. Julia led us to another part of the ICU. I was carrying Emma, and George kept so close to me we were walking shoulder to shoulder.

Becky had been moved to a single room, and the first thing I noticed as we entered was the big window facing the garden. The snow on the ground and the ice in the trees outside reflected the late autumn sun shining in from a clear blue sky, making the room tremendously bright. All the monitors were there—and the ventilator—but the tubes and the IV stands from yesterday were gone.

I moved Emma around on my hip so she would be able to see, her hands still clutched to my shirt, holding on for dear life, breathing fast. “Here, munchkin. We’ll say hi to Mom. Remember she is very, very sick.” We went closer, and I tried my very best not to freak out. I was the adult; I was supposed to be the responsible one. But I was just as scared as she was.

We sat down on one of the chairs. Emma hid her head in my chest, but after a minute she peered out again. She sat in my arms, staring at her mother.

“Is that Mom?” she asked quietly.

I could understand everything felt wrong for her—the disfigured face, the machines.

“Yes,” George answered her question. He sat down beside us.

Tears started rising in my eyes. Almost in panic, I blinked and blinked, pushing away my own feelings, concentrating on what was important here. Emma. George.

It wouldn’t have surprised me if Emma had burst out in tears, screamed and shouted inconsolably, pulling at her mother, hitting us. Anything. But she sat with me quietly, her eyes enormously wide, and just watched Becky’s chest go up and down, up and down, in the pace of the ventilator.

“I want her to wake up,” Emma said.

“She can’t,” I said. “Your Mom is going to die.” My voice was low. “Do you know what that means?”

She didn’t answer me.

“It means the doctors can’t fix her. They can’t make her body work again.”

Emma shuddered in my arms and repeated. “I want her to wake up.”

I understood how difficult it was for a four-year-old to grasp the finality of death.

“I don’t think she can do that, Emma,” I said very quietly.

Dr. Julia left the room—only for half an hour, she told us. The nurses didn’t enter as often as last night, but when they came in and adjusted the ventilator, Emma squirmed in my arms, obviously troubled that someone was working on her mom.

A doctor entered in green scrubs. George did a motion to get up, but the doctor came over and patted his shoulder.

“Sit, sit. I’ll grab a chair and sit here with you.” He went to the wall and got one of the chairs and sat down beside George. “It’s hard to wait. All relatives find this the hardest part,” he said. “Hi,” he turned to me. “You must be Isaac. And Emma, hello.” He smiled at her. “George told me all about you.”

Emma buried her face in my chest, seeking my comfort.

“We have made everything comfortable for your sister.” He was talking to George now. “She’s not in any pain. We have prepared... I want to tell you a little about what to expect, but perhaps I shouldn’t speak about the procedure in front of your niece.”

George looked very pale and didn’t answer. I had to answer for him. “I think we have no other choice.”

“Hmm,” he nodded. “The operating room will be ready. After the heart stops, we have about a minute and a half to start. I want to tell you this, because we’ll work quite fast, you might feel pushed aside in your grief. But please remember, someone out there will be eternally grateful for your decision. Her liver and kidneys will save several lives.”

“We’re not really able to think that way right now,” I said. “How long...?”

“We will disconnect at around two o’clock. Then we’ll have to see. It can take fifteen minutes. It can take hours. No one knows. There will be a nurse

with you at all times, and I will be here checking in on you. Her vitals are connected to the central control panel at the nurses' station. I will know immediately when any change occurs.”

George listened with his eyes closed.

The doctor continued. “When her heart stops, you won't have much time to say goodbye. We will arrange so that you can come back, and...”

“Stop... please, stop...” George suddenly whispered beside me. “I can't bear listening to this...”

I turned to look at him.

His eyes met mine, wild from grief. Suddenly he gasped, fighting for every bit of air. “Oh, God... I can't...” he cried out louder, and his eyes and mouth were wide open in panic. He panted. “Isaac! I... can't breathe.”

I didn't know what to do, Emma was on my knee, I couldn't move fast. “George...” I reached out, grabbed his shirt, begged, my heart burning for him. “Honey, what is it? What's the matter?”

He fell off his chair, smacking down onto his knees on the hard floor beside me, heavily resting his arms on the bed in front of him. “I... can't...” He tried to breathe.

Emma's eyes were enormous again. I tried to switch her position so I could reach George.

The doctor approached me. “I can help you with the girl. Here, let me.” Without further question, he scooped up Emma from my knee, holding her in his arms, standing behind me. Half-heartedly she protested, but she stared at George just as I did.

“Can you breathe?” I asked George, but he didn't respond, only continued hulking for air. The panic in my voice made it crack as I turned to the doctor. “Do something!”

Death and panic had to be a part of his everyday life. He knew apparently what was wrong with George. “I don't think we need to call the rescue team. This looks like a panic attack. Has he had one before?” the doctor asked.

I shook my head.

For the first time in my life I saw George crying. He hung his upper body, hiding his face in the palms of his hands and his shoulders were shaking. I slid off my chair and knelt beside him.

Brushing his hands with my fingers, he noticed me and grabbed hold of me. He clung to me stronger than Emma could ever do, his fingers digging deep into my flesh, strong enough to leave bruises.

I managed to make him release my arm and carefully reached for his glasses, took them off and put them on the bedside table. Free of them, he pressed his face against my shoulder. "They're killing her." He shook with heavy sobs, totally out of rhythm with his breathing.

"Oh, honey," I whispered in his ear. "I know it must feel like that. I love you so much. So much. I wish things weren't like this."

George shivered in my arms. All the courage he had been trying to build up vanished. He still worked hard to get air into his lungs, but I was grateful he managed to breathe again.

The doctor spoke, "Maybe I should arrange for a sedative."

"No." I looked at the doctor over George's head. "Absolutely not. I think he needs to remember this exactly the way it is, however painful." Instinctively I knew he wanted that. "We'll get through this." I tried to talk to Emma slightly up-beat with George in my arms. I already knew her trigger point. "Do you want to find Dr. Julia, and see if you can get her to raid the freezer for ice cream again? I think we all need ice cream. It would make George feel much better." I looked at the doctor. "We need a minute here. Please."

The doctor acted quickly, picking up his phone. "I'll sort that out for you. What do you say, Emma? Shall we see if we can find Dr. Julia?" He spoke to her as they left the room. Emma looked at us over his shoulder, but went with him without protesting.

George held on to me, fists locked in my shirt. I moved so I could put my arm around his back and support him. He tried to speak, opening his mouth and closing it again.

"You don't have to talk, George. Just hold on to me," I said.

He crumpled in on himself, the big, tall man so small and bent under the inhuman pressure. "I can't do this. I can't... do this. Isaac, I can't."

"Yes, you can. You can do this, because it has to be done. I'm by your side all the time." I tried to sound calm even though my insides were in turmoil, so inadequate in dealing with the chaotic situation, but still wanting to do everything in my power to comfort him. "You have to be strong now. For Emma."

“No... no, I can't be... strong anymore.” His voice broke again with new heavy, loud sobs. He cried with his eyes closed, his mouth open, twisted in grief.

“Look at Becky. Look at her. She helped you so many times.” George shook his head. I continued. “She will lie exactly like that, until someone has the mercy to set her free. This is one favor you can do her. One last time.”

He cried uncontrollably, and the sound echoed against the bare walls. I had never seen him so devastated.

“You have no other choice. Shhh. Calm down. Just breathe. That's it,” I tried to soothe him, feeling his torso twitching in my arms, contractions in every muscle. “I know I sound harsh, but... The part that was Becky is gone. It's not her anymore. It's impossible to understand, I know. We have to do this anyway.”

I saw him struggling to calm down, trying to take even, deep breaths. I stroked his back and rocked him slowly in my arms while I whispered to him how much I loved him. A long period of time passed, as he calmed down and fell into silence, my arms still wrapped around him.

“They're going to kill her and I get to watch,” he whispered.

I understood how he felt. “You don't have to stay.”

He shook his head and swallowed. “I have to be with her. I can't let her... without me.”

Clumsily, George moved from my arms to sit down on the floor, landing hard on his ass. I sat beside him on my knees, watching him.

“There is no way back from here. Everything in her is just too damaged.” I put my hand on his shoulder, circling gently with my fingertips. “I'm sorry.” I'd said those words more often in the last twenty-four hours than I'd done in my entire life.

With his legs drawn up to almost touch his chest, he hung his head between his knees. There was no strength left in him. He swallowed hard, eyes closed, then swallowed again.

“Christ, Isaac. I think I'm going to be sick,” George choked.

I frantically looked around the room and saw a sanitation unit with a sink and containers of soap, and on the wall were mounted holders for paper towels, mugs and blue plastic sickness bags. I got up, quickly grabbed a couple of bags

and returned to George. "Here," I said as I handed over a bag. He tore it out of my hand and turned away from me as he used it.

Hands shaking, he finished and closed the bag with the attached string. I signaled I would take it, but he shook his head at my offer, crawled to his feet and walked to the sink. He threw it in the waste basket and washed his hands and mouth. He finished with splashing his face with water and leaned on his arms, supporting himself by grabbing the sink. He looked up and watched me through the reflection in the mirror. I had moved back to sit on the chair by Becky's bed.

"We'll do this together," I said to his reflection.

"Together," George echoed.

"Yes."

He dried his hands on a paper towel and threw it in the waste basket. He went to sit beside me, taking Becky's lifeless hand in his, then held out his other to me and laced his fingers with mine.

"Could you talk about something, Isaac? I can't stand this silence."

"How are you feeling now?"

He only shook his head.

"We have to talk about Emma." I looked at George; one small muscle was bobbing in his jaw. "What will happen to her?"

"She'll stay with me. With us."

"Okay."

"Okay? That's it?"

"What about your parents?"

"Emma won't grow up with my parents as her guardians."

"I mean what will they say?"

"They won't say anything. They don't have anything to do with us anymore. I agreed to take care of Emma in case of... something like this. I didn't think it was important to tell you. Becky's request felt so hypothetical. Abstract. It sure as hell isn't abstract any longer."

"What did you agree to?"

He sighed. "She went to a lawyer and drew up her will. She sent me a copy, so I know she made it legal. It states that Mom and Dad can never be her daughter's guardians. If I won't take up my responsibility, she's put up for adoption."

"Is adoption really Becky's second choice?"

He nodded slowly, looking at his sister, heartbroken. "Yes. But Becky knows I will take care of Emma. She wants me to give her a good life. That's the least I can do for Becky, for all she's done for me. And I will be guaranteed that Emma will never have to grow up with an abusive parent like I did, if she stays with me. With us."

I watched Becky in front of me, all traces of the radiant woman who had visited us long gone. I remembered how she had sparkled when she looked at her daughter.

"Does it mean... Emma is coming home with us now?" I asked.

"I don't know how it works."

I glanced at him sideways. "Are you ready to become her father?"

He twitched and looked at me. "No. Are you?"

"No."

George sank back in meditation, holding Becky's hand. No nurses entered, no alarms went off.

A tree in North Dakota had started an endless emotional avalanche. I had to tell George later I had thought about kids, but always pushed the thought away, knowing it could never be a part of my future anyway. Now maybe it was.

But I didn't want it this way. Not at this price.

"Maybe Becky doesn't want her daughter to have two fathers," I said.

"Becky knows who I am. She's always known." He didn't take his eyes off his sister. "Maybe you don't want to do this with me." George turned to look at me.

I was struck by his words. "Don't be stupid," I said. He shrugged slightly, and I squeezed his hand.

The door opened. I turned my head and saw Emma peek in through the narrow opening, quickly followed Dr. Julia.

"We'll talk about this later," George said.

The little girl in the yellow sweat suit ran up to me, and with a little assistance she climbed into my lap. “Hi, Emma.” It felt so different suddenly. Was she going to become our... daughter? My thoughts were racing. My brain had a very hard time keeping up.

Emma had two ice creams in her hands, in anonymous white paper, coming from a multipack. She gave one to me, one to George.

“Here, I brought you coffee,” Dr. Julia said.

“It’s strawberry.” Emma handed me an ice cream.

“Thank you, Emma. Oh, it’s melted already,” I said, peeling off the paper. Strawberry flavor apparently was compulsory to accompany all important turning points in my life. Right after George and I met—actually on our first real date—we’d had strawberry milk shakes and had both gotten violent food poisoning. Emma looked at me expectantly as I ate it, as if she was pleased she could give me such a treat. The artificial strawberry flavor made me gag. But I smiled at her.

George refused to take the mug of coffee from the psychiatrist, and she put both his and mine on the nightstand by Becky’s bed. George seemed composed again, but walking on very thin ice.

George also declined his ice cream, so I took it and gave it to Emma. She spilled strawberry goo on my jeans.

Through the window the world seemed so normal, compared to the giant screw-up in here. Winter had obviously come already in November to North Dakota, and I saw how the solid, frozen branches on the tree outside were covered with ice and the tree glittered against the clear blue sky.

We both sensed movement at the door, and George and I turned our heads at the same time. The doctor was bringing two people into Becky’s room. Something triggered George to new energy, and he stood up so powerfully he almost tipped his chair.

“What the hell?” He stared at an elderly-looking couple walking in through the door. “Who told them to come here?”

Emma squirmed in my arms, claiming my attention. “What is it, munchkin?” I asked her.

“There’s an old lady staring at me,” she said.

Chapter Three

Frustration and anger boiled up in George as he turned to look at me. "I... I have to leave. I can't even stand looking at them." With tense shoulders he barged through the group of people, away from us and disappeared into the corridor. I kept staring at the empty doorway.

The woman was in an obvious state of shock. Surprised, I noticed she had the same big hazel-green eyes as George. My gaze, for some reason, then glued to the stains on her knitted, dark blue cardigan. She'd also buttoned the cardigan wrong, leaving one button at the top.

She looked at me. "Are you... Isaac?"

"Yes."

"Thank you," she said. "For calling. I'm Michelle Parker. Becky's... and Georgie's... mother."

The man staying at the door must logically be George's father.

My picture of his father as an older version of George crumbled. He was as tall as George, but that was where it ended. Now I knew what he looked like—the man that gave George the scars he'd have to carry the rest of his life, both on the surface and below it. He was dressed in old boots and a black puffer jacket that he was obviously keeping on, as well as the cap advertising Stuart Milking Machines.

He had sharp blue eyes that stared at me as if I were filth.

Emma was clinging to me like a little monkey.

"And that's...?" George's mother asked, nodding pointedly at Emma.

"This is Emma."

"Becky never told us she has a daughter," Michelle said in a low voice.

"That's Georgie's fault. He caused her to turn her back on us." George's father, Steven, pointed at the empty doorway, as if George would be standing there. "Haven't seen her for ten years. Might as well be dead to us already."

"Stevie, don't start. Please," Michelle said.

"I don't know why we bothered to come here at all. The last-minute plane tickets cost us about all we had in our savings account." Steven stuck his hands into his pockets.

Michelle ignored him and studied Emma. "The girl looks so much like Becky at that age," she said to me.

"Who is she?" Emma asked me.

"This is your grandmother, munchkin."

"How is... Georgie?" She used a nickname I never heard before, and it didn't apply to the George I knew.

I shook my head. She would have to ask him herself.

Steven took a step towards us, looking at me. His eyes were so piercing I wanted to look away, but I challenged his stare. "You shouldn't sit with the girl like that. The likes of you shouldn't be allowed to touch children. Give her to her grandmother."

I was shocked. Emma's fists holding on to me tightened.

Steven took one step further and tried to reach for Emma's thin upper arm. I guessed he was going to try to rip her off my lap.

Dr. Julia cut in and stepped between us. "If you can't control yourself, you will have to leave. You must know you're scaring the child. And please keep your voice down."

He stared at Dr. Julia, studying her identity badge with her photo, name and title clearly visible. He took a step back.

I turned to Julia with my arms around Emma. "Maybe you should... Do you think you and Emma should go look for some more ice cream?"

Emma preceded me. "No, I don't want to go. I want to stay." She kept her tight grip on me.

I felt Steven's gaze cut my face.

I replied to Emma, "Okay, Munchkin. You will stay with me. We'll just have to go and see where George went, okay?"

She stuck to me, and I held her tight getting up from my chair. I carried her as I went out in the hallway in search of George. I was relieved when I found him pacing at the nurses' station, arms crossed over his chest.

"What the hell are they doing here?" George's eyes were black.

"It's my fault. I called them."

He stopped and glared at me. "You knew you weren't allowed to contact them. Under any circumstances."

“On my way here, I thought... if I had a child, whatever had passed between us, at least I'd want to know. I had no idea they would come. I'm sorry, George. I told them where Becky lives. I fucked up.”

He surprised me by holding out his arm. I went closer, and he put it around my shoulders. His voice was strained when he talked, but he kept it under control. “Remember what I told you? He wants to ruin things, destroy me. That's all he wants. I won't let him succeed in having you and me fight.” He took a deep breath. “Of course I'm pissed, but I'm not accusing you. Your intentions were good. You come from a good family. That's how real family works. Not this... fuck-up.” He mouthed the last so Emma wouldn't hear.

“I'm sorry for making you pissed.”

He hummed and put his forehead against my temple, as if he was seeking strength from me. Emma patted him on his cheek. George looked up at her surprised.

“Why are they here, if your dad hates you?”

“I guess Mom wanted to come, and he has all the credit cards. I'm sure he still controls her by not giving her any money. They're both seventy ways of...” George looked at me, grinned and formed the words “fucked up” so Emma wouldn't hear. He took another deep breath. “And... And of course he had to be drunk. He comes to see his daughter die, and he's drunk.”

“He's drunk?”

“Yes. You won't notice. I do. I see it immediately in his eyes. Took me one second.”

Emma lost concentration and looked at all the nurses working at the nurses' station.

“Can you go back in there?” I asked.

“I have to, don't I? Christ, I can't even stand looking at him.”

“He can't get to you now. And you're not alone anymore.” I leaned closer. “Together. Remember?” I kissed his cheek. I saw one of the nurses looking up from her computer display watching us with a frown, but I didn't care. I could kiss George in public in Cleveland, and Williston would just have to get used to it. “Can you manage?”

“I have to.” He nodded. “For Becky.”

We returned to the room. Michelle sat quietly by Becky's bed, while Steven, still in his jacket, sat on one of the chairs by the wall. A nurse in scrubs and a hairnet entered behind us and approached. "George Parker?"

"Yes?"

"We want you to step outside while we remove some of the technical equipment. Only the ventilator stays."

I hadn't had time to sit down, so Emma and I just turned around and started moving towards the hallway. Steven got up and walked out behind us.

Michelle, though, stayed on her chair, holding on to Becky with a desperate expression. "You can't force me to leave," she said to the nurse. "I took care of her when she was growing up. Every tangle in her hair and every bruised knee. I must be here for her now."

The five of us huddled up in the hallway. Dr. Julia had placed herself so she stood between George and his father. Emma clutched her little arms around my neck as usual, making it perfectly clear to everyone she wouldn't let go of me. George stood silently, with arms folded. I moved closer to him.

"Are you coping?" I asked, needing a minute-by-minute report about his mental status. If he was breaking down like before, I'd prefer his parents wouldn't be present. At first sign, I'd pull him with me. I knew George would be grateful if I did. Never should he show them total weakness.

He shook his head.

"Do you need to step aside for a bit? Be alone? Be with only me?"

He shook his head again.

I knew he dreaded this exact moment. He was terrified at the thought of having to watch his sister's last struggle. I stroked his cheek. "Together." He nodded, shaking as if he'd been outside in the snow without his jacket.

A little awkwardly with Emma clinging to my waist, one leg on either side, I managed to reach my arm around his shoulders. All three of us stood together.

"It won't be long now," I said.

Emma stretched out her arm to circumfuse George in her embrace. I don't know how much she understood from all this, but she was deeply moved by the tears that silently fell from her uncle's eyes, so much so that she started crying herself.

Steve saw George crying in my arms. He turned to Dr. Julia and pointed at George. "I always said there was something wrong with that boy. A wimp."

"Hey!" I said. "There's absolutely nothing wrong with George."

"Hah, and who are you to talk?" he sneered.

"Just be with your daughter one last hour and then get the fuck out of here," I replied, aware of my voice starting to rise.

"Stop fighting," Emma cried.

"Yes," I said to her. "Yes."

"Can't you just give it a rest?" George sighed to his father. "Please?"

Steven pursed his lips and looked away.

The nurse returned, and we were allowed back in.

It felt different. Calmer. The ventilator was still there, and the machine connected to it, but all the other monitors and carts with supplies were gone. Left in the room was only Becky, free from almost all equipment, in a new hospital gown, and she was tucked in under a green quilted spread. It all looked peaceful.

There were more chairs than when we left: some simple plastic chairs, other armchairs looking as if they came from a conference room. We would all be able to sit around her.

Michelle sat by the bed on one of the simple plastic chairs, both hands holding on to Becky's. She looked up at us as we entered. I knew then that the hurt in her eyes would haunt me for a long time.

"Do you want me to draw the curtains?" the nurse asked me.

I shook my head. "No. It's so beautiful outside. Please, leave them open."

The sun had passed this side of the hospital, and only the top of the trees were lit by a yellow, afternoon autumn sun. Everyone had left the garden and it was empty.

"I'll stay here with you the whole time," the nurse said. "Please, if you have any questions, just ask." She sat down on one of the chairs by the head of the bed and brought a small book from her pocket. *Poems by Emily Dickinson*, I quickly read, somehow thankful it wasn't a thriller or murder story. She pulled out a bookmark and relaxed into her reading, making it clear she was leaving us alone, even if she was present.

“You’re still in Cleveland? Still with that firm?” she asked.

“I’m one of the partners.”

“You’re... you’re doing all right in your life, Georgie?” Michelle asked.

“Yes.”

Michelle apparently wanted George to tell her more, watching him from the side. He remained silent, not returning her gaze. “That’s good,” she said, obviously realizing George wasn’t volunteering any more information.

The doctor entered and told us they were now going to start withdrawing the mechanical ventilation. In a considerate voice, he reminded us that she wouldn’t feel pain, she would probably not react in any way; just slowly fade away.

I thought the nurse would disconnect the tube; instead, she turned down the machine slowly, until it was off. It was quiet in the room without the familiar sound of the ventilator. We sat around Becky in silence. George’s father had the decency to say nothing; he sat furthest away, not really in the circle of chairs, rather behind us. George sat at my side holding Becky’s hand, Michelle opposite us holding the other. Becky would not be alone.

“What are they doing?” Emma asked.

I didn’t know what to say, and I was also afraid I’d start to cry if I had to verbalize what was going to happen next. George seemed to be completely out of it, so I looked to the nurse sitting at George’s side. She shook her head, pointing at Dr. Julia. She nodded.

“They’re helping your mother,” Julia said, but nothing more.

None of us spoke. We only watched Becky as she lay calm and motionless, her breathing as light as air from butterfly wings, hardly noticeable.

Michelle looked up. “What about... what will happen with her?” she asked me in a whisper and pointed discreetly at Emma.

George answered her question. “We’ll take care of Emma. We’ll try to give her a bright and happy life,” he said distractedly. “That’s Becky’s wish. It’s already stated in her will.”

“Oh,” she said.

“I think it’s very close now,” the nurse said quietly.

George was startled by her words. He got up and leaned over Becky, kissing her bruised face. Carefully he cupped her bandaged head and laid his cheek

against her forehead. "Thank you." George words were hardly audible. His tears were flowing. "Thank you for everything, Becky."

We all saw how Becky's chest became motionless. Nothing is as motionless as a human body without life.

Our eyes followed the nurse, who quietly got up from her place and felt her pulse. George let Becky's head slowly and carefully come to rest on the pillow and turned to the nurse, a questioning look on his face.

"I'm sorry for your loss," the nurse said.

I cried now, I couldn't be strong anymore watching George's pain, and my heart shattered to pieces from grief. It bled for George and for Emma.

Staff entered the room. Efficiently and quietly they disconnected Becky's ventilator, unlocked the wheels on the bed and started rolling her away. I knew they had to hurry in order to get her to the operating theatre and remove her organs, but still it felt wrong, even though I knew it was for a good cause. Our grief would give another family great joy, and I tried to tell myself that it was the right thing to do. But it was so hard watching them roll her away.

Emma stared, almost paralyzed, when the bed left the room. She didn't talk. I didn't say anything to her either. I just let all impressions sink in and held her in my arms.

We sat on our chairs, staring at the now empty floor. It was over.

Relief mixed with the pain in me. I knew how it ended. All questions answered. She had passed on feeling no pain, no distress, just silently carried away by death towards peace.

Emma cried with hiccups. George showed composure and a hard-set face, hanging on to my hand, though I knew from the slight twitch at the corner of his mouth that there was chaos inside him. Michelle had fallen to pieces and was crying hard, but there was no one to take care of her. Steven stood with his arms crossed over his chest, evidently affected, but damned if he was going to show us any emotion.

Dr. Julia entered and I looked her in the eyes and nodded towards Michelle. She got my meaning and went over to comfort her.

"What now?" George said to the nurse. His voice was thick.

"You can see her again in about an hour, to say your last goodbye. I suggest you go and wait in the chapel. There's a room for prayer and contemplation further down the hall."

Without energy, and hollow, we left the room and walked through the hallway following Dr. Julia. I supported George with my arm around his waist, still with Emma clinging to me. I'd had her clinging on to me for hours now, and my arm muscles were beginning to get tired.

George seemed to breathe easier. Maybe he was just as relieved as I was that Becky hadn't suffered at the end.

The room for contemplation looked a lot like a church to me. Stained glass window, a few rows of seats, a small altar. Michelle went to sit in one of the rows, far away in a corner. She clasped her hands and look like she prayed, but she might only have been clenching her fists in grief.

Emma had actually fallen asleep with her head resting against my shoulder. All the tension and grief around her seemed to have drained her empty. She'd put her thumb in her mouth and I moved her into a better position; now that she wasn't clinging to my neck, I had her sitting on my hip, my elbow for support under her.

Dr. Julia turned to George standing by my side. "I'm sorry for your loss. Please tell me if I can be of any help."

George's eyes had locked on something far, far away, probably not even in this chapel. I wondered if he was in shock, because I doubted he heard her.

"Thank you," I stepped in and spoke to Dr. Julia, trying to stay fully rational. "Can you tell me how to proceed with Emma? It's not as simple as buying the plane ticket, I presume?"

