

Don't Read in the Closet Event 2014



**LOVE'S LANDSCAPES
ANTHOLOGY**

**BONUS
VOLUME 1**

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Love's Landscapes

An M/M Romance Anthology

Bonus Volume 1

Introduction

The stories you are about to read celebrate 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 these anthologies are 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.

Over 210 stories were submitted and have now been published as a seventeen volume set with five additional bonus volumes, titled *Love's Landscapes*; this edition is Bonus Volume 1.

Words of Caution

These stories may contain sexually explicit content and are **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.

Dedication

As you can imagine, coordinating over 210 authors, proofing their work and publishing it both online and in e-print involved hundreds of hours of volunteer work. Over the course of seven months, nearly forty members chipped in to help at various times; the *M/M Romance Group* would like to extend a special thanks to the volunteers of the event team for their unwavering commitment and enthusiasm.

Ebook Layout and Navigation

This ebook can be navigated through the Table of Contents which lists the authors, their story title and its overall genre or theme. Any time you see the words [\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#), you can click on the link and be transported back to the TOC.

Written descriptions of the images that inspired these stories are provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view these photos, 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.

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[Spooky Sunset](#), [Arizona Sunrise](#), [Arizona Sunrise](#)

These stories are works of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the authors' imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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A photograph of a wooden pier or dock extending from a dark, rocky shore into a vast, blue body of water. The sky above is filled with soft, white clouds. The overall mood is peaceful and contemplative.

COUNT *your* BLESSINGS

AMELIA MANN

COUNT YOUR BLESSINGS

By Amelia Mann

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: 55,507

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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 screwup." 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 bulletproof. "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.

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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 rearranged 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, 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 doorway. “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. Halfheartedly 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 upbeat 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 screwup 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.

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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 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.”

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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 midsentence. 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.

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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.

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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 antidiscrimination 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. Hypersensitive, 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 cum 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 cum and lube made me slightly aroused.

“Is that some kind of Jewish tradition? ‘Never mix different men’s cum 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 cum away from both of us. We’d have to do laundry tomorrow, because his cum 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.

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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."

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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... *crowded*."

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 netlike 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 cum.

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.

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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-a-long, 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.

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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-cum 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.

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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 nonreligious 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 extraterrestrial 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... handker... 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 checkup 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.”

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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

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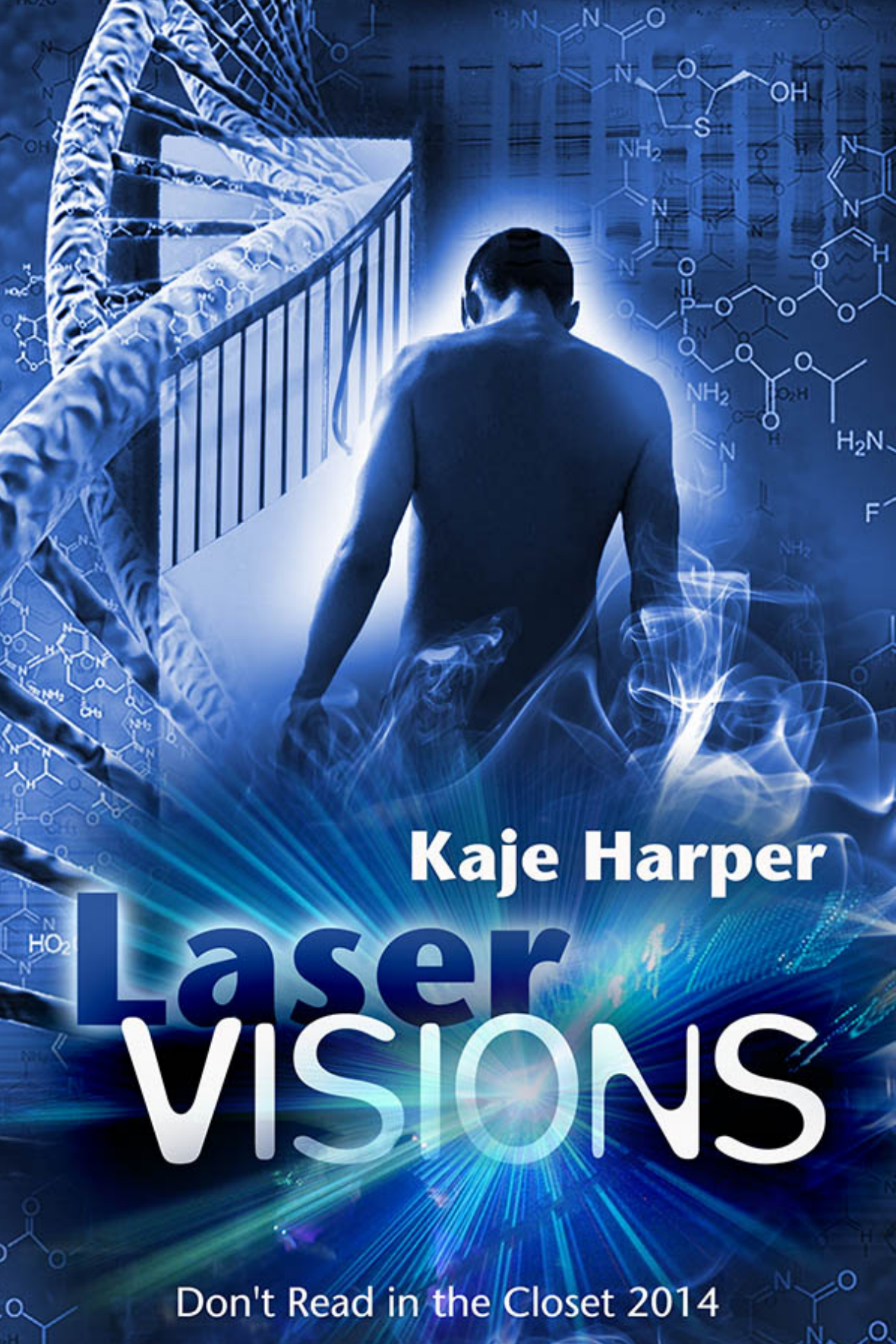
Author Bio