"No. There's a lot of paperwork. I'll arrange everything for you—I know what has to be done. I'm sure we can have it all wrapped up before the weekend is over. The judge is a friend of mine, and this is a small town. I'm sure she won't mind coming in for a couple of hours on Sunday morning to sign the papers. Some of them will only be temporary, and you'll need to contact an adoption agency in Cleveland to get all the correct forms and statements."

"Thank you," I said again.

"And you? How do you feel? Having her coming home with you?"

"Unprepared. Scary. Excited," I said. "I come from a very large family and we're all very close. I know how wonderful it is being a family, while George... He hasn't had the best experiences, and somehow I can't imagine his

and my relationship changing to be a family with Emma. There's some kind of fog in my head that makes me have problems connecting to reality right now."

Out of the corner of my eye I saw George's parents arguing. Steven sat down beside Michelle, waving his arms. He was obviously on the warpath again. I hoped they'd stay in the corner of the chapel; I'd just about had enough of that man. I decided to ask my sister what kind of diagnosis was applicable in his case. Or maybe he was just plain dumb. From what I'd seen, George and he had not one thing in common. George could just as well have been adopted.

Dr. Julia looked at me with interest, staying on our subject talking about Emma. "It's all so new, and I think that last word will be the most important. Exciting. I don't think I've heard anyone in your situation describe it that way before." She smiled at me, and it was heartfelt. "George told me your sister was a child psychiatrist specializing in traumatized children."

"Yes. She might come in handy. Although, my family's in New York."

"Don't make things out to be worse than they are. The transition..." she tilted her head, "might be much smoother than you expect. Or it could get very complicated. You never know."

"This is all so strange. This just happened and we're standing here, talking about the future. George, he..." I glanced at him. He wasn't listening. "Becky was everything to him. She took him in when he was around eighteen. It was Becky who got him through college and encouraged him to become a lawyer. This will be hard for him."

"Emma's real father—do you know anything about him?"

I shook my head. "Emma doesn't have a father. Becky trusted no man but George. You can't blame her. I think that bastard over there beat the crap out of her, too." I nodded towards Steven. "George doesn't like to talk about it. Emma's father was some random man Becky dated just to get pregnant. It's complicated."

"George might need a great deal of time to come to terms with his future. I hope you will help him when you get back to Cleveland."

"Of course. As much help as he needs."

I saw Steven get up from the bench. He was heading in our direction.

I shifted Emma a little higher to sit more securely in my arms. "Wonder what he's up to now?" I said to Dr. Julia.

“Do you know if he gets treatment for his alcoholism?” she asked.

“What?”

“He’s clearly under the influence of alcohol. He’s just hiding it well. Like habitual drunkards often do.” She took a step back.

“What’s this?” Steven barged into my personal space, mouth twitched into a grimace. “You can’t take that girl with you.”

I glanced at George to seek his assistance. He watched us, but wasn’t really watching us; his eyes were empty.

“I’m sorry, that’s how it’s going to be,” I told Steven, standing threateningly in front of me.

Dr. Julia held up her hands. “Calm down. This is what your daughter Becky wanted, and it is a very good solution.”

Steven turned on Dr. Julia. “You of all people should know he won’t be able to raise a child. They have no real father’s feelings.”

Steven was standing so close to me I actually got a faint smell of alcohol. Not the nice kind—the way George’s mouth tasted deliciously when he kissed me after the few times he’d had a whisky. It wasn’t often. He never drank alcohol other than at very special occasions, and now I understood why. The smell from his dad was stale and sour, coming from his skin rather than his mouth. I took a step back.

George woke from his thoughts and turned towards us. His voice was calm. “They? Father’s feelings? How can you, of all people, claim to know anything about a father’s feelings?”

“It wasn’t easy with you, you know,” Steven said and held up one finger. “It wasn’t easy being your father. You weren’t like other kids. Other kids cared about their folks. Wanted to please them. So their parents could be proud of them. You... you were a disgrace.”

“Whatever,” George said and turned away from him.

“You listen to me.” Steven was talking to George now. “You’re not fit to take care of her. You’re apparently living with this man, like you’re a woman. You weren’t enough man then, and you won’t be it now.”

Dr. Julia spoke. “Mr. Parker... Please.”

George interrupted her, speaking calm and clear. “Wasn’t I good enough? I tried everything to please you, tried everything to make you proud.”

"I ain't proud to have a son who sneaks out at night to take it up the ass."

George startled.

"Mr. Parker," Dr. Julia tried again. "I don't think this is the time and the place."

But Steven continued as if she wasn't there talking to him. "The neighbors laughed at me. You know that? Asking me what I'd done to make my boy queer."

"That had nothing to do with you," George said. "And if you'd listened, you'd have known. But you were far too occupied with using your fists and not your ears. Violence was the only language you ever understood."

"Her future..."

"You'll just have to accept that I love Isaac. He is my future, as well as Emma's."

If George had poked him with an electric cattle prod the reaction wouldn't have been less. He threatened George by stepping closer. "That girl will come with us. She will not stay in the premises of two perverted..."

"Watch it," George warned.

This was heating up too quickly. I moved backwards with Emma, I wouldn't risk her waking up and hearing this. Dr. Julia moved with me.

His father didn't listen and poked at George's shoulder with his index finger. "Children need to have someone to look up to. She needs normal folks around her. Two men bringing her up ain't normal."

"Normal? What the hell is normal?" George scoffed. "Holding you up as a role model? What a cheap joke! If she came home saying she wanted to love a girl, what would you do? Bust her ribs? Or maybe just poke her a little with the hayfork? Oh, no, *Dad*." He spat the word. "Never again."

"I'll use the law..."

"You haven't got a chance. Becky's will says that you are not suitable as adoptive parents. The law is very clear, if you take this to court, they will judge in my favor. I'll tell them what you did to me. I'll fucking show them my scars. I can guarantee you she will get a far better childhood than Becky or I had." George pointed violently in the direction of the ICU. "And it's your fault she lies in there now. You drove her away." George shook his head, trying to tame

his emotions. I'd never seen him this angry. "I don't even know why I'm talking to you. You're drunk."

"The hell I am!" Steven took another step closer, and George backed off slightly. "Becky could do whatever she liked. I never stopped her. All she wanted to do was run after you. I hear the girl has no father. Was that you too?"

George growled. "I said, watch it." He took a deep breath, thrusting out his chest, threatening, not backing off anymore. "You always had a foul mouth when you were drunk. I'm glad Isaac gets to hear it blooming, or he wouldn't believe me." George threw a quick glance in my direction. "Emma will have everything I never had. Love, and trust, and support—"

"Queers surely know how to use fine words. Still, it won't make your perverse lifestyle choice suitable for small children."

It was like a well-rehearsed dance. They had obviously done this before.

"The fact that I'm gay has nothing to do with it. It is my constitutional right to be a gay parent."

"Parent? Parent?!" Steven suddenly screamed and saliva spattered from his mouth. A drop got caught on his chin. He threw out his arms. "You don't even know what that means. A homosexual parent? Can't you hear how false those words ring? Are you stupid?"

In the rows of benches, George's mother was staring at her hands and gripping the support of the row in front of her.

George straightened his back. "No. And I wasn't stupid when I grew up either, even though you tried everything to make me think I was. None of the names you called me were true. A retard. Pervert. Dickhead. Idiot." For each word George took one small step closer. "And all the other names you called me. Ass-fucker. Homo. Faggot. Sissy." He was standing face to face with his father now. "Today those are easier to accept. Because you know what? That's exactly who I am."

His father's eyes were wild. "You were nothing but trouble!"

"I was nothing but trouble *for you*. I'm no trouble to Isaac. I'm no trouble to his family. It's you. God knows, you tried by the coarsest means to change me back then." George was trembling with anger now. "But you've lost your power over me. Emma will find a new home with us. That's all Becky wanted. So fuck off!"

“The hell I will. Us? Is that you and that... that...” He waved his hand in my direction.

I grabbed Emma harder. She was waking up in the middle of this turmoil, and we were clinging to each other.

“That what?” George provoked. “Say it!”

“That... man.” Steven retreated, finally feeling George’s rage. Apparently he had the good sense not to take that one last step. George looked like he was going to explode any second.

I knew George would never touch him. While he was growing up, his father had beat him until he could hardly walk. George wouldn’t do that to another human being; he would never hurt anyone.

George spoke, almost out of breath with restrained anger. “That man is called Isaac Hahn, and he is the one who cared so much about you that he called you to tell you about Becky. If it wasn’t for him you wouldn’t have known Becky died, much less been here in time to be with her. He believes parents should be by their children’s side. You should be grateful to him.” George tried to regain control over his breathing. He glanced in my direction and we locked eyes, and it helped him to calm down. He was much more in control when he spoke to his father again. “This won’t lead anywhere. We’ve fought like this too many times, and it’s pointless, because you never listen. Emma will come with us. End of discussion.”

“You’ll destroy her.”

“Isaac has a wonderful family, I’m sure we’ll get all the support we need. His sister is even a psychiatrist working with traumatized kids.”

“Two wrongs never make a right. We’ll provide her with a good Christian family, with parents that are normal...”

“Well,” George cocked his head. “Now she will have to do with a good Jewish family and parents that are normal.”

His father turned to look at me. “I knew it. Hahn. He’s not just a queer. He’s a fucking queer heeb.”

George’s fist flew out so fast there was no time to react. With amazing accuracy, he planted a hard punch on his father’s jaw.

“Oh, my God. George, no!” I cried out.

“Make them stop, Isaac,” Emma shouted.

A tall, wide man came in through the door behind the altar, apparently wondering about the commotion. He wore jeans and a dark shirt but I caught a glimpse of a white collar, and he fearlessly stepped in between the two men.

George's father swayed but stayed upright, holding his jaw and silently staring at George. Violence was apparently a language he'd listen to.

"What in God's name are you doing?" the pastor said, obviously upset.

George's eyes were black with anger as he continued to stare his father down. "I'm doing what I should have done years ago."

"You can't fight here. This is a room for meditation," the pastor said. "You shouldn't fight at all. I know you came from the ICU. You're not rational right now. You'll regret it later. Stay worthy of the situation, please."

George's father took a step towards George, I wondered if he would attack George, but obviously he changed his mind when George's eyes flashed from rage.

"You're so full of bullshit!" George snarled, his voice full of spite. "Insulting Isaac is too low even for you. Yes, your grandchild may grow up Jewish. And that's just something you'll have to live with."

I didn't want him to use my religion as a lever to provoke his father further. "George, please. Don't," I begged him.

"Don't worry, Isaac. I won't fall to his level," George said to me. "I think it's time for us to leave."

Steven stood, staring at George with his mouth open and his eyes desperate. George turned and put his hand in the small of my back, like he always did, and together we started walking towards to the door, me with Emma in my arms.

I heard a growl of rage behind us. I turned around and saw Steven charge towards us.

"Oh, God," I said, preparing for a blow of some kind. I'd never been hit by a man, although I'd been kicked by a horse once, and my mind started working in hyperdrive, wondering if it would feel the same. I closed my eyes and tried to protect Emma, wrapping my arms around her.

George turned us both so that he stood in between his father and Emma and me, ready to take the hit. I felt my pulse quicken. I hadn't been this scared for a long time, if ever.

“Hey, hey,” the pastor said very close to us, and I opened my eyes. I saw him grab hold of Steven before he reached George, and frog-march him in the other direction. I was thankful the pastor was a big man. “Dignity at this moment of grief, please,” he said. “I think you’d better leave,” he called to George and me. “I’ll call for security.”

Emma had bowed her head, pressing her chin to my chest. I relaxed my arms around her to a normal grip, and kissed the top of her head. “We’re okay, we’re okay,” I murmured into her hair. Never had I been more grateful. Emma started crying.

George checked that we were both okay, and turned around to speak to his father. His voice was calm and clear when he spoke. “Since you regard yourself as a good Christian, *Dad*, it’s suitable for a pastor to witness when I tell you that from now on and forever, you stay out of our lives. Emma will choose when she is old enough if she wants to meet you, but I hardly doubt it. Now Isaac and Emma and I want to be with Becky. Alone. We’ll stay half an hour. After that you can see her.”

George turned and with his hand against my back we started walking. His face was made of stone. Emma looked up and watched him, her face stricken and tracked with tears.

With his back unbroken, his shoulders straight and his head held high George met Emma’s eyes. He stroked her hair and smiled a smile at her that didn’t reach his eyes. He looked at me. “Let’s go see Becky one last time, and then we’ll do what we must to be able to go home.”

Chapter Four

Exhausted and emotionally drained, we went back to the hotel. Now there were three of us.

Emma fell asleep. I called Mom, and she had prayed for us. She told me she'd contacted her rabbi, and the members of the group "A Hundred Mothers" all got an email asking them to include us in their prayers. One hundred mothers would include us in their prayers tonight.

George sat in the armchair, staring right in front of him.

I slept for a couple of hours, with Emma clinging to me in her sleep. I don't think George slept at all. When I awoke in the middle of the night, he was sitting in exactly the same position.

I tried to communicate with George, but he was deep in thought. In the end, I managed to go back to sleep, and slept until Emma woke at six.

On Sunday morning, Dr. Julia helped us fill in the papers that would make George temporary guardian. She'd been quite right about waking the judge, and the county courthouse opened for us for a couple of hours. The judge also handed George a paper certifying Emma was allowed to come with us to Ohio, since without it we would apparently be regarded as kidnappers. After that, Dr. Julia persuaded the funeral home to open for us, and we decided on cremation. There was no use having her buried here. She was going to be sent to us via certified mail, and I knew that normally George would have made a joke about the fact that they could send your dead by mail, but everything was so heartbreakingly awful.

George was acting strangely. He was quiet, slow to react and disconnected from his surroundings. He was also indecisive; I had to make most of the decisions. I figured that once we got home and he could sleep for a couple of days, the old resolute George would return.

We were going to hire movers to clear the house in North Dakota. I spoke to the car rental; they came with a child's seat for Emma and we went to the house outside town, just to have a look and get some clothes for her. The keys were in Becky's handbag that had been retrieved from the crash site.

The house was big and even though it was full of furniture, it felt empty. Emma refused to go inside, so George went in and packed some of Emma's

clothes and toys in plastic shopping bags. I waited outside in the cold snow with Emma. She was wearing a thick jacket that the hospital gave us but eventually she agreed to come inside and show me if there were any of her coats on the clothes rack by the door. She grabbed a pink quilt jacket and a pair of boots that looked warmer than the shoes she had on. I decided the furniture in Emma's room should be sent to Cleveland; I reckoned it would make her feel at home. Everything else was to be sold.

We flew back to Cleveland and our apartment on Sunday evening—only a little more than twenty-four hours after Becky had died. The notice pad with my scribbling from when George called me for help was on the living room table exactly where I'd left it, but I wasn't the same person. It wasn't me sitting there, checking my computer for flights for Williston and comforting George on the phone two days ago. Or maybe this new person standing here with a little girl and a numb partner wasn't me. I was so confused.

Emma was restless, and sad. We spent most of the late night sitting on the couch, absentmindedly watching reruns of classic football games. We both hated football, but it felt like the only worthy thing on TV to watch. George didn't talk and I needed the distraction. I couldn't handle quiet in the apartment just then.

Emma wanted to hear again and again that Becky wasn't coming, that she died, that we would take care of her. When I'd told her for the umpteenth time, George just got off the couch, and went in to our bedroom and shut the door. He was crying, but he wasn't going to show us. At the hospital he'd let me see him cry. I didn't think he'd ever let me see it again.

I went back to work on Monday morning, only to go straight to my boss and to tell her I needed a two week leave. I'd never been so determined in my life, and told her that if she didn't like it, she could fire me.

Cathy was more than concerned for me. She hovered around me, trying to help pack the manuscripts I needed to take home anyway. "I'll email your authors explaining the situation. And I'll shoot Anne if she tries to call you while you're gone. What else can I do to help? My daughter is six. I'm sure I still have some clothes that would fit Emma, and we have one of those Danish fancy high chairs we don't use anymore. You can have a children's bed, too. It's more snug for a small child than a big bed. Do you need bed linen?" She touched my shoulder. "Isaac?"

I stopped in the middle of my attempt to wade through the largest stack of papers on my work desk. "My God, Cathy. This is for real, isn't it?"

“How’s George?”

“Low. Lethargic. I think he’s in shock. He just sits staring. Emma was still sleeping when I left, but she’s accepted me for some reason. I think George scares her in his grief.”

“What are you going to do?”

“We’ll see. Time is supposed to heal everything, right?” I said and continued digging among my papers while Cathy returned to her desk. I stopped. “Hey Cathy?” She looked over her display at me. “Thank you. And I would appreciate the clothes and that chair. And the bed, until Emma’s things arrive from North Dakota.”

“Family man,” she smiled at me.

I returned to our apartment at noon. George sat on our couch with Emma watching a cartoon, and she scooted away from him and came rushing towards me as I entered the living room. She was still in her pajamas.

“Hey. I brought some pasta from the pasta wagon. Hi, Emma.” She was back in my arms. I carried her as we went to the couch and I sat down beside George, Emma sitting on my knee. I stroked the back of his head. “Hi.” I kissed his cheek. “Okay?”

He took a deep breath and turned his head to look at me. His eyes were dead. “Yes.”

The cartoon on the television hollered. I reached for the remote and turned down the volume to almost nothing.

“It’s time for you two to get dressed. Come, Emma. Let’s see what we can find.” I got up and left George sitting on the couch alone.

When we returned to the living room, with Emma dressed in a pair of pink pants and a yellow sweater she’d chosen, George was gone and I heard the shower running. Emma helped me set out plates, and we opened the plastic containers of food. Somewhere in the back of my head, I remembered I used to love lasagna as a kid, and Emma seemed interested. She climbed up onto one of the kitchen chairs, tucking her legs under her and sitting on her knees to reach.

“What do you want to drink?” I asked her.

“Water. Mom always gives me water.

“Not milk? I bought some milk if you like.”

“No.”

“Okay.” In the fridge I found a bottle of water and filled her glass. I hesitated and brought the bottle to the kitchen table, deciding I might as well keep it there, as George needed to hydrate. I hadn't seen him eat or drink since we got home the previous day. It didn't look as if he'd been in the kitchen at all while I was at work. I sat down beside her, watching Emma eat.

“Yum,” she smacked her lips. Some of the lasagna fell off her fork and onto the table.

“That's good, heh?”

She nodded.

The spray continued in the shower. It had been turned on for more than fifteen minutes.

“I'll just go and check on George,” I said to Emma. Something told me it wasn't advisable leaving a four year old alone in the kitchen, but I had to see if something was wrong with him. “I'll be just through that door.”

The bathroom was all filled with steam. George's silhouette appeared through the shower glass door. I opened it. “Are you okay in there?”

George stood leaning his forehead against the tiled wall, letting the hot water rush down his neck and back.

“I know how hard all this is,” I said. “Come and eat with us. It will make you feel better. You're scaring me a bit, you know. You're so quiet.”

He turned off the shower, and stood naked, dripping from water. I handed him his towel, and he held it, not using it. “I'll be out. I just have to shave,” he said finally.

“All right. Emma and I are having lunch. Come when you're ready.” I didn't touch him. This George was so different, I felt like I didn't really know him. I could get that Becky's death and the showdown with his father drained him, but his energy wasn't returning. “I bought your favorite stuffed pasta shells.”

He nodded, and extremely slowly he began wiping himself dry, starting with under his armpits.

The day continued in the same way. Emma stuck to me. George collected himself and called his office; they spoke about how George could take some time off. Some cases were left to colleagues, some he had to follow up from

home. I had no idea how he would do that. He had energy only enough to get dressed. We were in a chaotic limbo.

Googling while Emma slept, I learned that Ohio didn't have any laws against same-sex adoptions, but the courts hadn't allowed it yet and I knew already we wouldn't aim to be the first to succeed in winning a case. As I kept searching, I read that single gay parents were okay. This would have to be George's call, and formally I would be Emma's father's boyfriend. It was okay. For now.

George had to wake up and start acting, though, contacting the adoption agency that would take care of the paperwork and home studies. We had to find daycare and George had to deal with Becky's life insurance.

Nothing happened.

Emma and I went out to explore the neighborhood, as we needed some air. I asked a mother walking with a stroller and found out we had a playground in the next block. The sun was shining and it was warm—much warmer than it had been in North Dakota. Emma and I had a go at the swings, and she quickly made a couple of tiny friends in an area where kids climbed the roped structure like monkeys. Emma laughed and screamed as she jumped into my arms from the highest platform. She was amazing to watch; for a while, she relaxed and showed me a side of her I hadn't seen before—a very forward kid with buckets full of energy and plenty of happy smiles.

George was asleep when we got back. At six I woke him, and we had leftovers from the pasta earlier. There was a lot left since he hardly touched his lunch.

My phone rang at seven. Cathy and her husband were waiting outside our front door with the kids' stuff. They brought the evening autumn air with them in their clothes and fresh air filled the hallway. I had never met her husband—I had never met Cathy outside work at all—and he turned out to be an ordinary, nice guy who shook our hands and expressed his condolences.

“Jim will help you put up the bed. Where do you want it?” Cathy was efficient, while her husband carried in what looked like a pile of white boards and a rectangular mattress. Our quiet apartment exploded with hustle and bustle.

“In our spare room. That's okay, George?” I looked at him. “It's perfect for Emma.”

"I'll move my desk." George was reluctantly taking part.

"No, we'll just shove it in the corner by the window, like when Mom and Rachel were here. She'll use it." Emma was standing behind me. I turned around and picked her up. "Emma, this is Cathy from my office. And Jim."

"Hi, Emma." Cathy smiled.

Emma stayed quiet, probably shy in front of the new people.

Cathy studied George for a long while with a thoughtful expression, while he was hesitating between going to the spare room and staying. Then she turned to me. "Where's the kitchen? I have the chair in the car, and several bags of clothes."

"I'll go down with you." I felt the now-familiar iron fist grasping my hand; Emma held onto me and wasn't letting me go. "You can come with us and you can carry something too," I said to her. I felt her hand relax. A bit.

"You're doing us a favor," Cathy said, as we went down the elevator. "Jim and I cleared out the attic in one hour. It's quite empty now."

"Emma's stuff will come in a couple of weeks, after George makes arrangements with the movers," I explained.

The elevator beeped to indicate we were at ground level. As we stepped out into the hallway, Emma was walking beside me, holding my hand. Cathy stopped and looked at me.

"He's in bad shape, Isaac. Really bad shape. That's not normal grief. I see it in his eyes. They're... dead. And he moves like he's not really there. I had a cousin who came home from service in Afghanistan. He looked just like that."

Emma stared up at us from her short view.

"We have enough problems as it is, and..." I looked down at Emma and stopped mid-sentence. She was listening in with a curious expression.

Cathy tilted her head and gave me a sad smile. "You'll just have to face the music and dance, Isaac. He's in need of help." She opened the front door and held it open for Emma and me to step out onto the pavement. "Call your sister. She'll know what to do."

The rest of the evening, we redecorated our home. At nine, Emma's new bed was assembled and made up with a half-size duvet and cushions, covered with what Cathy called "Rapunzel bed linen". To me, it was pink with a cartoon princess. We'd vacuumed and sorted out some of George's law books, and

removed one of the bookshelves to make the room spacious and more suitable for a kid. Cathy warned me that Emma wouldn't stay in her bed alone tonight, even though she seemed pleased with her room.

Cathy handed me a box of cocoa powder, ready to mix with warm or cold milk, saying I should gather my little family and try out the new chair in the kitchen as soon as they were gone. First some warm comforting chocolate, then hit the bed. She stroked a chord in me talking about us as a family. It suddenly became so real.

At nine thirty, we were alone again. We sat around the table with our big glasses of chocolate recommended by Cathy in front of us. Emma yawned, and I joined her, yawning too.

"I think we ought to go to bed, it's been a long day. I'll take care of Emma tonight, George."

The quiet was uncomfortable, but I ignored it. "Come with us to the playground tomorrow. I promise you will like it."

He got up. "We'll see." He headed for our bedroom after leaving the half-emptied glass on the kitchen counter. I watched his broad shoulders from behind when he moved away from us. I ought to have caught him in my arms and comforted him. But I just hadn't any strength left, physical or psychological. I'd do it tomorrow.

Emma was exhausted, so I brushed her teeth with my dentist's complimentary toothbrush. The toothpaste was far too strong for children, which I learned from reading the label—something I'd never done before. I knew nothing, absolutely nothing, about kids. It all went on instinct, and from what little I'd seen my sister Rachel do with her daughter Judith.

Emma agreed to try out her new bed, and with me sitting in the office chair by George's desk close by her bed, she tried to fall asleep. Twice she needed to hear about her mother. After that, I made up a story about the princess, or whatever, on her duvet cover. She was asleep within ten minutes.

That went easy. I was so naïve. I thought we were on track with Emma, at least.

Emma woke up at midnight, crying. George was lying in our bed beside me, but he was still fully dressed.

"Shall I go to her?" I sat up in bed and looked at George. He returned my gaze with empty eyes before he slowly rolled over to his side, turned his back towards me and stared into the wall. I interpreted that as a yes.

Emma was devastated and clung to me, arm around my neck, almost choking me. I'd left one lamp on earlier, and I sat in the dim light with her in my arms, soothing her and rocking her. She calmed down but didn't want to lose contact with me. With some difficulty, I stretched out beside her in her bed. Being six foot two in a five-foot bed didn't make it easy.

The following weeks, we started a new routine. Emma stayed close to me. We made breakfast, lunch and dinner. We went back to the playground every day. Emma seemed to enjoy that a lot. She wasn't as quiet as before, and after a week and a half, she was bubbling with words.

On Friday afternoon, as we came home from a two-hour stay in the playground, George was brooding at home, as usual.

"You can't guess what happened today," I called out to George from the hallway, as I carefully helped Emma peel off her pink jacket. Our apartment was open-plan and I could see him sitting at the kitchen table. Emma darted off to the bathroom, and I went to George and wrapped my arms around him from behind, leaning down and holding my still-cold cheek to his. "When we were going to head back home and I told her to stop playing, she came to me and stamped her foot. I'm not kidding you, she really stamped her foot, and she said, 'Go sit on that bench with the other parents and wait until I'm done.' Isn't that amazing? The *other* parents?" I smiled and squeezed George in my arms before I kissed him on his ear. "Now you have got to come with us tomorrow. It's fun. What are you doing?"

He shrugged his shoulders and pointed at the papers in front of him. "It's the papers from Becky's attorney. It's the will and some of the papers I need to sign. They'll deal with everything."

George had started speaking more the last days, but he was far from being himself again. The fact that he had opened the envelope and looked through the papers gave me hope. I desperately needed my George back.

"Good. You can get started with the adoption and contact the family center for counseling, as Dr. Julia recommended. On Monday, we'll start searching for day care and—"

George held up his hand, showing me he wanted me to stop talking, which I did.

"Isaac... Please not now."

Many people had told me to shut up during the years, but never someone I loved and who hopefully loved me. It made my heart hurt. "Then when will we deal with it?" I asked, sure he could hear the edge in my voice.

"Later. After the weekend, perhaps."

"I'm starting work on Monday. We haven't found daycare and you haven't done anything about the paperwork. There are good schools around here. I've talked to one of 'the other parents,'" I tried to bring things back to a lighter mood, "and there are at least two daycare centers within four blocks."

"No."

"No?"

"I can't deal with it right now. That means planning and I can't think ahead yet. It's like—"

"Yes? Come on, George, talk to me. I know how tough this is for all of us, but considering the circumstances I'm happy Emma's here, with us. I know we'll find a way to make this work."

He turned around on his chair and slid out of my arms. "Do you? I'm glad one of us knows how to make this work, because I have no clue."

"Of course you do. It's called one step at a time." I got up and went to the fridge, found a bottle of water. "Do you want some?" I held the bottle so he could see it.

George shook his head. "For you, it's so easy. I don't know how to take that first step. And it's been two weeks. It's all chaos."

"No, it's not. Emma and I already found some kind of daily routine, so will you. Together, remember? When will you start work?"

I had my back towards him, facing the sink, and poured myself a glass of water, almost emptying the bottle. I thought I might as well empty it, drank the last mouthful directly from the bottle and threw it in the garbage. Normally George would gently scorn me for not recycling, but he didn't react.

"I don't know. My assistant is dealing with my cases for next week. I can't see myself sitting at the desk like nothing's happened."

I turned around facing George, and rested on the counter top. "I actually think it's time to snap out of—"

"Snap out?" he said acidly, turned around and supported one elbow on the back of the chair. He raised one eyebrow looking up at me. "Snap... out?"

“Or move that little step forward. You know, in my family when someone dies, you put everything aside for a week and do nothing but mourn together. It’s called *Shiva*. Then life must start moving again. We need to start moving again. Emma needs us both now, up and functional.”

George sounded resigned. “If it hadn’t been for me, none of this would have happened. Becky would never have ended up in North Dakota if it weren’t for her taking my side against my dad and she wouldn’t be dead—”

“This is not your fault.”

“—and I don’t know anything about raising a child. I’m the queer uncle, not... her parent.”

I gaped at him, hardly believing my ears. “Hey, where did that come from? That’s not you at all. I have no idea what’s going on with you, but saying that you as her queer uncle wouldn’t do this as well as any other foster parent out there is bullshit, George. You’re her family. I think this is your dad speaking in your head, because you sound exactly like him. Now, that’s scary.”

Me and my mouth. I hadn’t meant it as an accusation, but it came out that way because I was frustrated, and confused, and a little bit scared, surprised by seeing the steady rock in my life in such pain.

The air went still. George froze.

He turned away from me, and I only saw his tense shoulders from behind. Suddenly lashing out, he smacked the flat of his hand onto the kitchen table, making a loud bang. I startled.

George’s voice was hard with suppressed anger as he spoke. “Never, ever compare me to my father.” He turned around to look at me, and his eyes had grown dark.

This time I froze. I’d never seen him mad before. Yes, of course I’d seen him irritated, who doesn’t get irritated once in a while, but I couldn’t remember ever seeing him really furious.

“Honey—” I put down the glass of water.

“Never. Is that clear to you?! Do you think I have *anything* in common with him? That... He... Now you’ve seen him—do you think I’m like him?!” George breathed heavily and clutched his hands, staring at me. Almost challenging me.

“No, George. Calm down.” I felt an urge to defend myself. “You got me all wrong. I didn’t say that. Your dad’s some kind of mad alien in a cap with a

milking machine print, in need of a straitjacket, while you are the kindest, most loving person I know. And beautiful. Of course you're nothing like him."

George ran out of steam and looked away, out through the window. The silence added to my helplessness. It felt as if he was pushing me away.

The fridge clicked and the compressor started humming as I watched George drifting off again. He had an internal dialogue he didn't want to share with me, I was sure of it.

I heard Emma fiddling with the toilet seat. The bang from when she dropped the plastic toilet cover could be heard all the way to the kitchen; she never closed the door.

I made my voice as soft and comforting as possible when I broke the silence between us. "I know you, George. So well. You're my best friend, we're not just lovers. But I can't keep up with you right now. You have to talk to me." I moved towards him, planning to take him into my arms. Physical contact was important to us, even if it was just knees touching under the table, or a hand resting on the other's shoulder as we sat together watching TV. "I'm sorry you lost Becky. I'm sorry you're hurting."

He looked at me and interrupted. "No. Save your pity," he said holding up his hand, showing me to stop. "I hate pity."

I had a knot in my gut from not knowing what to do. Whatever I did, it didn't seem to help. The frustration I felt made me involuntarily harden my voice. "For fuck's sake, George. Please let me help you."

George didn't look at me. "You grew up in your Jewish cocoon, where family is the solution to any problem. Everything is so easy for you. I'm apparently not made that way. My experiences aren't the best."

"It hasn't always been easy for me. You know that. Being gay and Jewish wasn't a walk in the park. Even if Reform Judaism is officially gay friendly, there were always people at temple questioning me, and my parents for 'allowing' me to be who I am."

"You have no idea how privileged you were... growing up in a family like yours. They fought for you. They wouldn't allow anyone to treat you differently." I heard the bitterness in his words. "Emma's going to be attacked for having gay... parents." I could hear how hard it was for him to say the word. "I'm not sure I can—"

"You? You've never had any problems standing up for yourself, or for me, or for anyone. You're the essence of out and proud."

“Don’t be naïve, Isaac. Emma’s going to be subjected to so much shit she doesn’t deserve, whatever I do.”

“We live in a modern world. There are a lot of same-sex parents. I googled.”

“How many do you know? How many of our gay friends have kids?”

“Well, no one, but—”

“Not one,” George stated drily.

“Doesn’t automatically mean we’re not going to be good parents.”

“Maybe... I don’t know. I don’t know anything anymore. It’s chaos.” George clenched his jaw and pressed his lips together. “I can’t think beyond today.”

“You need to get back to work very soon. I don’t know what a kid needs, but I see words like daycare costs and college fund dancing in front of me. We have to have your income, since mine’s a joke and my job doesn’t include dental plans for kids with gay parents, or any other benefits.” I had started to stress up about this. “The social safety net hardly exists when it comes to our new situation, you know that? Searching on Google actually made my blood boil. There are some things we need to deal with concerning Emma’s adoption and her insurances as soon as possible, or she will end up in an administrative limbo.”

He didn’t answer.

I sat down next to him, and he didn’t stop me this time. I stroked George’s hair. He started to relax, or go back into his numbness, it was hard to tell.

“About your parents showing up—I’m very sorry to have caused you pain, George. But I can’t undo that phone call.” I rested my forehead against his temple. “You come very close to hurting my feelings when you think I contacted your parents in order to hurt you, or because I’m stupid.”

“You’re not stupid.” George swallowed hard.

“No, I’m not.” I straightened up and stroked his bristly chin with the back of my hand. He hadn’t shaved today. Not yesterday either. “Let’s go to the park together next time, okay? All of us together.”

I heard the toilet flush.

“Emma will be here any second. Please, George—we’re stressed out and not really knowing what we’re doing. But we need to take action soon. Can’t you try looking into the adoption tomorrow?”

George shook his head. He looked at me, his eyes focusing on my face but not my eyes.

I squeezed his hand and tried an encouraging smile, though it wasn’t genuine. George was so incredibly vulnerable, and I had no idea how to make him regain his reason.

His eyes, red-rimmed with fatigue, focused on my smiling mouth. From somewhere, energy sparked. “Fuck it, Isaac! Do you always have to be so nice?” he lashed out, glaring at me. “You should slap my face and tell me to shape up.”

“George—”

In the corner of my eye, I saw Emma coming around the corner of the kitchen peninsula, watching us, obviously finished in the bathroom. George heard her small steps and turned to look at her. I stood up, and she came to me, staring at George, sensing the tension, and wound her arms around my leg, pressing herself against me.

George looked at her. “I’m scaring her,” he said and straightened up. He rubbed his forehead. “I’m sorry.”

He turned around and left the kitchen.

The rest of the afternoon he slept. Emma and I started assembling a doll’s house that my sister, Rachel, bought from the internet and arranged to be shipped to us, and it was interesting watching Emma’s enthusiasm. Still, my worry for George was growing by the hour. I knew I had to do something. But it’s difficult helping someone who doesn’t want help.

George woke up at five and was back to being in his quiet mood. He seemed able to focus a little on what we were doing. Emma crawled up to sit on his knee, while she explained how we had built the doll’s house and what the different rooms were for. Obviously she was so anxious to show him, she forgot to be intimidated by his constant brooding. He looked perplexed, and for ten minutes the real George shone forth. Emma’s bright voice filled the kitchen, and for the first time in two weeks I heard interest in George’s voice. When they’d finished, Emma asked me to help her carry the house to her room. When I returned to gather up all the packaging material from the doll’s house, George

was sitting at the kitchen table. He'd gotten the file with Becky's will and the papers we'd brought from Williston. But he only stared at the sheets; I don't think he read them.

The local pasta wagon saved us from starvation again, and after that we spent our Friday evening in front of the TV.

George's cell rang—I heard it sounding in the hallway, but he didn't get it. It often rang without him reacting, so angrily I went and found it in his jacket pocket. I could at least tell the poor bastard who kept calling why he couldn't expect George to answer. When I looked at the display, I was surprised because it was my mom's number.

"Hi, Mom. Why are you calling George's number?"

"Hi, honey. I got one of these new modern phones now, just like George's. Could you press the video call button? Rachel says we will see each other if you do."

"Wait, hang on." I searched the screen and there was actually a button with a video camera. I pressed it. Suddenly I saw Mom's face with the lit Shabbat candles behind her. I recognized the soft beige wall paper in the dining room at the beach house. "Hi!" I smiled at Mom.

She smiled back. "Hello, dear. It's so nice to see you." I saw my mother turn her head, looking at someone off-screen. "It works," she said.

"Is Rachel there?" I asked.

Mom looked at me again. "We're all here. Look." It was Friday, and my parents always celebrated Shabbat—the beginning of the Jewish weekly rest. My sister and her family often joined them at the Long Island beach house for the weekend. Mom turned the cell so I could see Dad, Rachel and John, sitting around the dining room table. They had a bottle of wine standing almost empty on the table, and their glasses, but they'd obviously finished dinner since all their plates were gone. She turned her cell towards the floor, and I saw Judith, sitting and patting Mom's dog.

Seeing my family, and seeing them sitting together, talking after dinner on Friday evening just like we've done hundreds of times before I moved to Cleveland, sent a pang through my heart.

"How are you doing?" Mom was back in the display.

"We're doing fine." I hoped there wasn't a special place in hell for sons who lied to their mothers. "Emma and I have been assembling the doll's house.

Emma?” I called her as I walked towards our living room and she came running, curious what I was doing. I hunched and she looked at the cell with me. “Emma, look. This is my Mom. Mom, this is Emma.”

Mom was quiet, clearly touched, her eyes wide absorbing her first glance of her... It dawned to me. Emma was her granddaughter.

“Do you want to say hi?” I said to Emma. My voice shook a little from emotion.

“Hi!” Emma parroted me.

Mom cleared her voice. “Hello, Emma. Did you like the doll’s house?”

Emma wormed her arms in front of her as if she was showing Mom the rooms in her imaginary house. “It has a bedroom and a kitchen. It doesn’t look like our kitchen, it has a wall.”

I laughed. “That’s right, we have an open solution, with the peninsula between the living room and kitchen. Your house has a big country kitchen. With a wall. Thank you, Rachel, it was much appreciated.”

Rachel’s voice came from the background. “Ask her if she wants dolls with it, or those little doll’s house bears! I’ll send them.”

Emma didn’t wait for me. “I want the bears, please.”

“Okay!” Rachel called from off-screen. “She sounds so cute,” she said in a lower voice; it must have been to her husband John, or Dad.

“Is George there? How’s he coping?”

“We’ll go and ask him.”

Emma got the cue and turned around and walked to George. I followed her and wanted to give him the phone, but he declined by holding up his hand.

“He’ll speak to you later, Mom. But he’s okay.” I turned so Mom would only see me.

“Do you want me to come to you? If you want, I can book a flight on Monday or Tuesday. I don’t want to intrude, but if I can be of any help—”

“No... We’ll manage.” I’m sure Mom would barge in, take control of the situation, maybe even turn the ignition on George. But we had to solve this on our own. That was the only way to solve it. “We just need some more time to adjust.” I smiled, hoping she didn’t see through me.

“When do you start work?”

“On Monday. I’ll probably work some from home.” I’d have to work a lot from home. Without daycare for Emma, I couldn’t be away from home ten hours every day, not with George like this.

“But if you need me, don’t hesitate to call. I’ll come.” She smiled at me. “So. Goodnight to all of you, from all of us.”

Emma grabbed my wrist and turned the phone so she could see Mom. “Goodnight!”

I heard my family laugh. “Goodnight, honey.” Mom ended the call and the screen went dark.

I put George’s phone back in his jacket pocket, but before I did that I saw he had about a hundred missed calls.

Things were going absolutely straight down the drain.

Emma fell asleep on the couch at nine, snoring like a lawnmower. I carried her to bed. When I returned, George hadn’t moved a muscle. I sprawled out on the couch with my head in his lap, and we continued watching TV. It was a show I’d seen before, with added laughter and it wasn’t funny at all. I lost interest and turned to look up at George. He met my gaze, and we looked at each other for a long time.

“I didn’t mean to get angry at you,” he finally said.

“I know.”

I pulled him down to kiss me. He was reluctant at first, his neck stiff, but I was strong. I forced him to me, one of my hands behind his neck so he was unable to resist. I wanted to kiss him, feel his lips against mine.

It wasn’t a passionate kiss. Our lips touched and he withdrew. He stared at me. He sighed deeply, and suddenly grabbed me and held me so tight I could hardly breathe. It was so in contrast to his rejecting behavior over the last couple of weeks that he surprised me, and my heart started to beat faster. I still had no idea what he was thinking. He burrowed his face in my hair.

“George? Honey, you’re so quiet again. Please talk to me.”

“I’m sorry I got mad at you.”

“I told you, it’s okay. To be honest, I’d rather see you mad than silent.”

“You know... if you want to leave me, I’d understand.” he said, his words hardly audible.

“What? No!” I exclaimed. I forced myself free so I could meet his eyes. “No. Where did you get that idea?” I sat up beside him.

He shook his head, and the empty look in his eyes tore my heart apart. He cleared his throat. “I’ll see if I can sleep for a bit.”

“George!” I tried to hold on to him as he got up, but he slipped my grip and left for the bedroom. I sat alone on the couch, with the news flickering on the TV with the sound turned down low. I took the remote, shut it off and threw the remote onto the coffee table in frustration.

At one o’clock, the now familiar nightly ritual started again. Emma cried in her sleep, and I went to comfort her. At two, Emma slept soundly again, contently snuggled up against me in her comfortable bed, as if she’d never cried at all. I got up and found my cell phone in the living room, and returned to Emma’s room, carefully closing the door behind me. Sitting on the chair by George’s desk, I dialed my sister. She answered after a minute.

“Hello?” My sister’s voice was heavy with sleep. She could probably see my name in her display. “Isaac? What’s wrong?”

“Everything, Rachel. Fucking everything.”

“You sounded so relaxed when we spoke after dinner.” Her voice was already clearer. “What’s happened?”

“Nothing. That’s the problem.”

“Nothing? I don’t understand.”

“George... He’s... He’s undergone a change in personality. He’s pushing me away. He’s pushing Emma away. He doesn’t eat, he doesn’t sleep. Well, he sleeps for hours in the afternoon but never at night.” I checked the closed door hoping he wouldn’t be able to hear me talking to Rachel. “My friend from work said he looks like her shell-shocked cousin when he came home from Afghanistan. And she’s right. He looks like a fucking zombie.”

“That’s understandable.”

“What?”

“He’s in shock, Isaac.”

“That’s all you have to say? Well, thanks. I don’t have to have a fancy diploma on my wall to figure that out myself.”

“No, no. Wait.” I heard some rustling noise in the background and a door closing. When she spoke again her voice was louder. “I don’t want to wake

Judith. We're going to the riding stable here at Long Island. She has her riding class tomorrow and she had a hard enough time going to sleep as it was from all her excitement. Isaac, you have to understand that he had to watch when the only person who ever meant something to him in his family died. It's not different from watching someone die in Afghanistan, I think that's what your friend meant. Has he got mood swings, or is he just catatonic?"

"Mostly just numb. Tonight he asked me if I was going to leave him. Rachel, I would never do that. I love him. I'm so fucking worried."

"So why did he think you're leaving him? Were you threatening to leave him?"

"No! I've been nothing but understanding, I know this is very hard for him. He seems to brood over everything." I rested my forehead in my hand. "But he won't talk to me."

"He's ashamed, Isaac. He's into something he can't control and he probably feels guilt for dragging you into it, too. George is a nice guy. He wants everyone to think it's all swell and perfect, but suddenly it isn't anymore. He's stuck you with a kid."

"But this is perfect. Just another kind of perfect."

"He might not see it that way. Are his parents totally out of the picture now?"

"Totally. I've never seen him so angry. He fucking hit his dad. In a church."

"Are you scared he'll hit you?"

"No!" I huffed. "Are you crazy?"

"I just had to ask." She went quiet.

"If his scumbag father called me all those words, I would probably hit him too. I had to deal with being called a queer heeb."

"He said that?"

"That's when George hit him."

Rachel was quiet for a while, before she said. "I believe he loves you, Isaac. He had strength to go against his dad for you."

"Then why, why is he like this? Why doesn't he let me help him? I think he frightens Emma, and he's not making things one bit better by avoiding all the

practical stuff we need to take care of right now. It's like, if he doesn't contact the adoption agency and start the process, none of this would have happened."

"Oh, Isaac," she sighed. "I wish things were easy. But they never are. You know... This is beyond your horizon now. George needs to see someone. If he were my patient, I'd tell him to go to the psychiatric emergency at your local hospital. This is how serious this is."

"No. No, no. No way, Rachel."

"I'm sorry, Isaac, but it is. He needs some kind of treatment, but I can't really say, since I haven't seen him like he is now."

"Can't you come?"

"Isaac—"

"Please, Rachel. Please. Please..." Finally I started to cry. I hadn't cried since Becky died. Something just burst in me and I broke down. The façade I'd kept up for so long was gone. It was such a relief I could cry. "Please... please..." I saw the tears drip down on my pajama pants, being soaked up by the checked flannel.

"Isaac, I... Oh, Isaac. Of course I'll come. I just have to arrange... I have patients on Monday... I can leave for Cleveland late Monday afternoon, but I'll have to return on Tuesday morning. Is that okay? It's only a day but—"

"Yes. Come," I couldn't help sobbing loudly. My sister knew everything about me—all the embarrassing things—and she was the only one I could cry in front of right now.

"I'll come. Calm down. It will be all right, Isaac," she comforted me.

"I don't want him to see me like this. He doesn't need me cracking up, too."

"It's only natural. You can't be the strong one all the time." Rachel kept her soothing tone.

"And he got so mad at me. He never gets mad at me..." My body shook from new sobs. I was crying my eyes out like a child.

She was quiet, as if she was thinking. "I'll come, and we'll speak. You will both get help, Isaac. You have to believe me when I say it will be okay."

I dried my tears, snot smeared onto my sleeve. "I believe you."

"Get some sleep, and we'll see each other on Monday."

“Okay.” I drew a ragged breath and got some more snot on my sleeve as I tried to wipe my face clean.

We said our goodbyes and hung up. I stretched out in Emma's bed beside her, because I didn't want to return to our bedroom. George would have seen that I'd cried.

Chapter Five

Rachel came out from Emma's bedroom—obviously Emma was asleep. She shut the door, just leaving a small opening so Emma would hear us if she woke up.

Emma had instantly taken to Rachel when she arrived, and remembered that Rachel had given her the doll's house. I thought there were supposed to be dolls in a doll's house, but Rachel had brought a whole set of doll's house teddy bears and Rachel and Emma had been playing together. I saw Rachel. She wasn't only playing. Her mind was working. Her psychiatrist mind.

She stopped in the middle of the living room and stood looking at George sitting on the sofa, his elbows on his knees, his forehead in his hands, eyes closed.

"Now we can talk," Rachel said gently.

Hesitating for a second on where to sit, she got down onto her knees on the soft carpet in front of George. Her kneecaps made a cracking sound. Slowly she reached for George's hands. He stirred when her skin touched his, but she caught his hands in hers in a soft grip, and moved them away from his face. He raised his head, meeting her gaze.

"George..." she cleared her voice, "it's starting to get a bit out of hand. You're in need of help."

George interrupted her, his voice tired. "Is this a 'there is always a purpose in life for everything' speech? I don't think I can take one more of those."

"No, George. I won't... I'm not talking about help in that way. Have you had periods of depression before?" Rachel asked. "Experience of ASD?" George looked confused. "Acute Stress Disorder?" Rachel explained.

"You think I'm crazy?" George asked quietly, and I suddenly realized by the tone of his voice that he was scared.

"No, George." She sighed. "These things happen. Anyone could feel like you do. Sudden death in a family is traumatic, and if you perhaps had a previous history of depression, it's more likely to—"

"No," he said, interrupting her. "No problem with depression, never. And not that other thing either, whatever you called it. I'm not mad."

“Hm. Well, that’s good. But right now, you will have to deal with the fact that you aren’t really feeling like yourself.”

“Maybe this is exactly who I am.”

“I’m sorry to break this to you, George, but you follow the classic stages for a patient diagnosed with ASD—Acute Stress Disorder—that may, or may not, develop to a full blown PTSD—Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. It’s nothing you can decide to get or not, it just happens to some after a really bad experience. You don’t have to be a soldier at war or in a hijacked plane, like most people think when they hear PTSD. Losing a loved one can be enough to trigger your feelings to go haywire. It’s often a once-in-a-lifetime experience that is quite frightening. And it’s definitely not the person you really are. Don’t ever think that.”

She let go of George’s hand and leaned back, folding her legs to sit cross-legged in front of us.

“I can’t feel anything,” George whispered.

“That’s a part of it. So is the inability to sleep at night. You have to know Emma is doing fine; it took me less than half an hour to be fully certain she will get through this as a happy little girl. It’s you we’re worried about.”

“Isaac doesn’t deserve any of this.” George hung his head, avoiding looking at me. “I... screamed at him. He’s trying everything—”

“I don’t think you should be that considerate towards Isaac. He’s your partner, he’s the person who loves you and you should trust him. You can yell at him, rage, let it out when you need to. He can stand it,” Rachel said. “At least until you feel better.”

George shrugged and shook his head slowly. “No. Never. I won’t do that to him. I... I need to be kind. Everything else is wrong.”

“You hit your father,” Rachel said.

“Yes. And I hate myself now. I promised myself I would never, ever hurt someone on purpose. Not even him.”

I huffed. “He had it coming.”

“Isaac, George doesn’t see it that way,” Rachel said. “He has more experience from abuse than you can imagine and he will never run the risk of doing the same to someone. It’s just a golden rule, and he broke it. He violated his principles. On top of that, you apparently know what kind of father George

is used to. Don't you think George is scared he'll turn out the same now with Emma?"

"He would never!"

"You know it, but I don't think George is that convinced right now."

"I... never thought that way," I said. He'd lost Becky, the only real family he had. I thought that was enough to make him like this, but I should have known better. I guessed everything bad that ever happened in his life now came chasing after him all at once—I had some clues to how the human mind worked, after all. Suddenly, I felt so ashamed for telling him to snap out of it, and I felt shame for not being enough for him, not strong enough or wise enough to help him.

I watched Rachel shift so she got closer to George, holding his hands again. "You can get angry and frustrated in front of Isaac, he'll cope, I promise you. Let him help you, don't spare him your grief. Do you think that because you suddenly changed some of the rules in your relationship, Isaac's going to be unhappy and leave you?"

"Shit, Rachel, you're not making things better," I said. I turned to George. "And I'm not unhappy. Well, I am, because it hurts me to see you this way."

"Isaac," George spoke to me like a broken man. "Everything she's saying is true."

Rachel squeezed his hands. "Even though you and my brother have been partners for many years, I don't know you that well, George. I know you have been trying to avoid us and I guess family isn't on the top of your ranking list considering what you've experienced. But it can be something good. Very good."

I started to move off of the couch. "Maybe this is more a talk between the two of you now?" I asked, looking at George. "If Rachel's going to turn into the professional psychiatrist, maybe you don't want me to listen in."

"No. Stay," Rachel said. "I'm not licensed for Ohio anyway, so this is purely me helping you. But I want to... Isaac, have you ever told George you always wanted a family? That it was the only thing you had a hard time accepting about being gay, that you probably never would have your own kids? Or have you only told me that?"

"We've hardly spoken at all these past weeks."

“Well, it might be the right time to talk about it now. It would make things a little bit easier for George if he had basic facts.”

George looked at me. For the first time in weeks I saw life in his eyes.

“So, I’ve already contacted a colleague here in Cleveland. I’ve made an appointment for you, George. Tomorrow,” Rachel said.

George scoffed. “I’m not crazy,” he said again.

“No, you’re not crazy. You just need a little professional help to see what wonderful things you have in front of you. Will you go?”

“Do I have a choice?”

“No, not really.”

George only nodded.

“Good. I think it’s the right decision. You might be asked to consider medication. Don’t turn it down.”

Rachel’s words made George shy away a little, leaning back.

“Happy pills?” I asked. “Is that necessary?”

“With medication you might get an easier recovery process. There are many modern antidepressants without major side effects. Combined with therapy, you’ll be back on track. I won’t promise you soon, but eventually.”

George groaned. “This is so fucking hard.” He hid his face in the palms of his hands. “This is not me.”

“It will be alright, George. I promise. We’ll all stand by you.” Rachel pulled him into a hug. “You’re not broken. Only a little battered.”

Rachel let go of him, and George seemed to be exhausted as he got up from the couch. “I’ll be off to bed.”

“That’s probably a good idea for all of us,” I said. “I promised Emma she could go with us to the airport tomorrow and watch the take-offs from the observation deck.”

Rachel went to the bathroom while I checked on Emma, and George put all the lights out. He was standing in darkness as I went to the kitchen with some glasses we’d left on the coffee table.

“Are you okay, honey?” I asked George.

“No... I’ll do what she says.”

“Good. Don’t ever think I’m going to leave. I love you, you know.”

“I know.”

“Yeah. Let’s go to bed. I’ll practice some TLC if you like? A good cuddle?”

George looked at me intensely. “You really wanted kids?”

“I was planning to tell you. I just didn’t know when I could do it without you thinking I said it only to make you happy.”

“It does make a big difference.”

After brushing our teeth and saying goodnight to Rachel, I made him cuddle up against me, trying my best to give him some of my warmth. His arms were present around me, but he wasn’t. Not really.

Chapter Six

George went to the psychiatrist the day after. He wanted to go without me, saying it was better I stayed at home with Emma so we wouldn't need to call a babysitter she didn't know, and I accepted that argument. It was the first time he'd left the apartment in two weeks, and he actually managed to eat something and call for a cab himself before he left. That alone was progress to me.

He was away for two hours, and I was so relieved when I heard the key in the door as he returned. Both Emma and I held him as he told me his doctor had very quickly diagnosed him with severe depression, most possibly a part of an acute stress disorder caused by the traumatic experience from Becky's death. Rachel's diagnosis had been absolutely correct.

The doctor had talked about a lot more, but that was what he remembered. He'd been put into a two-month-program, with scheduled therapy twice a week for the first five weeks, and thereafter once a week, and then for the coming four months once every two weeks. There were no quick-fixes.

The doctor added medication, and I learned that Rachel's talk about no side effects was just bullshit. The first week after he started to take his meds he was even worse, and one day he didn't even get out of bed.

George arranged with one of the other partners at his firm to take on his cases. They all felt for George and wanted to help him. I'd heard law firms were eat what you kill or you're out, so I was grateful for their kindness.

Three weeks later, small things started to change. George mustered up all his strength and got the ball rolling with the adoption, and together we started searching for a suitable preschool. He found pleasure in cooking again, for which both Emma and I were eternally grateful. He slept at night and after four weeks, he started working again, even though he only spent half of the day at the office and worked from home the rest of the time. I suspected his colleagues only gave him simple cases that wouldn't get too burdensome to him and would make him feel still on top of things.

If George's colleagues fully understood our situation, my boss didn't. After two weeks, I had to return to work, and she only wanted results, so I had to bite down and wade through my neglected assignments. My authors shouted with joy when they heard I was back, but I worked mostly from home so I could be with Emma and keep an eye on George.

Mom and Rachel both came to help us the week George started working. We had found a good preschool, but Emma still had to wait a week to start. I could go back to working full time, while they looked after Emma.

It was the second time Mom visited us. She came once, when we had just moved in together—a long time ago. George had called the visit “the visitation” because no Jewish mom could let their kids move in with someone without approving them. Or so George thought. My mom wasn’t at all like that, and she was wise enough to understand George had some family issues, so she didn’t push. Step by step, he’d learned that my parents thought of him as their son-in-law, and not a gay abomination, like his own father. The world didn’t have to be that way. To my surprise and utter delight, George started to feel relaxed around Mom.

We never abbreviated our names in our family; we weren’t Zac, Raich, Dave and Debby to each other. We were always Isaac, Rachel, David—my dad—and Debrah. Or Mom and Dad, but George didn’t feel comfortable with going that far.

Rachel and Mom took Emma to the zoo and the museums, something I hadn’t had energy for. Mom brought Grandma’s handwritten cookbook, and she and Emma spent a lot of time in our kitchen. I’d called Emma “Munchkin” for some reason from the very beginning—it always felt like it suited her, and now I knew exactly why. She could munch through every cookie she baked if she was allowed, and then some.

Rachel and George spent a lot of time together. I know they talked about the program he was in. One evening, Rachel came and hugged me when I was doing the dishes, saying George had told her every shitty detail about his parents’ and Becky’s part in all this. She’d never understood just how bad things had been. Apparently, George’s therapist had dug into that part of his life, and opened the door to the most painful memories from when he grew up. I just told Rachel we never discussed it—what George told his therapist stayed between them—but he was starting to talk to me about his parents. And he let himself be loved and taken care of by my mother, which was a big step for George who mistrusted all family.

Mom filled the freezer with food. On the Friday she baked challah, the traditional Jewish bread for Shabbat, and we celebrated a light version of the beginning of the weekly rest after sunset. Mom wasn’t picky; she said it was enough for her we were together, we didn’t have to perform all the ceremonies and blessings. I guessed she wanted to give George some other time to get

acquainted with Jewish traditions, and not while he was struggling with finding a secure foothold in his own daily life.

Mom even forced George and me to go on a “date night” on that Saturday. It was a big moment for both of us, even though we only caught a movie and went out for a coffee at the local café.

When we got back, Emma slept, and Mom too, in the cot we’d managed to squeeze in beside Emma’s little bed. Rachel slept on the couch; she was never fussy, and before we all went to bed, we sat talking at the kitchen table. I watched George and Rachel, the two most important people in my life before Emma stepped in, talk like old friends. I felt proud that I could give George a family he trusted, something he needed desperately.

That night, when everybody was asleep except George and me, I tried to arouse some enthusiasm for sex. It turned out George’s meds helped raise his self-esteem, but other parts of him definitely had problems rising. I didn’t care. All I cared for was the tenderness in his kisses.

Emma probably sensed Mom’s genuine love for her because they bonded immediately. Mom suddenly had a natural place in our little family. She was Emma’s grandmother beyond a doubt, and she was also George’s greatest supporter. Our family was growing.

When Mom and Rachel returned to New York, Mom had turned the ignition key; the spark in our lives was back.

Emma thrived, and some of the weight was lifted off George’s back as he saw how happy she was. Little by little, our life settled and the day George smiled a genuine smile at me for the first time since we got home from Williston, it was as if spring finally arrived after an endless winter.

We found a good preschool for Emma. Not optimal: there were no other same-sex parents. I told myself it would work out just fine; that we were living in the twenty-first century, and trusted their anti-discrimination policy, which I read on their website.

George had ups and downs, even though he was steadily working up to the surface again. One evening after putting Emma to bed, I found George on the couch, zapping the TV channels. Sports, news, sitcoms. Channels flashed by as he pressed the remote mechanically, never remaining on one channel for more than fifteen seconds. I went over to him, carefully removed the remote from his grip, and turned the TV off. Quietly, I put it on the coffee table in front of the couch. He didn’t object.

“Bad day at work?” I asked.

“We lost a case. I put a lot of work into it and I’m not that good at dealing with setbacks. Yet. Emma asleep?”

“Out like a light. As usual. I thought we might take a day at the zoo tomorrow. Will you come with us?” I sat down on the couch beside George. He pulled me close—it never ceased to amaze me how well we fit together. We were about similar height, so as I pushed him back and rolled over on top of him, our groins aligned as well as our lips, as they met in a gentle kiss. I didn’t need to keep my weight off him. He was strong and bulky and supported me.

“I haven’t been since I was a kid,” he said. “It would be fun. Yes.”

“Really?”

He lifted his head and kissed me. “Really.”

“We’re definitely heading in the right direction now. You’re feeling better?”

“Much better. It’s like someone pulled away a dark veil and I see clearly again. Maybe the medicine made a difference. Or time. Or you.”

“Me?”

“Always you. All good things always come from you. You just have to be around and things get better. What the hell would I have done without you?”

I laughed. When George told me just how much he loved me, something in me often cut to joking. “Got some random guy from the internet? I know there are several guys out there who’d love you to give them a call. Doctors, cooks or even daycare staff guys. I’m sure you could have found several that were both sexy and useful.”

He crooked his arm around my neck and pulled me against him so hard that even though I resisted, I had no chance to escape. “Idiot. I think ‘Uncle Hahn’ should never consider a career having his own advice column, or he’d be sued for malpractice.”

“Do you think it’s even possible to sue advice columns?”

We battled for dominance, even though I knew George would call it quits the second I asked him. I tried to push away while not crashing into his nose by mistake. I laughed, just feeling happy George was playful again. I relaxed and put all my weight on him, leaning my forehead against his. “There. Better?”

“Perfect.” He moved his arm from my neck and let his hand slide down my back and down to my ass. “Come. Let’s go to bed.”

George rose and I slid off him. He took my hand as we went to the bedroom, pulling me behind him. I closed the door and we both stretched out on our bed.

George's hand wormed beneath the waistband of my sweats, cupping my ass cheek, his palm so warm and inviting. I felt my dick stir with optimism.

"It's been a long time since we fucked. You're turning me on." We hadn't had sex since before the accident. Eight weeks. Almost two months. Hardly any kisses either—mostly brotherly hugs, pecks on the cheek, or George's standard, quick kiss on my lips before parting for work and school and grocery shopping and... I ground against him. "Do you want to?"

George didn't answer. Instead he kissed me so devotedly it made my toes curl. "Yes," he said breathlessly, as he released me.

"Wait, I'll lock the door." I slowly scooted off George, and off the bed. With my sweats now tenting, I went out into the living room and peeked into Emma's room. She was fast asleep. Returning to our bedroom, I quietly closed our door and turned the lock.

"I've never used the lock before. I didn't even know it worked," I said, as I went back to bed and crawled back on top of George. "I hope she won't wake up and find she's been locked out."

George had removed his clothes while I was gone and lay naked waiting for me.

"Come here." He cupped my face and pulled me down, nuzzling my neck. "I can smell your wonderful scent again. It was like all the colors and smells disappeared there for a while. All gray, all scentless. Tasteless, too." His lips captured mine and with burning passion his tongue played with me, teased me until my dick was hard and pleaded to be touched. Suddenly George pulled away, his lips red and swollen. "Get your clothes off."

He succeeded in opening the knot in my sweats, as I pulled my T-shirt over my head. Awkwardly, I managed to slide the sweats off and returned to striding his hips. My dick stood hard and pointing at him. I grabbed both our dicks in my hand. He wasn't fully erect yet.

"God, that's so wonderful," I said as I began to stroke us. "I'm happy you're feeling better."

George looked intensely into my eyes. I leaned forward and kissed him, arching my back to make room for both our dicks and my fist in between us. He

shuddered from pleasure as I slowly kissed his chin and his collarbones, before heading downwards to kiss his abdomen. Passing my hand from our joined dicks along his stomach, I gently pinched one of his nipples, and I bent down to take him in my mouth as I sucked his half-hard cock. I heard him grunt.

“Good?” I let go and looked up at him along his abdomen.

“Yes, but...”

“But?”

“I’m sorry Isaac. I...” His voice quiet. “My... it doesn’t...”

“Don’t worry, it’s the first time. Don’t feel stressed.” He held his hand on top of mine as I encircled his weak erection and caressed it. “Don’t hide it, honey.”

“Maybe it’s the meds, or...”

“Do you feel horny?” I asked.

“Yes. Oh, yes.”

“Well, that’s the main thing. The rest are just details.”

“Oh, Isaac. How do you stay so positive?”

“Because I have you.” I went up again and kissed him with tenderness. Erection or no erection, his kiss quickly became heated again. I felt him relax as I rested my elbows above his shoulders and met his kiss even harder. As always, George was the best kisser.

I rutted my hard erection against him. Again and again I humped his groin. I moaned. I could do this until I came, and it wasn’t far off.

“Get the lube,” George whispered.

I pulled myself up on my arms and without losing the contact between us, I reached for the lube on the nightstand. I snapped the lid open, poured some in my hand and reached for his dick. He stopped me before I had the chance to grab him. Instead he steered my hand towards my own shaft, making me grab it, coating it with lube.

“No. I want you inside me.” George’s voice was determined.

“We never...” I breathed. The thought of fucking him, pressing into him, expecting tight velvety heat, made my heart race. I swallowed loudly.

“I know. Don’t you want to?” he asked quietly.

I looked deep into his eyes, and my voice became dark and full of lust. “Oh yes.”

Without words, George took my waist and indicated I should move away from him, and when I did, he turned around and got on his hands and knees.

“No,” I said. “I want you to face me.”

He shook his head. “It’s been a long time. Easier this way. Just go slow, okay?”

I kneeled behind him on the bed with my thick and veined cock pointing towards him. I felt nervous—I hadn’t topped for a long time, not since long before George, and he played me like a virtuoso, so I’d never felt the urge to switch.

Suddenly, everything was sound and touch and sensations. I heard my own heartbeat in my ears.

“I’ll be careful. This is... this is... Oh God, George.” I brought my lubed hand to his entrance, swiping my finger up and down between his cheeks. He spread his legs wider and rested his chest on the mattress with a sigh. “I think my eyes might explode from looking at you like this.”

As I reached for the lube again, I leaned over his back and my dick touched his cheeks. Hyper-sensitive, it electrified me. With a good deal more lube than before on my index finger, I circled his hole, aiming to open him up, but his muscles contracted, and I met resistance.

“You sure?” I whispered, as if I was interrupting by talking during a sacred ritual.

As George felt my finger against his puckered hole again, he suddenly grunted and pushed against me. Without effort, I was touching him deep inside and it made him shudder. My dick twitched violently, almost painfully, in response.

“More, more,” he rocked against me. He’d relaxed, and a second finger joined the first easily. “Holy fuck,” George gasped quietly. He pressed his forehead against the bed. I moved in and out, and as I touched his gland he gave a start.

“Fuck, that’s good.”

“Ready for me?” I asked.

“Very.”

I slowly withdrew my fingers and walked closer on my knees. Gripping George's trim waist with one hand, I positioned the head of my dick against his entrance. "Together," I whispered.

With a low moan, he pushed against me as I pushed into him. I stopped halfway, even backed up a little, to let him get acquainted with me. I breathed hard as I leaned forward and bit his shoulder. "You're mine now. All mine." I pushed again and rocked back and forth, not yet gaining more access. "You're so tight. There's hardly room for me."

"Wait," he said. "Just wait."

I stilled and kissed his shoulders, nipping at his neck. "I love you. And this is amazing. You're amazing. I see myself entering you, and it's all so perfect, so..." Suddenly a wave of softness let me in and I sank to the hilt. "Amazing."

I straightened my upper body to get better leverage. I moved out. And carefully back in. My dick was caressed by his tight warmth, teasing the top of my dick at the entrance before I pushed in hard all the way, feeling my balls crush against his perineum. I was in charge of his pleasure as well as mine. It was a feeling of power, but also humbleness at the thought that of all gifts in life, George was the greatest.

I circled my hip as I entered again.

"Oh, shit. There. There," George cried out, muffled by the mattress.

I must have found his spot and did the same movement again. I pulled him up against me so I'd get the right angle every time. George hissed between his teeth.

Losing some of my surface politeness, I sped up, becoming stronger. I lifted my hand, gripping his shoulder and pushing myself forcefully against him with every stroke. Every time we met, we both grunted and moaned, the sensation overwhelming. My brain told me to keep it down, but I couldn't. I slammed into him, again and again.

"You're going to fucking make me come, Isaac," George gasped.

"What?" I didn't think he could, he was only semi-erect. It threw me off-balance, but only for a second.

"Harder. Don't stop. Please harder! Oh, fuck. I'm going to come." George's breath caught, he bucked and I felt his inside pulsate around my shaft. The rhythmical pressure from his heat made my balls draw up, and I wailed as his

orgasm pulled me with him, making me fill him with my come so hard I saw stars.

He fell forward, and I went with him. Panting, I lay on top of his back, my dick still inside, shivering from small aftershocks.

George took a ragged breath. "Why the hell haven't we done this before?" His voice sounded almost upset.

I chuckled from contentment. "Takes new challenges to make new experiences." I kissed the ridge his skin made at the nape of his neck, as he lay with his arms stretched out, reaching from one side of the bed to the other. I pulled out slowly. As soon as I'd left his welcoming channel, George rolled over onto his back, caught me in his arms and kissed me.

"Oh, Lord." George sighed, satisfied, as he pressed his forehead against my head, one hand in my hair.

"You can say that again."

"I think I'm on the mend." His eyes sparkled as he looked at me.

I kissed his cheek and stroked his hair. "You sure are. Thank God you are!"

"I haven't been hard once for weeks. But you made me come anyway."

I stretched out my arms in front of me and spoke in falsetto. "Oh, praise the Lorrred. It's a miracle!"

George actually giggled. He sounded a bit like Emma. "Things are going to get better from now on, aren't they?" he asked.

"Much, much better. And now, after discovering this, I think life will be spectacular." I rested my forearm behind my head for support and threw him a glance. "You have the hottest ass in history."

"Tomorrow I'll have the hottest *sore* ass in history."

"You just need more practice, that's all."

"Well, you should know." He nudged my temple with his nose. The day-old stubble on his chin grazed against the stubble on my cheek, making a dry scraping sound. "You're the expert."

I smiled, looking up at the ceiling, hardly visible in the dark room. "You are feeling better. That's so obvious. You can even be wonderfully wicked. Here, take my T-shirt."

"It's too small for me."

“No, smart guy, to wipe your ass. You can use it to wipe my dick, too. It’s all my come anyway.” Thinking he’d clean me from come and lube made me slightly aroused.

“Is that some kind of Jewish tradition? ‘Never mix different men’s come on the same garment’?”

“Nah. As long as it’s between partners it’s okay,” I said.

“You’re pulling my leg now, aren’t you?” George carefully wiped my come away from both of us. We’d have to do laundry tomorrow, because his come was already gone, soaked into the bed sheet.

“Yes, of course I am. So, I’ll unlock the door and check on Emma.” I got my sweats back on but didn’t bother about finding a new T-shirt. The lock on the door opened easily, and I tiptoed through the apartment. She slept just as heavily as when I checked on her last. She hadn’t even moved.

When I got back, George had slipped into his flannel pajama bottoms and T-shirt. I got back in bed and caught him in my arms, pulling me against him.

He turned to lie on his side alongside me, his body touching me from chest to foot. He settled in, with his head on my shoulder, his arm resting on my chest. “So, monkeys and grizzlies tomorrow?”

“Absolutely. And some burgers and milkshakes to celebrate that you’re back in the land of the living.” I regretted my comment immediately. I lowered my gaze and looked at him. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to—”

“No, Isaac. Speak of death and destruction, depression and post-traumatic stress all you like, I can deal with it now. I think I can, at least.” He smiled at me. “But... burgers and shakes are another matter entirely. I have our first date night in vivid memory. Strawberry milkshakes are still clearly associated with vomiting. So, we skip the shakes.”

“Maybe you should talk about that with your daughter. She will say, ‘Please, please, please,’ until your brain burns.”

George just laughed and I held him tighter. I loved when he laughed. It made me feel whole.

Chapter Seven

July 24, 2011

In May 2011, we packed up our apartment and got on the plane, leaving Cleveland for good. George's law firm was expanding, and being one of the equity members he had a say. New York was appointed as the suitable city for setting up the new office. I'd quit White Publishing, hoping to get a new job as an editor in New York.

Emma, as usual, was flexible as a reed, always bending and adjusting to new situations. She loved New York. We'd found an apartment in Chelsea, overlooking The High Line, an old elevated railway track that had been converted to an urban garden with hundreds of different plants. Looking out through the windows, we had our own green oasis four stories down. When seeing the apartment for the first time, Emma ran around enthusiastically, checking out the empty rooms. As soon as the realtor left us alone for a couple of minutes, George had kissed me, standing in front of the big living room window, and it felt like home. We both knew we had to make an offer.

The biggest reason for moving was getting closer to my family. Rachel lived in Brooklyn and we could get on the Long Island train and be at my parents' Long Island beach house in little over an hour. No more arrangements with flights.

The other reason was schools. I'm not sure Cleveland was ready for us. We tried a couple of preschools. At the second, a group of her teachers had referred to Emma as "that gay couple's kid", and the condescending tone made it pretty clear they weren't just speaking in a matter-of-fact way. George tried to convince the principal to talk to the teachers, but nothing changed. Being the only same-sex parents in school, we had little power, and we didn't want to push too hard, reading them the law of equal treatment, and risk things getting even worse. Emma, who had turned five and was curious about everything, came home one day asking me what exactly a sodomite was, if it was something like a termite. That was the last straw. Plans for moving began the next day. New York had to be better for us. And it was. Her elementary school in Chelsea turned out to be wonderful. There were several gay parents and a large, working, tolerance program. Emma thrived.

Emma started calling George "Dad" quite early. First time she said it we both thought it was a slip of her tongue, since all the other kids were crying for

their dads at the playground, but the second time it happened it was definitely no mistake. He had a hard time not showing his emotions that day.

I just continued to be “Isaac” to her.

The fact that it was Friday, and we had taken the day off to go to my parents' for the weekend, put all three of us in a good mood. The sky was clear blue, and the heat wave that pestered us in Manhattan would be left behind, making for a wonderful reprieve by the sea.

George entered the kitchen, fresh from the shower and still in his bathrobe as he prepared the coffee maker. George had put our shiny capsule machine away, claiming it was wrong to use so much aluminum for one cup of coffee, just to throw it in the trash. Having responsibility of Emma made him start thinking about the environment. Her preschool had a visit by a guy dressed up in a garbage cart suit, teaching the kids about recycling, and now she nagged me every time I threw a bottle in the trash. For a time, George recycled the capsules, then he stopped using them entirely.

“The train leaves at one. I have to finish up a thing at work, and then I'd like to stop by the bakery and get some of Debrah's favorite pastries...” George wrinkled his forehead. “Some what's-it-called.”

I laughed. “Rugelach. Not what's-it-called. Mom will love if you do that. D'you want some pancakes? Emma's finally managed to teach me how to make them so that they don't taste like old leather. Mom taught her. Do you know how embarrassing it is having a five year old teach you to cook?”

George did all the cooking. I was a kitchen disaster.

“You're making pancakes on a Friday?”

“Yeah. It's such a nice day and...” I pulled up my sweats that were beginning to get a bit big. I could use a more a substantial breakfast.

“You won't get upset if I say no? I have to start thinking about what I eat for a while. Me and the scale aren't buddies right now.” George put an unbleached coffee filter in the holder and started measuring out the coffee.

“Of course not. But you're not putting on weight, just muscle from training. You have a goddamn gym one story down from your office.”

“Yeah? Then the scale is a big fat liar, or I'm turning into Popeye. I'm not like you. You're slim and beautiful, no matter what you eat. I seem to puff up like a balloon.” He finished filling the coffee grounds and pushed the on button.

“You’re like a horse. If you don’t get fed every four hours, you get colic. Or wither away.”

“So what? We’ll do our *Laurel and Hardy* impersonations,” I said.

“Please, don’t joke about it. At eighteen, I was so thin that if I stuck my tongue out, I could have passed for a zipper. Now with domestic bliss... the bliss seems to stick around my waist. And don’t look so goddamn smug.”

“I don’t look smug. I just want to try that zipper.” But I did look smug, or at least I tried to. “I’m not going to feed you unless you want me to.”

George came over to me, kissed me, and whispered against my mouth. “Sometimes you don’t know what you’re insinuating, do you?”

“Oh, yes I do,” I smiled against his lips.

Emma entered, fully dressed and ready to go to her grandparents’. Seven o’clock on a Friday morning and already alert. She skipped up to her Danish designer child’s seat. We’d kept Cathy’s chair and adjusted it to fit Emma’s now astonishing height of forty-three inches.

George and I let go of each other, and he went to get the coffee mugs.

“You want pancakes?” I asked her.

“Are they like Grandma’s?” she asked suspiciously.

“Yeah, exactly like Grandma’s.”

“Yessss!” she said, pleased. Always the little muncher.

Emma found her crayons and some paper on the kitchen table. I leaned back against the counter, fiddling with the spatula, waiting for the pancakes to finish. George was moving around getting bagels, his low fat cream cheese and some cucumber, and putting it all on the table. Only George could look sexy in his white knee-length bathrobe, with his beautiful, hairy shins sticking out under the hem. And barefoot. Always barefoot. He had such beautiful feet...

“I think you have to stop watching me, and pay attention to the pancakes,” George said with his back towards me.

“Please, don’t burn them,” Emma said.

“No, I won’t.” Reluctantly I turned towards the stove and checked the pancakes.

“Where do cows go on Saturdays?” Emma said.

I turned and looked at George, and George looked at me. "What did you say, honey?" I asked her.

"Where do cows go on Saturdays?" she repeated.

"I don't know," George answered. "The car wash? No, the cow wash. They need to get clean for church on Sunday."

I chuckled, but the answer didn't impress Emma.

"No, you silly. They go to the mooooooovies!"

We both laughed at her imitation of a cow mooing, and I adored her for calling George silly. No one else could get away with it.

"Where did you learn to tell funny stories?" I asked.

"My new teacher is really funny." She grabbed the box of crayons, got a white piece of paper, and started drawing.

"Would you like Rachel and Judith to come to us on Sunday, Munchkin?" I asked her. "You could show Judith your new bed. I bet she doesn't have one with a canopy."

"No, I'll show her my doll's house. It has a toilet," Emma said proudly, and I tried to stifle a laugh.

George swept up behind me and put his chin on my shoulder as he reached to get the maple syrup. He leaned in close, talking quietly so that only I would hear. "Have you seen how all the dolls are so anatomically incorrect? It vexes me that they need something to piss in when there's nothing to piss with." He swept off again with the syrup before I had a chance to reply, and I chuckled.

"Why do sheep cross the street?" Emma continued telling us her funny stories.

"I don't know. Why do they?" George said. I imagined the biggest part of the fun for her was to have us guessing.

"They're going to the baaaa-bers!" Emma giggled, and when she saw us laughing too, she laughed even more. There was so much laughter in that kid. Now that George was back on track, he too had regained his constant inner smile. We were happy.

The kitchen was bright in the morning light, and George continued setting the table for breakfast.

"Can we go to the museum and see dinosaurs?" Emma asked George.

“What do you say, Isaac? You want to see the dinosaurs?”

She never got bored with the stuffed animals and dinosaurs at the Museum of Natural History. George and I actually enjoyed it too, though we were more fascinated by the Human Origins gallery, which Emma found a bit scary and wanted to leave immediately.

“If we go,” I turned to Emma and saw hope lit up in her eyes, “I said *if*, you will promise not to blackmail me in the museum shop. You have enough stuffed toys.”

“You can’t make a five-year-old make that promise, Isaac,” George said, shaking his head. “You’ll just have to open your wallet. Again. Besides, who did the heavy shopping in the museum shop last time? You can’t blame Emma alone for filling our home with unnecessary stuff.”

“If you mean my mug, I really needed one. No unnecessary stuff.” I got up and went to the fridge to get some more milk. I was returning to my chair when Emma spoke.

“Is it okay if I have a mug too then, Papa? I want the one with the whale,” she said, looking at me with begging eyes.

I almost dropped the milk carton. It was the first time she referred to me as “Papa” and the word slammed into me with full force.

“And Dad, what mug should he buy?” I tested her, unable to believe I had heard it right. If she mixed it all up I would find out now.

“Dad can have the owl.”

“You surely know the shop.” I put down the milk, my heart pounding. “We’ll buy the whale and the owl when we go next time.”

“Yay!” She clapped her hands.

“So, Papa,” George said to me, dragging out the word and peering at me. “Are you pleased with your new name?” He stroked my back.

“I’m extremely pleased with my new name.” Smiling at Emma, I said, “Do you want to call me Papa?”

She blinked at me in surprise, truly confused. “But you *are* my Papa...”

“Yes. I’m your Papa,” I confirmed, feeling a lump forming in my throat. I was trying to keep my emotions at bay, and not burst into tears and make a fool of myself. “Honey, are there kids at school who have a Papa?” I asked Emma. “I thought most kids around here called their fathers ‘Dad’.”

Emma was unaware of the emotional explosion she'd caused. "Liza has a Papa. I have a Dad and a Papa."

"Oh, so that's where it came from," I said. I turned to George. "Liza's from Atlanta."

"So. Officially, we're now Dad and Papa," George smiled.

I looked at Emma and recognized her eager expression. She had more to tell us. "Liza says she wants to have two fathers too, because her mom makes her eat her peas and her papa doesn't, so I said if she had two dads she would never have to eat peas. I never have to eat peas." She hardly took a breath between the words, and her smile expressed satisfaction when she was finished.

"Oh, my God," George said, chuckling, but trying to hide it from Emma by turning his head, looking at me. "That's simple logic for you."

"Aren't the pancakes ready yet? I'm hungry," Emma grumbled.

"Okay, okay," I said, and raised the temperature under the griddle. "Give me two minutes."

"I want milk." She reached out for the carton. George seemed a little perplexed over the quick change of subject, but helped her to pour milk in her glass before he followed me to the stove.

I poured in some batter and handed George the plate with already-finished pancakes. He took it from me, but put it down again.

George turned me around and wrapped his arms around my waist. "Are you happy?" He looked deep into my eyes.

"Yes. Strange how a little word like that can make the whole world look brighter."

I placed a wet kiss on his cheek. He answered by grazing his shaved cheek against my unshaven one, which would probably give him a red burn.

"Papa, where are my pancakes?" Emma ordered from the kitchen table, interrupting us.

George blinked at me. "Perfect timing. She's going to use 'Papa' as a lever and twist you around her little finger even more than she already does. That girl is clever." He grabbed the plate with pancakes and put it in front of Emma. "Here you go."

Emma dug in enthusiastically.

“Don’t eat it all at once, Munchkin!” I cried out, trying to stop the little glutton.

George grabbed a fork and tried to catch the pancakes as they went flying all over the table. Emma never saw the purpose of taking one at a time. She preferred to grab a stack with her little hand and pull. He looked at me across the kitchen. “You got anything special planned for tonight, after we celebrate Shabbat with your family?”

“Other than going to bed early?”

George got the message and flashed me a gorgeous smile. Emma was always exhausted Friday nights. After a whole week in school, and when we went to my parents, she went to bed at eight, sleeping like a bear in hibernation. We would have the night to ourselves and could indulge in some serious groping. I saw the glitter in his eyes and, yep, he was thinking the same thing.

But. I also had some other plans. Big plans.

I watched my family eating breakfast. George helped Emma with the syrup, and he grinned at her as he snatched a piece of pancake from her plate and stuffed it into his mouth. Emma laughed, pushing him away to stop him from stealing more food from her.

I loved them. God, how I loved them.

George suddenly cried out to me, waking me up from my thoughts. “Oh, watch out Isaac, you’re burning the pancakes.”

Emma groaned and wrinkled her face. “No, Papa. Not again.”

Chapter Eight

My dad came to pick us up at the station. Every time we met, his still tall, lanky frame and white hair commanded respect in our girl's eyes, but Dad larked about with her so that she also forgot her fear of riding in cars, and she brightened up considerably. Dad had bought a special, extra-sturdy, extra-secure Swedish car seat especially for Emma, just to drive her the ten minutes to and from the station. It made Emma feel safer while riding in the car with us, and George—who insisted on sitting with her in the impossibly small back seat so he could be sure she was all right, and not too scared—worshipped Dad's thoughtfulness. Emma still hated cars after the accident.

Dad steered the car up the driveway to the house. It felt almost too good seeing the old familiar house and the endless sea again.

The large beach house on Long Island was from the early twentieth century, situated directly by the sea, with the shore meadow as a back garden and a short narrow path leading through a gate down onto the sandy beach. One of the biggest assets of the house was a covered porch facing the water, as wide as it was broad. There had always been deck chairs and a big outdoor table, seating at least ten, outside. A sturdy roof provided shade or sheltered us from the rain, making an extra exterior room overlooking the sea, and frequently used during the summer. The inside of the house was bright, with white walls, dark, shiny wooden floors, and oak furniture inherited down through the generations. My parents moved here permanently after my grandmother died, and the house has been in the family on my mother's side since it was first built.

Dad put on the handbrake and killed the engine. With some difficulty, I found the inside car door handle, managed to open it and got out of the miniscule three-door Toyota IQ. Emma watched me patiently, while I first folded the front seat, then leaned in to unbuckle her from her safety seat. As soon as she was free from her belt, I backed away from the door, and she bolted out of the car, dashing towards Mom, who was already waiting for her granddaughter, with arms welcomingly open. My parents' old golden retriever came running from inside the house, wagging her tail, apparently wanting to present herself to Emma by trying to lick her face. Emma's pleased laugh was light and happy.

"Hello! Did you have a good trip?" Mom called out to us, after getting up from her crouched position from hugging our daughter. I saw her through the

rear window; Mom wore a bright summer dress and a pair of reading glasses on a black cord hanging from her neck. Her smile was radiant.

Dad got out and folded the driver's seat forward to let George out. He had to worm his way out of Dad's small car, unfolding his legs like a carpenter's ruler. It was a miracle he'd fit the back seat in the first place—it was surely not made for full-grown men.

Mom came and hugged us both, and she hugged George a little extra. He had to bend down to put his arms around her smaller frame. The dog stepped on my feet in her eagerness to get my attention.

“Have you eaten?” Mom asked.

“Breakfast. But we grabbed a couple at the golden arches at Jamaica station,” I said.

Emma tugged at Mom's elbow. She looked down at her. “My dads don't think I know, but that means burgers. It's... *crowed*.”

I looked at her while I was patting Mom's dog. “Now, when you're starting to spell things, *code*,” I emphasized the word, “might be necessary. You beg harder than this spoiled dog when we get near a burger place.”

“They say brain freeze when they mean ice cream,” Emma said to Mom, enlightening her as she stood holding her hand. “I know they have it when I sleep. And that's not fair.”

“Uh-huh,” George protested. “I plead not guilty. I have to start watching my weight, but Sir Eat-a-lot beelines to the freezer often.”

I got the image of George and me on the couch at home, George kissing me, trying to find out what flavor I had just eaten—a very pleasurable form of entertainment that we indulged in quite often when Emma slept. One thing usually led to the other.

“Well, I hope you can relax this weekend, George. I've tried my best to make all the traditional food, so you can try it out. We don't have the opportunity to spoil you that often.”

Dad came up to us, carrying our weekend bags, having taken them out of the trunk. George immediately went to his aid, taking the bags from him. “I'll take them.”

“I'm not ancient. Yet,” Dad protested, but gave George both bags.

“When will Rachel and her family arrive?” I asked, as we started moving towards the house.

“She’s driving from Brooklyn. About four I would suspect,” Mom said. “They’re bringing Uncle Ytzack.”

“I never get used to this,” George said from the top of the stairs leading up to the porch. None of us ever used the front entrance. He was looking out over the sea. “This is... magnificent.”

A light breeze came from the sea, cool but not enough to cool us off on a hot day like today. The sun was high in the sky and felt hot on our faces and bare arms. I regretted choosing my canvas sneakers before we left home. I’d have to change to my flip-flops. I knew I’d put them in my weekend bag somewhere.

“This is the Long Island Sound, isn’t it?” George asked.

“Yes.” I pointed towards the bluish haze where the sea met the sky. “Today it’s just a blur. But New Haven is there somewhere. Maybe we should try surfing someday on the other side of Long Island. Then, next stop Europe, pretty good waves.”

Dad came up the stairs to the porch behind us, a firm grip on the rail disguising that he had some difficulties climbing stairs because of his arthritis. “You boys are lucky. The sea has been very calm the last couple of days, so I believe the beaches are still clear from seaweed,” he said. “And the tide is outgoing. It’s perfect for swimming.”

George gave me a glance, his eyes mischievous. He was up to something; he had that eager look in his eyes.

“Do you want to go to the beach?” I asked him.

George had been to the beach house only a couple of times before. When we’d visited New York from Cleveland, we usually stayed with Rachel in Brooklyn. When we’d come here, we’d only stayed for the day, and never for the weekend. George was much different now. He didn’t feel apprehensive about meeting my family like he did before Becky died. My guess was that after all we’d been through together, he finally realized my family loved him, and that he was worth being loved.

“Yes, absolutely,” came his quick answer, combined with a lopsided smile.

“Here we are. Welcome back to the Hahns’, George,” Dad said as we entered the hallway. The house looked the same. Dining room and kitchen to

the left, the huge living room with its several plush couches, the many overfilled bookshelves, and a fireplace to the right. In the middle, a large staircase led to the upper floor with several bedrooms. "You'll have the large guestroom as before, but today we've prepared Isaac's old room for Emma."

George and I exchanged a glance. Last time, she'd had a cot in our room. This new arrangement afforded new opportunities.

Mom and Dad had always hoped for grandchildren, and some of my family's old children's beds and toys had been kept in the attic for generations. My old room had been refurbished. In one corner was my grandmother's rocking horse. Rachel's whole life revolved around horses, so I remembered it from when I was growing up. I knew Emma would love it. I'd been fanatical about assembling plastic model kits, often together with Dad, and a couple of them were now standing on the chest of drawers.

"Dad, you kept them," I said. "I loved building those cars."

"Well, perhaps Emma isn't as stereotypical as you and Rachel were as you grew up. I might get her interested in assembling models, not just favoring those horses the Hahn women keep fussing about. I actually went to the shop in town before I picked you up at the station. There were quite a lot of new models. I bought a kit with a '49 Mercury Custom Coupe. Maybe Emma wants to help me start assembling it while you're here?"

"She's five, Dad. She'll probably glue the exhaust pipe to your forehead."

Dad laughed. "You weren't all that precise when you were five, either. But we managed anyway."

We continued to the large guest bedroom. The big bay window dominated the room, and the view from there, looking out over the Long Island Sound, was spectacular. It had a window seat covered with Grandma's embroidered cushions, and growing up, I'd sat for hours watching the sea change its color depending on the weather. There were as many colors of water as there were blues, greens and grays on a palette.

The forecast had warned of temperatures up to ninety degrees, and the window was open. Small puffs of air, smelling of salt and sea, made the room airy and fresh. Distant cries from seagulls made it perfect.

Emma, of course, went directly to the bed and jumped up and down. I couldn't blame her. Looking at the inviting double bed almost made me do the same. George stopped her, and she plunked down on the soft quilted spread.

“It’s fantastic, as always. Thank you,” George said, and spread his hands, indicating the room as a whole.

“It’s our pleasure to have you,” Mom said.

“I bought this for you, Debrah.” George gave her the bag from the bakery shop. Then he opened his weekend bag and pulled out a book with a colorful cover. “You know my law firm assists publishers negotiating an intellectual property contract—that’s how Isaac and I met. After a meeting this morning, I asked the author if I could have a copy to give to you, so... voila! It’s the latest Whitt Lawson, due to hit the stores next week.”

Mom took the book with a pleased smile and turned it over to study the back cover. “George, you’re amazing. Thank you. I’ve read all his books. You’ve ruined my sleep now, you know. I’ll stay up reading.” She opened the first page. “Look, he’s even signed it for me.”

“I know. And this is for David.” George held up a book called *Studies in Microbiology, the Bacteria in the New Haven Sediment*. “This was also given to me by the author, but it’s nothing the publishers I work with would print. I happened to run into him and he knew I was connected to David Hahn for some reason and wanted me to give you this. He writes thrillers with marine themes, but he’s a professor of microbiology at Columbia University. It’s your field of work.”

“I knew he wrote it. I contributed to some of his research. But I haven’t seen it in print.”

“That’s because it was printed yesterday.”

“You don’t say...” Dad turned the book over to look at the back, then turned it again to read the first page. He fished out a pair of reading glasses from his front pocket and put them on. “Yes, I’m mentioned in the acknowledgements. I must call and thank him. And thank you for bringing it.”

I sat down on the bed, and Emma quickly came to sit on my lap. “You see? Dad has a magical weekend bag filled with presents,” I whispered to her. George mentioned he’d brought something for my parents but hadn’t told me what exactly. In his classic Georgian style, as I called his sixth sense of knowing exactly what to give people, he’d hit the nail on the head again.

“Do you think he has something for me in there? I’d like a dog. Like Molly.”

Her face, looking at me, just waited for me to say yes, hardly giving me another option. But I was more clever than a five-year-old. Or so I thought. “You’ll get one. When I retire. Like Grandma and Granddad.”

“Yay!” Her happy face turned inquisitive. “When’s that?”

“Oh, in 2046 sometime,” I said.

I saw the little wheels turning inside her head. “How old am I then? When I get my dog.”

Okay, now I felt embarrassed for my half-lie. “You’ll be forty.”

“How old are you?”

“Twenty-nine.”

“Oh.” She looked at me with eyes black. “You’re lying. You won’t get me a dog.”

I laughed. “No. I’m sorry, Munchkin. We can’t have a dog, not right now. But you can come here often and play with Molly, now when we live in New York.”

“But a dog?” she asked, and added in her sweetest voice, “Please? Papa, I love you.”

That girl surely knew how to wind me around her little finger. “Nope. And that’s not code for yes, so don’t push it. And I love you too. But no dog.”

Emma stuck her tongue out at me. Then she laughed. That little thing knew exactly where she had me. She was incredibly smart for a five-year-old. Give it a year, and we’d probably have a dog. It would have to be a small one, though. *No, what was I thinking?* No dog.

Mom looked up and focused on me. “Papa?”

I smiled. “Yes. Papa.”

“That’s wonderful! Honey, I’m so proud of you.” Mom came over and hugged us both, before she held out her hand to Emma, who quickly got the message and scooted off my lap to grab Mom’s hand, clearly looking forward to the afternoon’s adventures.

“Why don’t you boys start by going to the beach for a swim? It’s such a lovely day,” Mom said to George and me. “And you, *shayna maideleh*, will come with me to the kitchen.” Mom used the Yiddish expression for “sweet girl”; it was an old habit coming from my grandmother. “I need help cooking

dinner, and I made cookies I need you to try and tell me if they're tasty. Then Grandpa needs help setting up the dining room for tonight. You go with him, I have something I want to tell your dad. I'll join you in just a couple of minutes."

Emma's eyes glittered. She never refused an opportunity to eat cookies. She never turned down an opportunity to feel wanted and needed either. Dad and Emma went out into the hallway, talking. I heard Emma's voice chattering all the way down the stairs. First she told Dad about the ride on the train, then she quickly changed to adoring the dog. There was a lot of enthusiasm in her.

"George, I..." Mom went up to George and took his hands. She led him to the window seat and had him sit down beside her. "I've been meaning to tell you this for a long time, but it never seemed right."

I sat down on the big bed, crossed my ankles, and stayed in the background.

"You know I had a brother who died in Vietnam, in 1968?" Mom asked.

"No. I'm sorry."

Mom shrugged her shoulders. "It's a long time ago. It's not so bad anymore. He died far away, in a country we couldn't even imagine what it looked like, and for a reason we couldn't understand. It was the worst day of my life when two officers came knocking on our door. My wonderful big brother... It wasn't even comprehensible. So meaningless."

"I know the feeling," George said.

"Mom broke down completely and wouldn't leave her bed. Dad was trying to put up a brave front, but I saw the hurt in his face, and I heard how he cried, sitting alone in his office. He had three kids; me, Ytzack and Aaron. He had to adjust to a new reality where there was only me, and Ytzack. I remember the *Shiva*. I was seventeen. All our relatives came to offer their condolences during that week. Dad didn't even have the strength to greet our family, he just sat in his chair. And that's all right. During the *Shiva* the family in mourning can't be expected to be polite, everyone will understand. But, after that week, life is supposed to go on again. Slowly."

"I know about the tradition. Isaac told me."

"Dad had a hard time coping after that. Very hard. Aaron was very special to him. I think you know where I'm going with this?"

George watched the sea through the open window, not looking at Mom. "I might."

“In those days there wasn’t the kind of help one can get today. The kind of help you got. He just had to wait and see, hoping life would get better over the course of time.”

“And did it?”

“It took three years until he surfaced. Mom, who had been so obviously devastated, recovered much earlier. Dad had to come to the point where he discovered he still had a lot left to appreciate in life, and not just mourn for what he’d lost. So, you see, if someone knows exactly what you’re going through, it might be me. Losing a loved one is hard. Dealing with grief can be even harder.” Mom stroked George’s back, circling her hand on top of his shirt. “He started to count his blessings.”

“Blessings are a very Jewish thing.”

“I don’t know,” Mom sighed. “Blessings are the good things we have around us every day. You have Isaac and Emma.”

“I’m grateful for having Isaac and Emma in my life. They’re my blessings.”

“A Jewish blessing isn’t exactly like a Christian one, you know. We’re not asking for good health or being blessed with money. We bless God for his presence—in the food we eat, in the beautiful rainbow we see, or in the joy of meeting an old friend. There are also blessings for when bad things happen. Dad started counting his blessings. Soon he found one hundred reasons to bless God’s presence, every day. It opened his eyes. He saw his family again. He saw life.” Mom smiled softly. “If you’d ask Rachel, she’d say Dad invented mindfulness as a psychological treatment. As in the moment-by-moment awareness and acceptance of your feelings, and then being grateful that you’re alive to experience them.”

“That’s what I’ve been given as an instrument by my therapist. It’s helpful.”

“Of course it is. You and my dad use the same keys to the problem. Only, he got his coaching at temple, for free.” She peered at him.

George chuckled. “You know, Debrah, you and Isaac are so alike sometimes. You have the same sense of humor.”

Mom chuckled too and looked at me, blinking, but spoke to George. “Shh, he might hear you. I don’t think Isaac likes to hear that I remind you of him. Or was it the other way around?” She whisked a fly away from her forehead.

They both laughed silently. Mom placed her hands in her lap. "I guess you've already started counting your blessings? You seem so in balance now. Still, I can see your thoughts wander off sometimes."

George hesitated. He usually never opened up. "I often think about Becky. And about being a father. Do you think Isaac and I will be enough for Emma?"

"If it's of any consolation, all parents wonder if they can be enough. Not just you." My mother added, her voice soft, "You will be wonderful parents."

"I'm starting to believe that too, now." George looked at Mom as if she was God.

"I know you had a rough start in life, but that doesn't influence your ability to be a good father. If you have any doubts or questions, just come to David and me. I also happen to know you wanted to keep us all at a distance before, when it was only you and Isaac." George opened his mouth, but Mom interrupted him. "Don't deny it. I understood why, and guessed you would start to relax around us soon enough. I hope you know we are nothing like your parents. You're always welcome and this room will be waiting for you."

George hugged her, and she looked so small in his arms. He had turned his head away from Mom, probably not wanting her to see that he was quite emotional. No one but me was allowed to see him so affected.

"You are so kind," he said, his voice thick and dark. "Sorry, I..." His eyelids fluttered, and Mom wasn't stupid. She saw the unshed tears he managed to blink away.

Mom protested and shook her head slowly. "Don't you excuse yourself. In our family we're never sorry for who we are. We believe all humans are created in the Divine image, so to claim that you're less in any way... Well, it just doesn't work like that around here. You are so deeply loved, George. By all of us. We all have to count the blessings, and you are one of them." She got up from the window seat and kissed his temple. "Now that you live in New York, I hope you will join us here at the beach house very often. I want to see my little granddaughter grow up, month by month. Perhaps even week by week."

George only looked up at her, speechless.

"So," Mom continued, "I'll have coffee ready for when Rachel and her family arrive. You do what you want until then. I'm sure Dad and I will keep your little girl busy."

Mom went over to me and ruffled my hair before she left, like she used to do when I was fourteen.

Alone at last, George came over to me, sat down, and wrapped his arms around my waist. "I can understand how you became such an awesome person. It's easy with a set of parents like yours." He leaned forward and placed a kiss on my lips.

I pulled back to focus on his face. "You became awesome even though your parents are prizewinning assholes," I smiled.

George glanced towards the open door, and when he found the doorway empty, his arms around me tightened and he kissed me passionately, devouring my mouth. He finished by nipping at my cheek, grazing his teeth against my stubble, and I moaned.

He let go and watched me with a lopsided smile. "So, you want to go swimming? I think we need to cool off."

"Oh, yes," I said. I kept my hand at his waist. "I don't know if this house brings out the teenager in me, but it makes me horny. The sun and the sea, no worries..."

"Don't forget the babysitter. Your parents have just given us some time alone."

He cupped my head and kissed me one more time before he turned to his weekend bag. "I think I'll change down at the beach. I feel a bit awkward walking half-dressed past your parents."

"Suit yourself. You know you could dangle your... eh... dangle in front of them and they wouldn't care less, don't you?"

He shrugged. "I don't care about my... dangle. I don't want them to see the scars I have on my back. I don't like to show them to your parents. Not to anyone."

"Remember the first time I saw them, and you said you'd been scratched by a lion? That had to be hell of a big lion," I laughed. The process to get George to tell me the real reason had taken a year in the beginning of our relationship. Now I was even allowed to make jokes. I shook my head. "They're so faded. I don't think anyone notices them anymore." Four scarred ridges on his skin, one ridge for every tine in his dad's pitchfork. I'd kissed them so many times, wishing he'd never come across his dad that night, drunk and insane and armed

with a farmer's tool meant to feed cows, out to teach that sissy boy of his a lesson.

George found his swim shorts and rummaged around after something else, which he apparently found, before reaching and grabbing a towel from the stack my mom had put on the table by the window, and then wrapping it all up into one package.

"I know the marks are there. That's enough. Are you ready?" He looked at me.

"Ah, shit. I'll do the same, I'll change on the beach too.

I went through my bag, carefully moving the little black jewelry box to one of the inner pockets so it wouldn't be found. I found my swim shorts and my flip-flops, and smiling at George I took the lead, grabbing a towel on my way out.

Walking down the stairs I heard Mom and Emma talking in the kitchen. As we went out onto the porch, Dad was sitting in his favorite chair, reading the newspaper, the tilted roof giving him shade. The dog slept at his feet, knocked out by the heat. As Dad heard us, he lowered the paper, smiling when he saw us carrying beach towels.

"It's a perfect day for a swim. You be careful, the undercurrent can be a little tricky if you go too far out. But, I don't have to tell you. You know it already, Isaac. Watch out for George, he's not familiar with our waters."

"Don't worry, Dad. We'll be careful. And Mom promised Emma she gets to help you with setting the table and preparing for tonight. Don't forget to tell her before you start or she'll be very disappointed. You heard anything from Rachel?"

"They should be here by four, as planned. Sunset is at eight thirty, so there will be plenty of time," Dad said. "You go swim and stay as long as you like. Mom and I will take care of your little girl."

"Thanks, Dad," I said.

"Now, off with you, before Emma sees you and demands to go with you. Spend some time alone for once. We'll take good care of her."

George took my hand in front of Dad, and that was something he would never have done before. Dad had disarmed him with his natural acceptance. My dad was Steven's opposite. He, like Mom, had taken George in as a second son.

We took the stairs leading down from the porch and walked along the path to the beach. The sea was calm and there was hardly any breeze.

“Your parents’ house is impressive,” George said. “A Long Island beach house can’t be that easy to find, much less to afford. Even if they have that much money, they’re very low key—no fancy cars...” He laughed. “Your dad’s miniscule Toyota was built for anything but show.”

“You know there isn’t any money,” I said, interrupting him. “You know the house was built by my mom’s granddad almost a hundred years ago, and it has been passed down in the family. We often came for Shabbat. Mom and Dad sent us kids here every summer when school was out, while they stayed in New York City. Do you think Emma will be the same? That she can’t wait until summer comes so she can have my mom to herself? And Judith, of course. I guess it will be like with Rachel and me—it was always the two of us. I loved my bubbe.”

“Bubbe,” George repeated. “I have to start learning these Jewish words.”

“I never think I told you how different everything was when I grew up. My bubbe was brought up orthodox. She lived according to kosher laws and kept strict rules for Shabbat. She never used electricity or watched TV, she never rode in a car or spoke on the phone, or used the stove during Shabbat. And a thousand other things.”

“I’ve always wondered why Debrah didn’t follow her mother’s tradition. She’s clearly religious.”

Long ago, I’d told George that my mom went to Woodstock when she was eighteen, bringing a whole package of condoms. Yes, my outspoken mom had told me about the condoms as a part of educating her children. I was fifteen, just out of the closet, and my mom told me that I could love and have sex with anyone, as long as it was between consenting adults and condoms were used. That was Mom’s way of talking about the birds and the bees. After that, I had no idea what could embarrass me again.

She’d been on the barricades in 1968, fighting for peace, equal rights, and the right for birth control. My mom was one of a kind. She’d been grounded for six months by my grandmother after she went to Woodstock without permission. A good Jewish daughter was forbidden to do what she’d done. As if she’d cared.

“Do you think a Jewish hippie would stay orthodox?” I laughed. “No, Dad’s always been reformist. I think that’s why they love each other so much. They

share all beliefs. If you look really close, I think you'll still see the hippie in Dad, too."

"Peace and love and tolerance," George smiled at me.

"Yeah."

"That's groovy," George smirked.

"I remember one summer, Rachel rented a horse at one of the stables here, and Granddad taught me how to sail, even though he was over eighty. I can't tell you how much those summers meant to me. I hope Emma will love her bubbe just as much as I loved mine."

We had moved to where the yellow, soft sand began, and George let go of my hand so we could take off our shoes, and from there we walked barefoot.

"Does the house belong to your parents now?"

"The houses are still owned by the family trust. Nothing leaves the family. Do you remember Rachel needed somewhere to live after she married John and Judith was born? It feels like we were so far away in Cleveland, so perhaps you don't remember. My bubbe died, and Dad retired from the University, and Judith was born. It all happened at the same time. That's when Rachel took over the house in Brooklyn where we grew up, and Mom and Dad moved here. Perfect solution for everyone. It has been five years now." I turned to look at George, squinting with my eyes to avoid the sun reflecting off the water. "You know what? Judith will probably live with her family in the Brooklyn house one day. And who knows—maybe Emma will come visit us with her kids, here at the beach house."

"Don't speak like that. It jinxes things."

"Oh, stop it, George. You know, the future might just as well be you in a home when you're eighty, and Emma doesn't give one shit about visiting you. I think my vision of us all here at the beach house is by far the better one."

We had reached the water's edge. The sky and the ocean had almost the same light blue color where they met at the horizon. George waded barefoot into the water, grinning like a fool.

"This is fantastic!" he shouted, spreading out his arms in the air.

I smiled too, and my heart did little flip flops watching his happiness.

This wasn't a private beach, even though it technically belonged to the house. People in the neighborhood knew my family and often came to use it. Today the beach was empty, though.

"I've hardly ever seen the water so calm," I said. "It gets lukewarm when it's like this. Get changed and we'll see if it is." George unrolled his bath towel and caught the swim shorts before they hit the ground. A much heavier object fell out and landed in the sand. I remembered George had taken something from his weekend bag, looking smug. "What's that?"

George took a quick look around and bent to pick up a bottle I clearly recognized, but not the brand. "Underwater lube," he said. "I knew we were going to the ocean."

"Are you insane? They can see us from the windows on the second floor. I might be fully accepted for who I am by my family, but I don't feel comfortable being caught on the beach with your dick up my ass. And neither would you."

"They can't see us underwater." George grinned as he pulled off his shorts and then his briefs, changing into his swim shorts and showing me his arousal. He shrugged his shoulders. "Not much reason to put these on, but if you insist on keeping up a chaste appearance..."

George took his glasses off, then pulled off the T-shirt and exposed his torso. His muscles weren't as defined as when we'd met almost five years ago. All the stress and worry this last year showed on his body. Nevertheless, he was beautiful, firm and more athletic than the bundle of muscles he normally was. He thought he was putting on weight, fat-weight he called it, and maybe... no. To me, he was just as hot as always. Enough to make my dick twitch, watching him in his blue Speedos.

"Can you swim without glasses?" I asked. He seldom wore his contacts now.

"Perfectly. Just stop me before I reach... New Haven, was it?"

I laughed as I fiddled with my baggy, multicolored swim shorts. I got them on, even managing to cram my growing erection into the net-like inner lining.

George grabbed my hand and together we went into the sea. Just as I suspected from a lifetime experience staying at the beach house during summer, the water was warm and it glittered in the reflecting sun. It was also shallow, and we had to walk about ten yards before it reached us to the waist. Then it got deeper, quickly. George dived into the water, disappearing under the surface, only to immediately emerge, shaking the water off his head like a dog. He snorted loudly from having water up his nose as he dived again. Standing in the water, he dipped his head under the surface and pulled his short hair back with both hands.

“Come on. I want you in here with me. It’s like a giant bathtub.” He floated away on his back.

I laughed. “You swim like a seal! I’m skinnier than you, so I’m colder. Lack of excess body fat. Give me a second.”

I crossed my arms over my chest and walked in, balancing on the sandy seabed for a couple of yards until it got deeper. Goosebumps formed on my chest as the water chilled me. It was warm, but it could never get warm enough for me. I was an experienced swimmer, but getting into the water was agony every time.

Some more steps and the water finally reached my chest. The coldness of the water and the sun burning on the top of my head and shoulders was an all too familiar sensation from my childhood. I watched George stand in front of me, waiting, smiling, and seeing him made the past merge with the present; the uncomplicated joy and contentment I’d felt as a kid during my summers here at the beach house were mixing with the happiness of living my present life with George. I grinned like a fool from where I was standing, watching the man who made my life worth living.

George turned away and darted through the water in front of me, only to change direction and come towards me again. His eyes glittered as he looked at me mischievously. “Oh, no you don’t!” I said when he grabbed me, but I had no chance. He pulled me under the surface. Saltwater leaked into my nose and mouth, and I closed my eyes just in time to prevent them from filling with water.

As quickly as he pulled me under the water, he had me up again, clutched in his arms. I snorted.

“Wow... oops!” I said, as I lost my balance and fell over, bringing George with me, his arms still around me, pulling us both under the surface. He must have gulped water because he coughed when he reached the surface and gasped for air. The saltwater would burn his throat. I knew the feeling exactly, from having done it so many times before. “Ha, that’s my revenge. Saltwater.”

While George coughed, I broke loose and swam away from him for all that I was worth, waving my arms in a style that couldn’t be recognized as any of the established ways to swim, but it made me plunge forward through the water. I might have been faster, but I was laughing so hard that I lost coordination of my limbs. George came after me, targeting and catching me in his arms, once again anchoring me. I chuckled as we both planted our feet firmly on the

seabed, wiping away water from our eyes and faces. Looking at each other, he had hunger in his eyes.

“No, this is revenge,” he said, and the intensity in his eyes told me he was going to kiss me. His growing desire made me feel very serious suddenly.

Water reached to our shoulders, making us feel light, almost weightless. George could wrap his legs and arms around me, clinging to me as I carried him easily. His lower arms rested on top of my shoulders, and his hands raked through the hair at the nape of my neck, and almost painfully, he gripped my head hard, tilted it and forced my mouth to his. The frenzy with which he kissed me reminded me of those first days, weeks, months, when we desperately couldn't get enough of each other. He opened his mouth and tasted me, gaining entry as blood raced to my groin. He slipped his tongue inside my mouth, touching my tongue with his, and licking the roof of my mouth. He was powerful as he pushed forward, practically eating me, though... still so weightless. My hardness rubbed against his, forced against him by the way his thighs held me in a steel grip, long legs locked behind me just above my ass.

I could taste the saltwater on his lips as he withdrew, and I licked them before we separated our mouths fully, resting our foreheads together with eyes closed. We both had to catch our breath. His arms around me tightened ever further, and we almost merged into each other.

“I love you, Isaac,” he said, his breath hot against my face. “So damned much. I owe everything to you.”

I shook my head slowly, making his head move in sync with mine. “No. You don't owe me anything. We're in this together.” My lips moved against his. “I love you.”

George pulled back, watching me with glimmering eyes. I almost forgot where we were. The house, the beach—nothing but George existed. There was only us in the blue-green water.

He unwound his legs from my waist and straightened up. I felt his erection as he pressed his groin against mine again.

“Do you want to try?” he asked in a low voice. “I have the lube tucked inside my Speedos.”

I grinned. “I thought that was your dick pressing against me, and all the time it was the bottle.”

“You idiot,” he smiled.

He reached down in the water and fiddled around, head bobbing just above the surface. He gave me a lopsided smile when he pulled his Speedos up above the surface and threw them away behind him. Quickly, I loosened the knot in my shorts, pulling them off and letting them fly above the surface in the same direction.

“Oh, my God,” George said, and reached for my dick under the water, his other hand caressing my ass. “I can’t believe how hot you are. Always.” From the house it must have looked as if we were just standing talking, with the waterline reaching our shoulders. I closed my eyes as he grasped my shaft and teased me by caressing it gently. It felt as though I was harder than I had ever been, but with George that was the sensation every time we had sex, so I knew it wasn’t true. My erection was throbbing, and the water swirled slightly around us, as George stroked me with a firm hand.

Leaning forward and rubbing my nose against his temple, I asked, and there was no doubt from the thickness in my voice that I was anxious. “So how are you going to solve this?” I was glad we were long past condoms; that would have made this impossible. But to get us lubed up, here in the water, was tricky enough.

“You trust me?” he whispered.

I nodded. “Always, you know that.”

George turned me so he was facing my back and placed one arm around my chest from behind, holding me firmly. Leaning his cheek against my shoulder, he reached for my dick and stroked it. He then changed his grip to hold my lower abdomen, lifting me backwards, and with his other hand holding the bottle of lube, he pushed me forward with a touch at the base of my neck and bent me slightly. “Stay there,” he said. I heard the snap of the bottle opening above surface. And then he kissed my neck.

“This is another way of doing it,” he growled, lowering his hand beneath the waterline and suddenly placing the opening of the bottle against my puckered hole. I relaxed as he squeezed lube around my hole, and then inside me. The open plastic cap scraped against sensitive skin, but his finger quickly replaced the bottle and started to massage the lube inside. It was enough to make it possible.

I shuddered and leaned on his arm. He moved it to hold me with his elbow by my waist and a hand splayed against my breast bone, between my pectorals, his arm vertical to steady me and keep me from floating away.

“Ah...” I moaned, as his finger moved in and out, a little deeper each time, gradually opening me. I floated in the water without my feet touching the seabed, my lower back still arched.

“Are you okay?” he asked, whispering in my ear. “Do you need me to stop?”

“I’m fucking more than okay. Don’t you dare stop...” He pushed in a little further and his finger brushed my prostate. It sent a shock of pleasure racing through me, and my hips bucked, making my ass meet his finger. “Yeesss...” I hissed. George became excited by my reaction, growling as he pulled me close, biting down hard on my shoulder. All those combined sensations almost sent me over the edge. If someone saw us now, there would be no doubt about what we were doing. I prayed everyone stayed indoors with the blinds shut.

Slowly, and careful not to hurt me, he withdrew his finger from my ass, leaving an empty feeling for a couple of seconds, until I felt the familiar sensation of the tip of his hard-on resting against my opening. I pushed back and he breached the barrier of muscle easily. As always, I yielded invitingly to his penetration.

Holding my hip in a steady grip, one arm still in front of my chest, he slowly pushed inside me in one long, firm, unrelenting movement, not stopping until he was buried inside me to the hilt. The pleasant burn from the salty water on my stretched hole was almost too much. He halted and rested, leaning his forehead against my shoulder.

His throbbing dick buried deep inside me and his arms tying me to him prevented me from floating away. It was so different from fucking in bed; he could maneuver me in a way I never knew possible. He went even deeper inside me, changing the angle, and the distinct edge of his swollen, mushroom-shaped head swiped over that bundle of nerves, making my body feel electric. I moaned and tried to press against him, but it was so difficult in the water. He froze. I felt him tremble with lust. “You’ve got to move, George, or I’ll go crazy.”

“If I move, I’ll come,” George said, and held still.

“Just do it!” I demanded, almost desperate. Pulling out almost to the tip, George growled as he pushed in again. “Yes! That’s it,” I croaked.

“You feel so good...” He pulled out and went slowly back in, deeper, deeper, groaning. “I’m not going to last...” His dick went out, and in again. “Touch yourself. I can’t manage in the water.”

My erection cried to be touched. It was raging between my legs, the angry head pointing towards the surface. Using one hand already to hold onto George, I was hanging onto his wrist against my chest, I moved and used my other hand to grab my rock-hard member. This was just too good to last.

George was starting to lose control. "Isaac..." he panted. "Isaac, Isaac, Isaac." My name came out at his every thrust, almost as sobs. He wound his arms around me, pressing his chest to my back. Again and again he pushed himself into me, pulling me down onto his shaft every time.

Nothing had ever felt this different, almost otherworldly, as floating around, fucking. The thrusts were deep, but not hard and pounding, since the water resisted our movements. All the power, when moving against each other, came from the muscles in George's arms and the thrusting of his hips. Nothing else. He was holding me, caring for me, dominating me in a way, though I felt just as much in charge as he was. Like a complicated dance.

The water was now splashing around us, waves of ocean water hitting my face. I didn't care. I needed release and George was my only focus.

I stroked myself in my fist, the sea lubricating my strokes. My balls pulled up and with a deep moan I came, my seed spilling into the water. My whole body clenched and my head flew back. George's orgasm, spurred by my tightening around his dick, hit him just seconds after, making him scream. He shot hard inside me, filling me with his come.

When the first strong waves of orgasm were over, he slumped his forehead against the base of my neck and wound both his arms around my upper body. He whispered repeatedly in my ear, "I love you, I love you... I love you, Isaac," in the same rhythm as the aftershocks that made him buck, still inside me. As he stilled, he let out a final groan, revealing all his pleasure.

"I am yours and you are mine," I said, covering his arms with mine so we both crossed my chest with our arms. He hung on to me and we held each other tight, "and may this joy be with us always."

He chuckled mirthfully against my back, his somnolent afterglow almost palpable. I vowed to keep this day in my memory for all time, so that in the future I could close my eyes and remind myself that life could be this wonderful.

As George slipped out, the water rushed inside me, and I felt his warm seed blend with cold water until I managed to tighten the muscle. The remaining

lube coating me prevented the salty water from stinging, but it cooled me off and brought me back to reality.

George had closed his eyes when I turned around to face him. I cupped his cheeks and kissed him. "Hey," I said. His eyes fluttered open, and he smiled the most beautiful smile. "I love you, George Parker." I was full to the brim with emotions.

"That was unbelievable," he said. "I had you in my arms, and you were floating around with me, nailed onto my cock. Fucking unbelievable."

I nodded, putting my hand on his chest, feeling his heart still beating hard beneath my palm.

Looking around, I didn't see our clothes at first. Then I spotted my swim shorts half-floating, some yards away, being slowly pulled out by the tide. His were nowhere to be seen. George understood.

"Wait," he said. "I'll get them." He swam away, returned with my swim shorts, and handed them to me. After a third dive he finally retrieved his own. I wasn't going to put mine on, but George had obviously put his on in the water.

"Where's the bottle?" I asked.

He looked around. "It's gone."

"Polluter. And imagine if it washes ashore up by the family beach?"

"No problem. In that case we'll get it back. I wrote your name on it."

"What?!"

"Oh, you're such a prude sometimes." He leaned in and kissed me. "Of course I didn't put your name on it. But it sure is fun pulling your leg, Isaac. You buy it every time."

"It's just because I'm naïve and always trust you."

"Right," he smiled, squinting against the sun in his eyes.

Both George and I were still semi-erect when we returned to our clothes. Satisfied wasn't enough to describe how I felt right at that moment; I was truly happy in all possible ways.

Our beach was still empty, but I could see families far away, further down the mile-long beach, now arriving with parasols. The sun heated us fast and we rubbed ourselves dry and pulled on our shorts. I skipped the briefs and went

commando. George put on a T-shirt, while I tried to get as much sun as possible and stayed bare-chested.

“Do you want to stay and lie in the sun for a while?” I asked George.

He hesitated, but then shook his head. “No, I think I’d prefer to head back and see what Emma’s up to. Besides, your sister ought to be here soon.”

With the towels hanging over our shoulders, and carrying shoes and the clothes that we weren’t wearing in one hand, we strolled, hand in hand, back towards the beach house.

Chapter Nine

Rachel's car was already in the driveway when we reached the back porch.

"Rachel?" I shouted inside. "Are you in here?"

She made us both jump as she answered from behind. "Hi there! I was just heading to the beach to meet you. Did you have a nice swim?"

We both turned around and saw Rachel, dressed in a slim summer dress, making her look even thinner than usual. With her big, dark sunglasses, she was ready for a summer weekend by the sea.

George blushed. "It was absolutely perfect," he said, sneaking a glance at me. George blushing, and thinking of what we had just done—a picture of us with the water splashing around us and George's groans—made me blush too.

With eyes watching first me, then George, and then me again, Rachel laughed and clapped her hands together. "Oh, God, you two are so cute! But... eh, next time you and George, eh... take a swim," she smiled devilishly and tilted her head, "you ought to remember that when it's a calm day like this, sound travels on water *extremely* well."

George's face went completely crimson, like a strawberry and just as sweet, and the smile he tried to keep hidden twitched at the corner of his mouth so slightly that only I could notice.

Rachel reached out her hand. "Hi, George. It's wonderful seeing you again."

"Nice to see you too, Rachel. Sorry if..." George trailed off, pointing with his thumb in the direction of the ocean. Even his ears were red now. He never got used to how we were open about everything in my family. This was about the same color he had turned when Mom had asked him if we still used condoms, and if he had been tested. Just to make sure.

Rachel smiled and shook her head, "No, no..."

Emma saved us. She came bursting through the front door. Before she reached Rachel, I quietly said to my sister, "You know I have to kill you for saying that and embarrassing George, don't you?"

"I think you've got that wrong—you mean you have to kill me for *seeing* that. Who wants to witness your brother having sex? I'm scarred for life!" she whispered back to me and waved her hands in front of her, saying much more loudly: "Oh, my eyes, my eyes!"

“Aunt Rachel!” Emma threw herself on Rachel, and she picked her up. “Is something wrong with your eyes?” she asked troubled.

“No, my eyes are perfect. They can see very, very far,” Rachel said happily.

George must have gotten something down his windpipe because he started coughing. I stood beside him and put my arm over his shoulder, massaging his chest with my other hand. Together we faced the rest of the family. John came carrying two bags from the car, and hiding behind him was their very shy daughter, Judith. Still getting out of the car, fiddling with his cane, was my Uncle Ytzack. He never wanted any help, so we usually just left him to it.

Dad came out on the porch, and my mom followed in his footsteps only seconds later, carrying a tray with lemonade in a big pitcher and glasses, which she put on the table.

“Welcome, welcome!” Dad said, warmly hugging Rachel after she’d let Emma slide out of her grip. Then he turned to John, waiting with his arms ready to hug him as soon as he had put down the bags by the door. My parents never treated anyone differently—all members of the family were always hugged, no matter if they were men or women, blood relations, or married into the family.

“Did you have a good trip?” Mom asked, as she took Rachel from my dad and hugged her.

Rachel sighed. “You know how it is. Weekend traffic from Brooklyn to Long Island is terrible. Judith, do you want to come and say hello?” Her daughter kept following her father like a shadow, always staying right behind him. Judith watched us, taking in the whole scenario, people laughing and hugging and joking. She shook her head. “You come when you feel ready, Judith,” Rachel said. “You can stay with Dad if you like.”

Then Emma took over in her amazing way. Since Emma never had any problems with self-esteem, she went straight to Judith. “Do you want to see my new room? I have a horse in my room.”

Judith’s eyes lit up. “A horse?”

“It’s not a real one. It’s a rocking horse. Come, I’ll show you,” Emma said, grasping her cousin’s hand and pulling her inside.

We all stood gasping for a long time after they were gone.

“Well,” Rachel said at last, lingering on the word. “That’s new.”

John came up to George and me. “Whatever you did to make your kid this outgoing, thank you! It’s exactly what Judith needs. You know how she is—far too shy, even with people she knows well. Obviously, this will be an amazing weekend. Hi, by the way,” he said to George, and they shook hands.

John always looked plain. He was dressed in sand-colored pants, brown leather sailing shoes with the characteristic white soles, and a light yellow polo shirt—very traditional for a weekend on Long Island. My sister loved him to pieces, plain or not.

I had to release my arm from around George’s shoulders when John hugged me. I was still bare-chested after our visit to the beach. It was quite obvious that John wasn’t all that happy hugging me without my shirt on, by the way he patted my back formally.

“Shall we go and change?” I asked George, who nodded. Then I hesitated, remembering we were not all here yet. “Wait, where’s Uncle Ytzack?”

My dad looked as if he’d just remembered something. My guess was he’d forgotten he was waiting for my uncle, turned around, and went stiffly down the porch steps to the graveled pathway, heading towards Rachel’s car. Mom said to George, “You boys might as well go up and get dressed. It will take some time for Ytzack to get here, since he’s stubborn like an old mule. It can take fifteen minutes to get him from the car to the porch. He’ll be waiting for you when you get back.”

I took George’s hand. “So, we’ll be back in fifteen minutes,” I said.

Mom stopped George. “By the way, I put a dress on your bed. I wonder if it will fit Emma? Rachel had it when she was four and Judith needs a size that fits five-year-olds. They are the same age—they’re only a couple of months apart. But I thought, Emma is so much smaller than Judith. Maybe she can still wear it? I forgot I’d kept it, I found it in the attic when we were looking for beds for the children. Maybe she’d like to use it tonight, for Shabbat? She can keep it if she likes it.”

Emma was exactly like me—very thin though she ate like a horse—and it was strange that we could be so alike when we didn’t have the same genes. She also had my temperament, but she had George’s brown hair color and hazel-green eyes, and that little cute curve on her cupid’s bow, just like George’s. I knew it came from Becky, but nature could play tricks, and there were many in her school who asked if she was either mine or George’s daughter by blood.

George nodded. “Thanks. I know she’ll love it. That girl loves all clothes.”

The girls were playing with the rocking horse as I peered inside her room when passing, and they stopped only for a second, registering that we were watching them. Judith twittered in a happy voice as they were removing the saddle and putting it back on, and for all that I knew, it was the first time I'd heard Judith speak more than four words at the same time. Emma's voice was, of course, the dominant one. She chattered about horses, and colors of cats, and the size of a cake she'd had last month, always moving forward and always in some mysterious way involving Judith in the conversation. Soon even Judith talked about cake and the cats she'd met. Our girl was a virtual fountain of words.

"What do I need to put on?" George asked as we entered my room.

"Just something casual. Mom and Dad will appreciate it if we clean up for dinner later, though."

We rummaged through our bags. George put on a short-sleeved cotton shirt he often wore for semi-official events, and matched it with a pair of slacks. After searching through my weekend bag, I decided to go for jeans and a gray cotton V-neck for now—my usual uniform. I pulled the sleeves up to my elbows and made my outfit more fit for summer. On our bed, just as Mom had said, there was a fluffy green dress with frills. We went to Emma's room and held it up for her to see. "Emma," I said, "have you seen what Grandma found for you in the attic? It used to be Rachel's when she was your age."

"Here, I can help Emma if you want to go down to the others," George said to me before he turned to Emma. "Do you want to try it on?" She stopped playing with Judith, got up from the floor and went over to him. Judith seemed interested too. George turned to me. "If you want, you can go down. We'll join you in a couple of minutes."

I nodded and backed out of the room, watching Emma's joy as George handed her the dress. Judith got up from the floor and tugged at George's leg, making him aware of her. "I have a dress with me, too. Shall I get it? Can you help me, too?"

I left him in the hands of the girls, smiling a smug smile at the thought of how easily George now shouldered the responsibilities of being a dad.

On the porch, Uncle Ytzack had settled into one of the deck chairs. I wondered how he would get back up. The chair was low and he was eighty-two, and had survived two heart attacks. He was probably relying on George and me to lift him up.

"Isaac!" He reached out his hand to greet me. "I haven't seen you since you moved back here. You look so thin. Don't they feed you, that family of yours?"

He pulled me towards him, and placed a wet kiss on my cheek. As a child, I'd hated my uncle kissing me when we greeted each other. Now I knew he only did it because he was so fond of me. I grinned. "Yes, Feter Ytzack, they feed me. And you're doing well, I see. Still alive."

He squinted and stroked a hand over his almost-bald head. "My warranty may expire soon, Isaac, but I still have some things I want to do before I check out. For one, I have to meet your new family. Your..." He hesitated.

"It's called his 'partner'," Mom said loudly to him as she passed with a tray of sliced melons, heading for the table on the porch.

"Ah, here he is," Ytzack said, as George stepped out onto the porch. "Nice-looking too. Well done, Isaac."

I know I was foolish, but I felt my heart swell with pride.

George was carrying Judith, supporting her on his waist. Amazed, I watched her trust him enough to let him carry her. Judith meeting George must have been instant attraction, and I knew exactly how she felt.

Judith was quite big for her age, but George was strong and able to carry her easily. She wound her arms around his neck, looking very comfortable.

"Well, hi, Judith. Did you have a nice time with Emma?" I asked, careful not to frighten her. First she hid her face behind George's head, but then seemed to have second thoughts and peeked out, watching me. "Did Emma like her dress?" I asked Judith, who was already wearing her dress. Simple, made of jersey, with blue and white stripes. It was perfect for a kid.

Judith spoke. "She's brushing her hair."

George nodded. "She liked the dress, but she wanted to do something with her hair before she came down. She didn't want my help, so she simply sent us down..."

"That girl," I said, shaking my head. We both knew she tried to comb her own hair, but normally it ended with the comb caught in a tangle so bad she couldn't pull it loose, so we'd have to untangle it and finish for her.

George went over to my uncle and they shook hands. George was saved from his sloppy kisses this time.

"So," my uncle said, "you know what day it is today?"

“Friday?” I jested.

He laughed. “Undisputable. But it’s also the weekend when the Marriage Equality Act will be signed in the State of New York.”

Mom laughed. “Why, are you planning on making some man very happy?”

“You’re very funny, Debrah. The boys ought to consider the fact that it affords a few very important legal matters. It means you can both be registered as Emma’s parents. If something should happen... well. I just thought you ought to know.”

“I’m aware of it, Uncle,” I said, and looked at George, my eyes searching his. “My uncle practiced family law.” George looked back at me, apparently ignorant about the fact that the law from today said we could be husbands, not only “partners.”

I had given this a lot of thought. As spouses we would have the same rights and obligations as any married couple. It was a big thing. George and I needed the safety net now that we were parents.

“I still read the trade journals,” my uncle said. “I never get too old to keep up, even though I closed my practice fifteen years ago.” He looked at us. “Well, I see things from a practical view. Don’t mind me. I’m just talking too much. We all talk too much in this family.”

“I know,” George answered, giving me a look full of meaning, and love. “And the talking never stops. That’s one of the charms. He never gets boring,” he said. And in front of my whole family, against all his normal hesitation to show public affection, he wound his free arm around my waist and gave me a light kiss on my lips.

Judith giggled. She’d probably never seen such corny boys before.

“Ah, love,” Ytzack sighed, gazing at us. “Three things in life cannot be hidden. Poverty, coughing and love.” He moved to sit better in his chair, using his cane to push himself to a more upright position. “Look at them, Debrah. Imagine, I had someone looking at me with those same loving eyes for over sixty years.”

“She probably got an honorable mention in heaven for her perseverance,” Mom said, setting out plates on the table. “Can you help me, Isaac? Rachel’s getting the cups.”

“I’ll help you,” George said, putting Judith down on the floor. She, though, decided she wanted to stay with her new favorite uncle and held on hard. “Or on the other hand...”

“No, you’re the newest guest. You rest. Have some lemonade,” Mom said. “You must be thirsty after your swim.”

I tightened my arm around George and smiled at him.

George whispered to me. “Did you know they’re passing the act now?”

“Maybe,” I said.

Emma interrupted us, loudly running down the stairs and out to us on the porch, dressed in a very fluffy, frilly green dress. Like a meringue surviving from the eighties. “Look at me! I’m beautiful! Can you help me?” she asked, holding out a pink hair scrunchie to me. Her hair looked as if she’d been standing in a wind tunnel.

“This isn’t my best game, you know. But I’ll give it a try.” I took it from her. “Ponytail?” She nodded. I left the comfort of George’s arm and moved behind her, gathered up her brown hair first with both hands, then held it in one hand while I somehow managed to wind the scrunchie around her hair, making something that resembled a ponytail. My hands were too big and stiff for this, but I had improved with handling the girly things lately. Looking at the result, I knew for sure I would never be the approved assistant to Miss America, though. “There.”

Emma was pleased anyway. She smiled as she went over to Mom, who had finished setting the table for afternoon coffee. She twirled in front of Mom, obviously looking for approval. Discreetly, Mom corrected the ponytail at the same time as she admired the dress.

“Oh, you look wonderful, honey!” Mom said. She turned to my sister. “Do you remember, Rachel, when you wore this?”

“Yes. Isaac’s naming ceremony. I remember. I was five. I hated it.”

“You hated all dresses. You preferred your riding clothes from the day you were able to put them on yourself,” Mom said.

“Are you serious, that everyone looked like that when I was born? Frills galore?” I watched my girl as she twirled around on the wooden floor, making the skirt flare out.

“I think it’s modern again,” John said.

“Since when do you care about fashion?” Rachel asked her husband, and she was right. Dad could have worn the same clothes as John, and the thought made me smile. Rachel caught me. “And you, stop looking smug. You should

update too. You got stuck somewhere in your early twenties jeans-sneakers-sweater style.”

Emma stopped twirling around, obviously getting dizzy, and walked on unsteady legs to Judith and George. “Do you want to try the swings?” she asked Judith, who quickly started to squirm in George’s arms. He got the message and released her. Emma clutched Judith’s hand and looked at George. “Can we, Dad?”

There were old swings in the garden that my grandfather had put up for Rachel and me a long time ago.

“Isaac, what do you think?” George said to me. “We can’t see them from here.”

“They’ll be fine. Don’t fall off, okay?” I said.

Immediately, they started heading for the garden, but Dad stopped them. “Wait! Don’t you go anywhere near the water. You mustn’t leave the garden. I’ll personally make sure your parents ground you if you do.”

“What’s grounded?” Emma asked George, squinting her eyes.

I tried to look stern. “That, Hop-along, means you’ll be stuck with Dad and me forever. You won’t have any fun, and you’ll only stay in our apartment and never be allowed to go out for the rest of your life.”

“That’s it?” she asked.

“Yeah. That’s it,” I said.

“I thought it was a bad thing. Can I watch TV?” she said, looking at me, tilting her head the way she did when she twisted me around her little finger.

“Well, I suppose...” I said.

“Isaac, what are you doing?” George asked me, and shook his head before he turned back to the children. “Girls, you go to the swings, but stay out of the water, okay? We’ll take you swimming tomorrow, but you’re not allowed to go there without me or Papa. Understood?”

“Yes, Dad.” Emma said. The girls started moving towards the stairs leading down from the porch, but on the first step Emma turned around. “Papa, can we play grounded when we get home?” She was sweet in her dress and her boundless enthusiasm. I couldn’t help laughing.

“Yes, Emma, we can play grounded,” I said. Emma grabbed Judith and they took off. It suddenly felt so quiet with the girls gone. The only sounds came

from the seagulls, and from the end of the porch, where Mom and Rachel were setting the table for coffee. George took the opportunity to put his arm around my waist and pull me to him. Obviously he felt totally at ease now showing affection. I wondered if it was my mom's words to him earlier—that he now knew that us being gay and loving each other was the most natural thing for her—made the last wall crumble. John and Rachel kissed in front of Mom and Dad, and so could we.

“I'm happy she likes Judith,” Mom said when she was finished.

“It's amazing. Judith said more words in one hour than I've heard her say the whole time I've known her,” I said.

“Emma has that effect on people. She's extremely outgoing,” Rachel said. “It makes things easier now, but God help you when she's a teenager. You know, Isaac, teaching her the game grounded perhaps isn't such a bad idea.”

“Says the child psychiatrist. That's bad mojo, Rachel,” I said.

“And you're Papa now. Well done,” Rachel beamed at me. “Those days in Cleveland seem so very far away now.”

“Yep. I'm now officially one hundred percent Papa.” I felt George squeeze my waist.

John looked at George. “Will you raise Emma in the Jewish tradition?”

“What? No, I...” George turned his head and searched my eyes. “Do we?”

Mom watched us. I knew she wanted both Rachel and me to raise the kids Jewish, but she would never pressure us into doing anything. She never asked, she only hoped.

“Your daughter isn't automatically Jewish, since your sister wasn't,” Rachel said.

“Oh, I don't know,” John said. “You adopted her, and one of you is Jewish. But with these modern ways, it's passed on from parents to their children, not always from the mother, and adopted children are welcomed at Temple and in the community. So you can choose. Emma is your daughter, and if you like, you can choose for her to be brought up as Jewish. It's all up to you.”

“It's a big part of life here,” George said to John. “It's a new way of thinking for me.”

John answered. “My family are Baptists. We're secular, Rachel and me, but we both like to come to the beach house for most big Jewish holidays, so Judith

can learn about them here. Rachel, you wouldn't dream of not celebrating Christmas with my family, or putting that ridiculously large Santa on the lawn, would you?"

"Uh-huh, and we don't celebrate Shabbat at home the way we do here," Rachel said. "That's more my personal thing at home."

"Compared to Rachel, you're a total apostate, Isaac," George said to me. "It's hard to know you're Jewish."

I grimaced at him. "Other than I'm cut?"

Mom snapped, "Isaac, don't be vulgar!"

John continued. "Maybe it'll get confusing for Judith, but she's a smart girl. When she grows up, she'll decide what she wants. All paths are open."

"You did your read up, I hear," my Dad said to John before he turned to George. "We don't hear John talking about religion every day. He always abstained from converting."

"I don't see the point," John said, raising his eyebrows. "Converting has to mean something more to me than just traditions. I think the point is to believe in some kind of God."

"And that, Dad," Rachel said, "is the very reason he shouldn't. We've been through this."

"But you obviously looked into what it means for Emma?" Dad said. "It means you have some interest, at least?"

"It means I have a friend at work who is married to a rabbi, and I asked her to ask him how this worked, when the child was adopted by two men. It's purely scientific interest."

Dad went over to John. "And we like your scientific interest in things. Thank you for researching this." Dad was walking towards the door leading inside, but changed his mind and returned to Rachel's husband. He frowned. "Kindness doesn't come with beliefs or tradition. It comes with a good heart." Dad patted him on his shoulder and then went inside.

George looked at me. I smiled, and said to Mom, "I think he's a bit more sentimental today than usual."

"Just leave him for a bit and he'll get back to being himself," Mom said. "It's a big day for all of us. You coming here, George and Emma. His family is growing and it means a lot to him."

Dad returned carrying the coffee pot.

“What did you have to pay for the apartment?” Dad asked George.

“Far too much,” I cut in, trying to avoid the question, never wanting to discuss money. George would have to pay far more than me. His income was five times what mine was, and I hated the fact that we could never be on an equal footing, financially. Editors and lawyers, being equity partners in a large New York law firm, just never had the same wage trends.

“We’ll afford it, even if it’ll cost us to be ‘Nahw Yahwakahs’,” George said, in a way that proved to us that no one would ever mistake him for a New Yorker. He smiled.

“Don’t push it, George. Stick to hillbilly,” Rachel said, now sitting in John’s lap.

Dad always took for granted that Rachel and I never had any money. We were like perpetual teenagers to him, always asking for a couple of bucks to go to the movies. “Mom and I don’t have much, but if you’re ever in need of money, we’ll help you with what we can.”

“That won’t be necessary, Dad. Don’t worry. But thanks.”

“Coffee?” Uncle Ytzack said. “We seem to have forgotten the coffee.”

“We had more important things,” Mom said. “But let’s move to the table.”

George let go of me. I went over to my uncle and reached out my hand. “Do you need a leg up?” I asked him. He gratefully let me pull him out of the chair, and grabbing his walking stick, he moved to the table set for afternoon coffee.

The girls came running back. I heard them talking and laughing as they were approaching. Emma must have had a sixth sense for treats. Everybody in our family obviously had a sixth sense for something. I was grateful my mom had stopped her calls every time I was about to get laid. Something had broken that spell. Or was it that I got laid so often now that she just couldn’t keep up?

“Emma!” I said, as I saw her head pop up over the top of the stairs. “Snack-time.”

“Are we having cake?” she asked.

“No. Watermelon,” Mom replied.

“Ahh,” she sighed, obviously disappointed.

All but Mom sat down at the table, George beside me. Emma scooted onto his lap.

Uncle Ytzack grabbed a piece of watermelon from the big plate in the middle of the table and placed it on his plate. “Now that you live in town, boys, I have a lot of things that need to be fixed in my apartment. You’re close now. You can fix them.” Uncle Ytzack shrugged his shoulders and bent his head forward, concentrating on taking a big bite from the melon.

George turned and smiled at me. Everything was working out so perfectly today. I only had one last, big assignment to finish.

Chapter Ten

Of course, I knew about the New York Marriage Equality Act that Uncle Ytzack had mentioned, and I had plans about how to ask George to marry me. I wanted it to be on the first weekend same-sex marriages were to be made legal in the state of New York, but I knew I shouldn't do it in front of my family. He still avoided getting too emotional in front of anyone but me. I would have to do it when the right time came.

In my family, people were like bald-headed eagles—mating for life. They got married in a big Jewish wedding, and stayed together until they died. Not one of my relatives had ever gotten divorced—if I didn't count my cousin Danny, whose wife one day finally dared to come out, and now lived in Seattle with her wife. But that was a completely different matter. I'd figured out there must be some special "Hahn gene" programmed to attach itself to someone and hang on. Like the eagle.

And I knew that to some, gay marriage was a heterosexual farce. To me, it was the final proof that George's love for me was worth recognizing, just as much as any love between a man and a woman. I wanted him to be my husband. I wanted to be able to present Emma's dad as my husband. I wanted... Ah, who was I kidding? I wanted George, and I wanted him with my ring on his finger, marking him as mine. I'd buy that heterosexual cliché any day.

We weren't supposed to be in the dining room until seven. George and I sneaked away like a couple of teenagers and stretched out on our bed. It was so hot, we both took off our trousers and fell asleep.

I awoke to George rubbing his groin against me. He kissed my neck and breathed against the hair at my nape. I listened carefully. Emma and Judith were busy in the kitchen with my parents. I could hear them.

"They're busy. Relax." His hand stroked my hip, further on down my leg, towards my knee. "There's plenty of time, and I found the key to our door. It was in the top drawer." His hand moved back up, caressing my hip and sliding around my waist to grab my cock. He moved his body upwards and ground against me, while teasing the tip of my cock with his thumb. I immediately got hard.

With part of my family in the house, we needed to be quiet. George knew this too, apparently. "I'll get the lube," he whispered, and set me free from his

arms, released his grip around my cock and leaned across me to get the bottle from his weekend bag on the floor on my side of the bed. He kissed the base of my neck as he returned to his previous position, with his firm chest against my back. I started to turn around but he stopped me. "No, stay on your side." George's voice gave away his arousal. It wasn't quite steady as he pushed my upper leg carefully towards my chest, making me accessible. I heard the cap of the bottle snap open, and one slicked-up finger parted the globes of my ass, touching my hole. I must have made a sound. "Shhh," he said. Without any further preparation I felt his erection against my entrance. "Okay?" he asked. I nodded without looking at him. My skin was very sensitive. Everywhere he touched me, his fingers left traces of heat, like small fires.

I pushed against him, and the tip of his cock slid easily into me. I felt my muscles tighten, then relax. George slowly entered me, in one long, pleasurable push, not stopping until his balls pressed against me. He moaned quietly. We were connected in the most intimate way possible. We stayed in that position, George kissing my neck and shoulder. I felt him grow even bigger inside me, filling me gloriously, my tight channel gripping his engorged erection.

"I love you like this," he whispered. "Relaxed, still sleepy. So close. So... mine."

George pulled back, and to stop my next moan, I pressed my face into the mattress.

"I'm not going to last long," he breathed into my back, and I heard the arousal mounting in his voice.

"Then don't," I replied, my own voice muffled from having my mouth pressed against the sheets.

He pulled out and pushed back in a bit faster, stroking with his hand from my ass-cheek to my thigh, and then grabbing my leg at the fold of my knee and pressing it against my chest. I felt him move down to get a better angle, and when he pushed in the next time, he hit my prostate. I twitched, my whole body spasming from the electricity that surged through me.

"Oh, yes," I gasped, a little too loudly.

"We have to be quiet," he huffed. "Hush."

His touch made me feel like I was going to melt. "That's so fucking good. Right there. Right there." The words flew out of me, and I tried to keep them to a whisper.

From there on, there was only raw lust, and lust always made us both very serious. Not one thought crossed my mind about not being alone in the house. Again and again he hit my sweet spot, grunting, pleasuring himself, making me almost mad with desire. My own cock was rock-hard and ready, and every stroke inside me made it leak.

“Grab your dick, Isaac,” George urged me, and let go of my knee so that I could move. His steel-hard grip caught my hip, and he placed his other hand on my shoulder, holding me steady. I lowered my knee and let my fingers embrace my erection. Using my pre-come as lubrication, I started stroking myself.

“I’m going to come,” he said. His rather calm statement made my hormones decide it was time to go into hyperdrive, and as I quickened my hand, stroking faster, George came inside me with a deep, growling grunt. It took me a second to go over the edge, urged by his orgasm, and I yelled out my release.

We both lay panting.

“It’s impossible they didn’t hear that,” I said, waiting for my heart to slow down.

“Yep. Well,” George said, as he slowly pulled out, careful not to hurt me, “If they did, I guess your mom already figured out she won’t be expecting any grandkids nine months from now.” He chuckled.

“Oh, you’re hopeless,” I said. “Hopeless and wonderful.” I turned around to face him. “And I love you.”

“Does your mother always call everybody ‘honey’?” George asked, one hand slowly stroking my now-sated dick.

“Wow, this is a new one, even for me—discussing my mom while the most beautiful man is stroking my dick. Makes it kind of kinky.”

George grabbed a handful of my balls and squeezed hard. I squealed like a girl, “What the hell!” George hushed me laughingly by covering my mouth, a smile playing on his lips. “I guess you don’t want any members of my family to come barging in, trying to save me from this monster. So quit it,” I tried to say, with his hand still lightly covering my mouth.

He stopped stroking me and instead he tucked me in against his chest. “You do the same. You call me ‘honey’ all the time,” he said.

“Do I?”

“Yes, you do. You never noticed?”

“Mom uses ‘honey’ with the ones she loves the most. I guess I do the same.”

I turned my face and leaned close so our lips could meet in a sensual, slow kiss. George’s hand stroked the back of my head, caressing the nape of my neck, then moving further down to my back. When we finally broke the kiss, George’s hand was on my waist. Our eyes met and neither of us looked away or even blinked, both feeling the bond between us.

“I love you,” George said, his eyes bright and full of devotion.

“I know, honey,” I said with a smile. I reached over and grabbed my still-damp bath towel from the afternoon. “Here.” He wiped himself clean and handed the towel back to me. We both got into our clothes. It wouldn’t do for both of us to be naked if someone came banging at the door, wanting in.

“Where do you think Rachel and John went? Both girls are still in the kitchen. I can hear them through the floor boards,” I said.

“John’s way of looking at Rachel during coffee tells me they’re off somewhere going at it like rabbits. I saw them sneak away towards the garage.”

“Hmm, there’s a small room above the garage. We used it as our hideaway when we were kids. There’s a mattress in there.” I gave George a smug smile. “Guess it can be used for things other than sitting on when having milk and cookies.”

“So,” George pulled me into his arms again and brushed his lips against my neck. “Do you think Judith will have a little sister or brother in nine months? It kind of thrills me, thinking we can babysit for your sister and help her out. They’ve done so much for us. We’ll have a whole bunch of kids running around with us, out on the High Line.”

I raised my eyebrows. “Hey, God knows, not all sex ends with kids. We’re hardly aiming for reproduction,” I snorted.

“You? You get all target-orientated. You should look at yourself in the mirror sometimes.” He whispered in my ear. “You’re different when you top me. You’re always so kind and understanding—loving. But when you get that dick of yours inside me, your autopilot sets you on possessive. That’s a hell of a turn-on.”

I playfully slapped him across his head. “I just want to get off. The rest is just your imagination. And could you please stop? If I’m going to show up at

dinner without a raging hard-on, we have to stop now.” I pushed him away. “Once is obviously not enough anymore. I’m getting insatiable.”

George chuckled and turned over to lie on his stomach, resting on his elbows, looking down at me.

“Okay,” he said.

I couldn’t stop my arms from pulling him towards me, and I hesitated, wondering if now was the time to ask him to marry me. The thought made my heart suddenly race uncontrollably.

“Oh. Your heart is pounding hard,” George said, with his cheek resting on my chest. “Is something wrong?”

“No. Nothing’s wrong. Absolutely nothing.”

He played with my nipple through my shirt. “I think the love you have for your family makes you even more attractive to me who never really had a family.”

“What? The fact I have a mother who checks every move I make and an uncle that both looks and moves like an old tortoise and makes us fix his sink? How on earth does that make me attractive?” I smirked at him.

“Isaac...” George pressed his body against me and kissed me hungrily. He left me panting, looking deep into my eyes. “The way you love them is wonderful to me, and the way they love you... and now me... You know I never had a family before who supported me, who loved me for who I am, no matter what. Well, there was Becky, and she was amazing but... You take it for granted. I take having a family as a gift. It’s a big thing.” He lifted his head to rest his chin on my chest and look into my eyes. “Before I met you I had nothing. Now I have everything.”

This was my cue. It suddenly felt right.

I released my grip around him and sat up. I was so nervous and must have looked very serious. This was my George, and I didn’t think he would say no, but... It was a very big moment for me.

“What?” He sat up too and looked at me curiously.

“George?” I heard my voice had a very solemn note. “Speaking of family...”

Touched by the moment, I had to clear my throat to steady my nerves. I had rehearsed this, but that didn’t make it any less nerve-wracking.

“You know how much I love you, George, and... I can't even imagine my life without you. After everything we've been through together, I love you more and more every day.” I cupped his cheeks in my hands to really look deep into his eyes. “You're the one I want to kiss when I'm old and gray and I want it to be you lending me a hand when I need help getting up from the couch like Uncle Ytzack.” My voice was now only a whisper, and I was so nervous my hands were shaking. “Please, George. Will you marry me?”

George tilted his head and gave me a lopsided smile. “It's all wrong, you know.”

“Wrong?” I asked perplexed.

“You know we're doing this the wrong way? First you see me broken down like an old pine after Becky died. Then you become a father without expecting it. And I get a wonderful family—your family—into the bargain.” George chuckled. “*Then* we get married. Aren't we doing all this in the wrong order?”

I blinked. “Was that a yes?”

“Of course it was a yes!” he laughed.

We held each other tight. George sought my lips and kissed me.

“Wait, I'll get the rings,” I said and moved out of his arms.

He sat on the bed watching me as I went to my weekend bag. I found the little black jewelry box in the separate compartment and brought it with me. George's eyes beamed at me, glittering like the water in the sea where we made love earlier.

“I...” I had to clear my throat again, my emotions were everywhere. “I wanted you to have something that's very special to me.” I picked up a thick golden wedding band. “I have my grandparents' wedding rings, and I had them altered to fit us. I thought that... they were happily married for over fifty years... maybe they'd bestow some of their happiness onto us. The true beauty of wedding rings are not the glimmer and the sparkle—I think the real beauty lies in the nicks and the scratches that comes with a life together. They were a wonderful family. So are we.”

“Isaac...” George watched my hands as I slipped one of the rings onto his left ring finger. I knew it would fit—I'd measured one of his rings for size. He was deeply touched, his voice thick. “I didn't think I needed more happiness. But apparently I do.”

I leaned close and kissed him again. “You’re cheesy. You always were, you know.”

Now George laughed out loud. He knew exactly how sweet and sappy he could be with me, not that grave façade he preferred to show others, and I loved it.

“I love you, Isaac. Where’s your ring?”

“Here.” I took it out of the box.

George took it from me and placed it on my finger. The metal felt unfamiliar. I’d never worn rings—this was the first and it was the only ring I ever wanted to wear. George looked too, before he wound our hands together so the rings touched. “There. These rings must be old.”

“My grandparents were married in 1948, in Israel, but the rings might be even older. I had the inscription put back after I had them resized, but with our initials.”

“What does it say?”

“‘I am yours and you are mine, and may this joy be with us always.’ But it’s in Hebrew. You won’t be able to read it.”

George started blinking away tears. “I remember. That’s what you said to me on the beach today.”

“It’s an old Jewish blessing.”

He laughed, and his tears came so quickly that he didn’t have a chance to blink them away. “Your mom will be pleased with you. She has a blessing for everything.” He withdrew to discreetly wipe his eyes.

“Come here, you cheesy fool.” I clutched him in my arms and we laughed together.

Chapter Eleven

We cleaned up for dinner. Since it was Friday evening, the beginning of Shabbat and the day of our engagement, I tried to look my best in a shirt and tie; very unusual for me.

George, out of courtesy to my parents and the tradition, had changed into more official clothing, wearing something he could be wearing to work. It was too hot for a suit jacket, so he decided to go with a tie, white shirt, and waistcoat and trousers that hugged his tight ass perfectly. He looked absolutely amazing. I'd always had a thing for him in his formal wear, and I kissed him and kissed him, until he begged me to stop or he would have to stay in the room to cool things off.

George and I went down the stairs, and Emma came rushing as we entered the dining room. She threw herself at me.

"Hi, Munchkin," I said as I lifted her up and carried her. "Did you have a good time with Grandma?"

"We made..." she hesitated and turned to look at Mom, who came out from the kitchen. "What did we make?"

"We made apricot chicken for tomorrow and the usual for tonight," she answered.

"Dad, you can't imagine." Emma turned to George so quickly I almost dropped her. "We made fish and soup and more chicken and a big, big bread. Like the one we made in Cleveland."

I laughed and hugged Emma who was now balanced on my hip. "It's called challah. We always have that on Fridays."

Emma was restless in her anticipation for dinner and wiggled in my arms—her signal for telling me to let her down. She ran off to Mom and helped her with placing the cutlery.

Everyone had arrived in the dining room. Mom and Dad were finishing the preparations for dinner, Rachel and John were laughing as they folded napkins with Judith. My uncle already sat at the table in his usual spot.

"Hello there," my dad said, as he looked up from setting the table. "Did you have a nice rest?" He smiled at George.

“Yes, thank you, sir.” George said politely.

“Oh, no no no,” Dad said, stopping him, shaking his head. “You know I’m not Sir. You might be used to that from back home but I’d prefer it if you’d to call me David. Or you’re welcome to call me Dad like Isaac does, but I’m not sure it would feel right. And unlike your father, who is an asshole—” Mom had always been very outspoken, but this crossed even her line in front of the kids, and she opened her mouth to protest. He hurried to continue, “Unlike your father, I’m very happy to have you as our son’s... Hey, Isaac. Help me out here. What are you? I’m probably not up to date. Tell me the correct official term right now. Is it domestic partner? Or just partner?”

I grinned at him. “From now on I think the term is going to be husband, Dad. My husband.”

The dinner preparations stopped. Mom dropped a fork, and it clinked as it landed on the edge of the plate. My family stared at us like a troop of startled lemurs. Except Dad. He looked smug.

George wrapped his arms around my waist from behind, and I slid close, leaning my back against his firm chest. George, being the same height, rested his chin on my shoulder and smiled, looking at my family.

I smiled too. “We have a big announcement to make.” I hesitated, unsure how to say it without sounding too ceremonial. Or too conventional.

Rachel, of course, took advantage of the passing seconds. “Oh, my God,” she said, mocking a startled expression with her mouth open and eyes wide. She smacked her hand to her cheek. “He’s going to tell us he’s pregnant!”

Uncle Ytzack huffed out a quiet laugh. Rachel frowned at him.

“Rachel!” Mom snapped. My dad laughed. He had always enjoyed Rachel’s quick comebacks. “That’s not funny,” Mom continued. “Your brother has important information for us. What is it, honey? There’s nothing wrong, is there?”

Lately I had only been burdening my family with bad news and problems. Not this time.

“We... we’ve decided to change our tax status,” I said, and grinned at my family.

“What?” Mom said with a puzzled look on her face.

George let go of me and stood at my side. “What Mr. Witty is saying, is that we are engaged to be married. According to the law of the state of New York, Isaac will soon be my lawfully wedded husband.”

“And we will both legally be Emma’s parents,” I added.

Mom looked at me, then at George, with the most radiant smile on her face. “That’s wonderful news!” she said. “Wonderful! I’m so happy for you!” She came over to us and wrapped us both in her arms as well as she could, considering the fact she only reached us to our shoulders. “George, you and Emma are such an important addition to our family.”

Dad went over to George and offered him his hand. George took it, and Dad reeled him in in a big hug. Then Dad hugged me, until it felt as if my eyes were about to pop out. “Well done, son. Well done.”

“Yeah,” Rachel said. “But how on earth could you keep such a big secret in this family?”

“Eh... Dad knew. He gave me the rings.”

Dad chuckled. “Let me see.” I showed him my ring, and George did the same. “Looks good on you. I’m glad you decided to keep the inscriptions. They kind of go with the family.”

“And you didn’t tell Mom?” Rachel laughed loudly.

“Some surprises are best kept as surprises, Rachel. I don’t mind,” Mom said.

John, for once, was the one now snorting out a laugh towards Mom. “As if! Ha, my ass. You knew Rachel was pregnant with Judith before I did. Congratulations, both of you. I’m glad to have you in the family, George.” He came over to us and hugged first George, then me.

“Dad...” Emma came up to George and looked seriously at him. “Are you going to marry Papa?”

“Yes. If it’s okay with you. It wasn’t legal before, but now it is, and it’s very important for me to be married to Papa, just like Rachel and John are married, and Grandma and Grandpa.” George gave a quick glance in my direction.

Emma looked at George, then at me for a long time. Suddenly she squinted, and pinned her eyes back onto George. “Will Papa wear a wedding dress?” she

asked, serious in the way only a five-year-old can be. Then she added, shaking her head slowly, like she was warning George, "I don't think he will like that."

George appeared to be totally flabbergasted. Whatever answer he'd expected, this wasn't it.

Rachel exploded with laughter, and I couldn't stop my mouth from twitching severely. We both did our best to hide our mirth. This moment, I thought, had to be written down somewhere, so that I could tell her the story at her own wedding one day.

"No, honey. He won't need to wear a dress," George grinned sheepishly at me as he said it. "Why should he wear a dress?"

I wanted to know that too.

"When the prince marries the most beautiful princess in the world, the princess gets to wear a *biiiiig* wedding dress," she answered, sweeping with her hands, showing the size of the skirt. "Then you eat cake."

"Okay. Well, now the prince gets to marry the most beautiful prince in the whole world, so we'll both wear prince clothes," George said and smiled at Emma. "But we might have cake."

"Yes to the cake, no to the dress," I said to George. "I think Dad and I will wear our tuxedos. And you'll get a new dress." I didn't consider that as a bribe.

"Will you get married in a church?" Emma asked.

"Noooo..." I hesitated and looked at George. "Probably not... Maybe here at the beach house... On the big porch overlooking the sea, and now in the summer... something very small... Just to say that we've done it..."

"Sounds good to me," George said, smiling at me.

"Is it okay, Mom, if we don't have a big, Jewish wedding?" I asked.

She laughed. "You do exactly what you feel is right. It would be wonderful to have the wedding here. We'll make it beautiful for you."

Rachel cut in, still chuckling about Emma's dress comment, apparently. "George, I think the only weddings Emma knows about are Cinderella's and Snow White's. You can't hold it against her."

"Well. Someone has to forge new paths," George said to Rachel. Bending down, he scooped Emma up into his arms. "Hey, golden child. Perhaps we're not like all other families, but no one could love you more than Papa and I do, okay?"

“Yeah,” Emma giggled, as George swung her around in the air in his strong arms.

“Ask Papa what color lipstick he’ll wear,” George teased.

Emma shook her little head. “No, I won’t,” she said from up in George’s arms. “You won’t wear lipstick, Papa. You’re a boy. Dad is crazy.”

“See?” I said, raising my eyebrows to George. “She’s already got the hang of it. Yes, Emma, Dad is super-crazy.” I reached over and tousled her hair. “But he is super-wonderful anyway.”

Emma reached out her arms to hug me, and George passed her on from his arms to mine.

“So,” my dad said, and cleared his throat. He patted George’s shoulder one last time. “Isaac. Do you think you could get the candles? It’s time we finished our preparations for Shabbat.”

“What do you say, *Ziskeit*?” I adjusted Emma higher up on my hip so she would sit better. “Shall we get the Shabbat candles? I think they’re in the big cupboard.” With all the attention and the nervousness now over, I felt free and relaxed. Maybe the smile on my face was made permanent; with George and Emma as my very own family it might be there to stay forever.

The dining room table was set with a white cloth, Mom’s nicest white china and my grandma’s silver cutlery. Mom must have been outside sometime between baking and cooking and picked flowers. She’d placed a vase on the table, full of garden flowers mixed with small delicate sandplain gerardias from the grassy edge of the sandy beach. Judith helped her with making the flowers stand straight in the vase.

I opened the big cupboard and saw the two silver candleholders. Emma peeked in, hanging off my hip. Mom had put new candles beside them. I took them out, having Emma hold one and we placed them on the side board.

“Get the other two, honey,” Mom said to me. “For the girls.”

There were two smaller candleholders. “These?” I asked.

“Yes. They were yours and Rachel’s, remember? I haven’t had them out for years. I should have continued taking them out and lighting them for you after you left home, but somehow I went back to only having the two.” She tickled Judith who was standing beside her, and she laughed. “I think it’s time to start some new traditions.”

I felt George's hand on my back. I turned around and he grinned while looking into my eyes, and he kissed me. I was again amazed how he dared show so much affection in front of my family. It had changed so quickly.

Mom caught us in the moment. "Love doves, could you help me with fetching the bowls of salad from the kitchen? Go make yourselves useful."

The candles were out and arranged on the oak sideboard, the cup for the wine set on the table. Dad had put the bread on its cutting board and covered it, placing the knife nearby but safely away from the edge of the table. Mom and the kids had prepared the food, everything was waiting in the kitchen. We were ready.

"If there is one tradition I want to keep in our family," I said to George, as we were waiting to sit down, "it would be the celebration of Shabbat. I love the easy Friday evenings with my family. On Sundays we're all back up and running as usual. I need this twenty-four hour window to catch up with myself and just be me. Be a family."

"Is it possible that your view on Judaism and tradition is based more on your sluggish personality than spirituality?" he asked and winked at me.

For once, I was at a loss for words.

"Pay up, guys," Rachel held a bowl in front of me. I grimaced.

Uncle Ytzack waved a ten-dollar note in Rachel's direction. She went over to him, and he put it in the bowl. Mom and Dad each put money in the bowl.

"What's that?" George asked.

"It's part of the tradition. Mom wants us to contribute for a good cause every week," I explained. "Among the orthodox, it's common to send charity to Israel, but as reform Jews, she wants us to support local non-religious groups. It's still a good deed. My wallet is upstairs, Rachel. I'll give it to you later."

"What's it for this week?" John asked.

Rachel answered, "Mom sends them to the youth center on 28th. They're starting up another shelter for runaway kids. You have no idea how much good every dollar does. Do you want to contribute even though you're an infidel?" She held out the bowl to John and smirked at him. "They need the money."

John dug in his pocket and fished out a twenty-dollar bill and put it in Rachel's bowl. With this she seemed satisfied, and headed to put the bowl by the Shabbat candles.

“Wait,” George said. He got his wallet out from his front pocket. Rachel returned and held the bowl in front of George. He took out two one-hundred dollar bills and put them in the bowl. “Here. I wish I could give more, but that’s what I have on me.”

Rachel looked at George, amazed. “Thank you. They will use it well. I know some of the psychiatrists who are volunteering.”

Dad patted George on the back in his usual manner as he passed him on his way to the table. “That was good of you.”

“My money is far better used on helping some kid to survive another day than staying in my wallet.”

George didn’t have to tell me he wished there’d been a shelter for him back then. I stroked his back to show him I knew, and he nodded at me.

Rachel went and put the bowl on the oak sideboard.

“Come, girls. Light the Shabbat candles for us. Rachel, are you ready?” Mom waved Emma and Judith over. She gave Emma a match.

“Is it okay, Dad?” Emma asked George, looking at him and at my mom. She knew she wasn’t allowed to touch matches.

“With Grandma it’s okay,” George confirmed, nodding at Emma.

Mom let Emma light the first small candle. Judith had difficulties setting fire to the match, and Rachel had to help her. Then Mom lit both the big candles, circled her hands over them three times and covered her eyes. Emma’s eyes grew wide as Mom performed the blessing for Shabbat. I’d seen my mom do this on Fridays as far back as I could remember, but to Emma and George it was all new. Mom ended today with a prayer for her granddaughters’ health and happiness.

George’s emotions surfaced as he was standing beside me watching the ceremony, and he chewed on his lower lip. I took his hand, and he squeezed mine. “Too much mumbo jumbo?” I asked him quietly, watching him from the corner of my eye.

He looked inexplicably sad, and his smile was a little hesitant. “No. Not at all. I think it’s beautiful.”

“Then what is it?” I turned my head to look at him. “I feel your nerves are on the outside.”

“Just too much happiness, I guess,” he said, looking at the two women’s and the two girls’ faces lit up by the candles, all looking at peace. “And also gratitude.” He squeezed my hand.

Mom turned around, away from the candles and took Dad’s hands. She kissed him slowly on his lips before she spoke, smiling at him. “Shabbat shalom.”

I turned to George, still holding his hand. “Peaceful Shabbat. That’s what it means. So I wish you the same.” I kissed his cheeks. First one, then the other. George had closed his eyes by the time I was finished.

Dad returned Mom’s greeting and kissed her on her cheek. Still holding hands, they turned to us. Dad spoke, and his voice was solemn. “Before we sit down and carry on with the Kiddush, I want to say something to all of you.” Dad had to clear his throat. “I always prayed to one day see my two children with spouses who adore them, and have their own children to love as much as I love my Rachel and my Isaac. Today is that day. It has come, and I’m grateful that God has let me experience it. Family is our main support when life is tough, but also our main joy when life is good.” Dad cleared his throat again, clearly emotional. “George. You’re like a son to us, just like John is more than just Rachel’s husband. He and you are a part of our family, no less than our own children. We wish you to feel at home with us, sharing our joys and our sorrows. If you and Isaac ever need us, in happiness or in sadness, we’ll be there for you. I hope we’ve already proven that.” He let go of Mom and went over to George, placing his hand on his shoulder. “We are your family now, and you should always feel at home here with us.”

Everyone looked at George. We all saw how profoundly moved he was.

“Thank you...” George’s voice cracked. “You know Isaac is the most wonderful thing that ever happened to me. Being welcomed into the family this way, it’s so...” He suddenly couldn’t speak, just shook his head.

“Oh, honey,” Mom said in a happy voice to George. “We’re the grateful ones to have you in our lives. You are a blessing.”

Dad smiled and squeezed George’s shoulder. He continued to Rachel and John, giving them their traditional Shabbat greetings. We were back on track again with our traditions. Mom kissed George’s cheeks and greeted him.

“Now, let’s sit down,” Dad said. “As one big family.”

The others started to sit down, but Emma came and pulled at George’s and my joined hands. We still stood by the chest of drawers, and she wanted up.

George grabbed her and pulled her up, but she turned to me. "Uncle Ytzack told me to tell you 'Gut Shabbos.' What's that?"

I laughed and ruffled her hair, now loose and well brushed. I was sure Mom had laid the final touch on it while we were upstairs. "It's Yiddish. It means Happy Shabbat. You say it to each other when the Friday and Saturday rest starts. Mom and Uncle Ytzack learned Yiddish when they grew up. I'm sure they'll both teach you some, if you ask them."

"Can you speak Gibberish?" she asked me.

George for once let out a big belly laugh, and his eyes glittered mischievously as he looked at me. The remaining tension in his nerves from my dad's speech obviously poured out of him like melted ice water from a glacier. He looked happier than he ever had. In this chaos of kids and uncles, he thrived.

"No, Munchkin. I can't," I said. "I never bothered to learn. Which I regret today," I said to George. "Now it's too late to learn to speak it fluently. And it's Yiddish. Not Gibberish. Gibberish means you don't speak any language at all, just sounds that are like words, but are not real words."

"You're fluent. In Gibberish," George said, blinking at me. "You have no idea what words you can make up."

"Here, Emma. Hop down and join Judith at the table," I said, hoisting her first up in the air and then down. Emma darted away.

I turned to George with my most devilish smile. I grabbed his hair with both hands, pulling him to me, not caring if he got embarrassed by public display of our affection. My way of holding him must have reminded him how I sometimes loved grabbing his hair when we had sex, and I caught the glint in his eye. I was so close I only whispered, "Okay, Mr. George Parker. I know I can blabber along quite well during sex, so let's say I do speak fluent Gibberish. But only when I fuck you. Do you want me to demonstrate at the dinner table tonight?" I smiled when I kissed him. "I can speak Gibberish. I think it would make you pretty embarrassed, because it involves certain movements to get me inspired..."

He stopped me talking by kissing me. When he let go of my lips he smiled, just as devilishly as I'd just tried to. "No, but maybe a demonstration later tonight?"

"You bet. I'll bang you. Speaking Gibberish."

"Boys, are you coming?" Mom asked from the table.

We looked at each other and laughed, both apparently thinking of Mom's suitable choice of words. I was standing with my back towards my family, just listening to them speaking, George holding me tight, looking deep into my eyes.

"God, I love you, Isaac," George smiled and kissed me again, quite forcefully. He was so joyful and relaxed, and he obviously felt comfortable with showing my family exactly how passionately he loved me, right in front of them. My future husband. George.

"Hey, guys," Rachel called out. "Get a room."

I heard my Dad's voice. "Rachel, there are children present. No language."

"Why are you picking on me? Look at them, Dad," Rachel said. "They're the ones who are NC-17 rated here."

"No." Judith's rare voice suddenly spoke up. She must have been answering a question from Rachel that I didn't catch. Judith continued explaining, "Your Dad is licking your Papa clean. My friend's dog did that once when I'd eaten ice cream."

"You let Cookie lick you on your face?" John sounded disgusted. "Dogs have germs."

"I didn't have a handkesh... hande... handkerchief," Judith said.

Emma, free-spirited as always, immediately came back to Judith. "Use your sleeve next time. Or a Kleenex." Then she raised her voice, probably thinking George and I would hear her better. "Dad, do you need a napkin? Then you don't have to lick Papa clean." And she added with emphasis, like it was very important to inform us, "John says Dad has germs."

"I said dogs have germs," John replied. "Not George."

"What is germs?" Judith wanted to know.

"I don't know. Worms?" John suggested.

Mom broke in. "I think heartworm is spreading in this area, actually. We should take Molly to the vet just to be sure that..." Mom sounded concerned, but she got interrupted.

"Worms!" Emma's voice got bright, almost in panic. I could hear the tears approaching from the sound of her voice. "No! Stop, Papa, now! Dad can have a worm in his heart! Don't let him lick you."

“Okay, okay,” my dad said. “Who started this?”

Rachel sounded laidback. “I think you did, Dad. You tried to stop me from saying they should go to their bedroom if they want to drag that out any further.” She apparently meant George still holding me in his arms, still kissing me.

Dad defended himself. “Me? I didn’t say anything. The boys can do whatever they like. Having sex with your spouse on Shabbat is a blessing, you know that. Why should I say anything?”

“Dad! David!” John and Rachel cried out at the same time. Rachel continued, “The little ears here might not need to learn all the traditions at the same time.”

The situation at the table was getting more chaotic.

“Waah! Dad has a worm in his heart!” Emma cried out, now it sounded as if her tears were near too, perhaps even falling already. “It’s going to eat him up from the inside!”

Rachel added, “That’s science fiction, Emma. No one’s going to be eaten from the inside.”

“Sign’s fiction?” Emma hiccupped.

“There’s a movie where an extra-terrestrial eats people from the inside. But it’s a movie. Not for real.”

“Not helping, Rachel,” John hissed.

“Children need their fears explained, to help them learn what’s real and what isn’t,” Rachel said. “This discussion needs some facts... It’s getting too superficial.”

“No, your dad doesn’t have a worm anywhere,” I heard my mom say patiently. “Where did you get that from?”

“You said so, Grandma. A heartworm.”

Judith’s clear soft voice joined in, sobbing, “If he had used a hanki... handcher... Kleenex, he wouldn’t have to lick your Papa. He would have used that and he wouldn’t have a worm in his heart.”

“You said Cookie licked you. You might have a worm too.” Emma sounded rational between her sobs and made Judith cry harder.

Uncle Ytzack decided to join the conversation. “You should have seen the parasites when I was stationed in Korea in the fifties. I had one, as thick as your wrist in my...”

John raised his voice. “Now stop. Everybody. Stop, stop, stop.” He spoke loudly to be heard over the girls crying. “Everybody. Calm down. This is absurd.” I turned my head to see him go and pick up Judith from her chair. “And it’s silly,” John added.

Mom sat down beside Emma, comforting her. “No one has any worms, honey. I meant to say we should take our dog to the vet for her annual check-up and vaccination against heartworm. And your Dad just kissed your Papa. Nothing else. You know they like to kiss. People do that when they love each other.”

Emma hiccupped again. “Can Dad get a vaccination too if he goes to the vet? He can go with Molly. I just want him to be safe from worms.”

Mom obviously decided for a half-lie to make Emma feel better. “I’ll ask the vet. Maybe he knows. I promise. Your Dad will be safe.”

George wound his arms around my shoulders and pulled me in close. I felt him chuckle violently, and he buried his head in my hair. I joined in with his laughter, it was impossible not to.

“Listen to them,” he whispered in my ear. “Our family.”

Epilogue

September 28th, 2013

John had delved deep in the wine cellar in the basement of the Brooklyn house and found some French wines Dad said he put there a long time ago. George's unfortunate history of parents and alcohol meant that he seldom drank anything but soda. Tonight, though, he'd made an exception, and we both had a couple glasses of Chateaux Dordogne from 1987. When we returned home, we weren't really buzzed, just extremely pleased with the wine and the food and the fact that we were celebrating my first bestseller as an editor at Emerald Publishing, the publisher where I'd worked the last years.

Emma crashed and fell asleep within five minutes, exhausted after playing with Rachel and John's baby all evening, together with Judith. Sam was already over a year old now, and perhaps he couldn't be called a baby anymore. He had started walking and talking and among the first words he'd said, besides the compulsory "Mama" and "Dada", was "Uh" for Uncle George. I definitely came in second place when it came to popularity among the uncles.

We had all been at Rachel's. Mom and Dad had joined us and stayed overnight with Rachel and John, so they wouldn't have to go home to Long Island late at night. We had invited Uncle Ytzack, but he declined. Mom gossiped a bit. He had finally moved to a retirement home, and it was poker night every second Saturday there. My Uncle never missed poker night, mainly because a Mrs. Freeman also played poker. He was eighty-four but obviously young enough to fall in love. He would join us next weekend at the beach house instead.

George and I lay in bed, and as usual it took only a couple of minutes for us to realize just how horny we were. The perfect evening just needed the perfect ending. I got up and fiddled with the lock to our bedroom door, while George lay naked in bed with a smirk on his face, hands behind his head and his erection straining, hard and throbbing, waiting for me. Every time we made love, it brought new sensations, and I came like a rocket with George inside me. He followed me within seconds, biting down on my back to keep himself from screaming.

We lay together, softly kissing, until neither of us had the energy to continue. George rummaged around in the bed linen until he found his sleeping T-shirt, and used it to wipe us clean, then tossed it on the floor. We both lay on

our sides, watching each other in the darkness. Everything in the room had slightly yellow edges from the faint lamps lighting up the New York High Line outside our bedroom window.

George had gotten tired of having a beard. He said it didn't make him hip, only look older, especially when small traces of gray had blended in with the dark brown, and after having it for about a year he'd shaved it off. Now he'd shaved right before we went to Rachel's dinner and his cheeks were still soft. With my finger, I traced the laugh lines around his eyes and the small lines around his mouth. I looked at him in awe. He was still the most beautiful man I had ever seen, and even though I saw him every day and from every angle, I never got tired of looking at him.

"If you stare at me like that, your eyes will pop out."

"I'm just thinking how much I love you," I said, feeling my heart thumping in my chest. I slid my hand behind his neck and brought him to me for another long, searing kiss.

When we finally pulled apart, George's eyes were soft as he looked into mine. "I love you." He took my hand and gave the thick golden band a twist. "Two years."

"And Emma is seven. Can you imagine?"

"No. But yesterday when she and I reassembled her chair to fit her better, I noticed she's growing like a weed."

I settled in more comfortably, putting my hand under the pillow, fluffing it to support my neck. "Should we plan something for our second anniversary?"

"Isn't that a little stereotypical?" George answered my question with a question.

"What? You love being married. You speak of me as 'your husband' all the time. Don't pretend you don't like it."

"I like it. I love being married. To you." He blinked as he looked at me.

"Sappy-time?"

"Yeah."

"Come here." I reached for him and he slid willingly into my waiting arms. "Two glasses of wine and you get all mushy."

George chuckled in my arms. "It's not the wine. It's you. I have all the happiness I want and it's you making me happy."

“You see? All mushy.” I chuckled and pressed him closer. “But we should do something special for our anniversary. I at least know what I’d like to do.”

“What?”

“I’d prefer if we went to the beach house and spent it there, with Mom and Dad and Rachel’s family. Maybe we could even have the same menu as we had on the wedding. I was so fucking nervous, so I have no idea what it tasted like. I only know everyone says it was one of the best meals they’d ever had. If the caterer could do it again, I’d like to try the food in peace and quiet this time.”

“Not with thirty people on the porch asking me to kiss you for photos?”

“Yeah. Exactly.”

George moved slightly so he could see my face. “God, I think you’re blushing. You weren’t all that comfortable being the center of attention, were you? Or were you embarrassed when I kissed you in front of all your family and our friends?” He cupped my cheek, stroking me gently with his thumb.

“You can’t see me blush in this darkness, you’re just teasing me. I think kissing is a very intimate way of showing affection. Letting thirty people witness how you clean my molars with your tongue isn’t intimate.” I tried to sound upset, but I wasn’t. I was proud he’d showed to everyone just how much he loved me. “That day I might have preferred just a little bit of the old George, the one that hardly showed any affection at all in front of my family.”

George threw his head back and laughed. “But that was about how intimate we got that day, remember?”

“Aha,” I said triumphantly. “I wasn’t the one that fell asleep still in my tux. I’m sure I would have been up to it, if you get the pun.”

“Well, ha ha. Yes, it had been a long day, and yes, I was absolutely exhausted. Sorry, I robbed you of your wedding night fuck. I didn’t think you were that traditional.”

I raised my eyebrows and hoped George would see it through the darkness. “When it comes to fucking, I’m extremely traditional. Jewish tradition says it’s a blessing to ‘have marital intimacy with your spouse’. I’m counting my blessings.”

“I think we overcompensated during the following weeks, so…” George chuckled.

“Yeah, no harm done. We’re still on the credit side. Will you go get the door?”

George slid out of bed and unlocked the door to our bedroom. Neither of us wanted Emma to stand outside a locked door, but we didn't want her to walk in on us either. It was a bit tricky.

When George returned, he crawled under the covers, still naked. "It's a good idea, going to the beach house to celebrate with your family," he said, when we were snuggled under the covers with our arms around each other.

"They're your family, too. And it's not romantic, like renting a cabin and going at it like rabbits..." I said.

"Oh, shoot..." George chuckled again and nudged his nose against my mine. "You ruined my surprise. The cabin and the rabbit..."

I moved so I could gently cup George's balls as he lay close, feeling the weight of them and the wrinkly skin cool against my palm, playing with them. "I think we can fit in your plans too. Now, when Emma sleeps in her own room at the beach house."

"Or... there's always the room above the garage..."

I clicked my tongue. "And you don't think Rachel and John already have dibs on that?"

We laughed. We both suspected Sam had been conceived during one of Rachel and John's "visits" to the room above the garage. Our wedding had apparently inspired them for a long time, and they'd been like two love birds, sneaking away as soon they had a chance. They'd almost been embarrassingly obvious.

"So, it's okay to celebrate our anniversary with my large and crazy family?" I asked, and removed my hand from his groin so I could hold him closer.

"Family is everything," he answered.

"Yeah. Family is everything."

George looked at me thoughtfully. "Isaac, sometimes I think you actually wished it would be possible."

"What?"

"Having more children. Emma is growing up as an only child, and I know... We both know how much it means to have a sister. Or a brother. Judith seems very pleased with becoming a big sister. You thrive when we're at Rachel's, with all the kids together. I see you with Sam..."

“Ha, I see you with Sam. He’s acting like he’s *your* kid, even with his parents around. He loves his ‘Uh’. If you don’t watch out, Emma will get jealous. I think you’re turning into some kind of super-dad. Everything you give those kids is everything you missed out on growing up.” I lightly stroked his cheek.

“I believe you miss having your own large family, too.” He was suddenly very serious. “I think it’s that Jewish part of you.”

I moved so I could look deep into his eyes. “Honestly, George. Don’t you think that was one of the first things I realized after accepting I was gay? A bunch of kids was definitely not in my future, most possibly none at all. Now I’m Emma’s Papa, and I’m so happy with life giving her to me. You two are my family. It’s more than I’d hoped for. Much more. Of course I’d like us to have more children in our family, but that’s just not possible.”

George sounded thoughtful. “I don’t know if just any kid would be accepted by Emma, but...”

“But what?”

He opened his mouth, but hesitated and closed it again. Then he apparently took a run for it and his voice was a bit rushed when he spoke. “Lately I’ve done a lot of thinking, and I’ve made some enquiries. We aren’t allowed to make you a father by surrogacy here in New York, but there are states...”

“Wait! Whoa!” I said, held up my hand, and George stopped talking.

I had to gather my thoughts. He... he wanted our family to grow. And this time by choice.

He lay still, waiting for my reaction, looking at me.

A strange mix of feelings that I couldn’t control rushed out. It was as if he’d thrown me with a wide sweep into a pile of snow. While my heart was racing with exaltation from the thrill of riding through the air, I knew it might get cold landing.

After I’d taken a couple of deep breaths, the thought that we might be entering a new chapter of our lives, to start planning for more children, touched ground in my mind and heart so quickly it frightened me. George knew me far too well, and my inner voice cried out to me as vividly as if I was speaking the words out loud. Yes. Absolutely yes.

My face must have expressed a combination of deer-in-the-headlights and Santa-is-coming, and I had to steady myself to speak.

“Eh, George? How long have you been thinking about this? And which states exactly?”

George gave me a very pleased look.

The End

Author Bio

Since author Amelia Mann lives in the cold, dark North, her characters must be warm and bright. The men in her stories live their own lives in her head, sometimes letting her in on their secrets. Amelia believes that all stories are worth telling—even the sad ones—but things must come to a happy end, or it is just not finished yet.

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