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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Kaje Harper

Laser VISIONS

Don't Read in the Closet 2014

LASER VISIONS

By Kaje Harper

Photo Description

Light streams into a narrow, old-fashioned hallway from the open door at the end. Framed in the brightness, back-lit to blurred outlines and shadows, is the silhouette of a man, walking away. He's tall, lean but well-built, with faint tan lines across his lower back and thighs. He's also completely naked. His curved ass and broad shoulders are the most solid things about him. He strides off into the blue, head slightly tilted, not looking back.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

I just moved into this old antebellum home I bought with the intentions of restoring. I often find myself awoken in the night by strange noises I cannot identify or hear during the day. At first, I think it's just a dream... this seemingly phantom always walking away. Who is he and how can I get him to finally turn around and see me?

****I don't want this to be a past lover/reunited lovers story. Please no cheating or ménage and must have a HFN or HEA ending. Otherwise, get as creative as you like.****

Sincerely,

Kyle

Story Info

Genre: paranormal, science fiction

Tags: suspense, abduction, law enforcement, friends to lovers, hurt/comfort, slow burn

Content Warnings: very minor plot threads of abuse, PTSD, violence

Word Count: 79,271

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LASER VISIONS

By Kaje Harper

Chapter 1

Roman struggled, even though he knew it was hopeless. In the back of the swaying van, he did his best against two men he could see only as blurs. Both men outweighed him. They'd tackled him backwards onto the floor; his arms were pinned at his sides. One of them sat on his legs. The drug in the tranq dart was taking effect quickly. He was weaker every minute, reactions slowing, muscles going soft. He gasped for air, against the muffling thickness of the sedative, shaking his head as if that would clear it.

He'd been a soldier. He'd fought truly desperate men in the desert, in the Water Wars of '22, probably before these punks were out of diapers. He wasn't going down easy. He wriggled in their hold as they bent over him, and slammed his head up hard against the closer man's nose. He heard a crunch. *Yes!* He hoped he'd broken it. The guy swore loudly, and his grip on Roman's wrist loosened.

"What the hell?" the driver of the van called from up front. "Aren't you done yet?"

"Someone must've fucked up the dose!" the guy on his legs said, trying to ride his struggling thighs, reaching across him for something. "He's not out yet."

"Well, get the cognoburn into him already!" There was a chime as they turned onto some tollway, and the auto-drive system took over the van. "Here, I'll come help."

Roman froze, his gut turning to water at the words. Cognoburn was illegal, was tantamount to murder. If that was what was coming, it would be better to be dead.

His moment of panic gave the men time to renew their grip. With a third man moving toward him, there was no way to survive this. Maybe he could make them kill him. He tried to make it look like whatever had been in the dart was taking effect. It carried the familiar sweet rush of a narcotic, and he hoped that for once his old mistakes might give him just a little extra tolerance. He imagined his grandfather saying, "*You're the fox, not the wolf; be canny and clever.*" He forced himself to go limp, letting his eyelids droop shut.

"There," one man muttered. "Finally!"

He lay there, unmoving, feeling the onset of the sedative turn his body to blissed-out mush. He would have one last chance. Maybe. A narco dart would take him down fast, tolerance or not.

A tourniquet was placed on his arm, biting in tightly. He felt the poke of a needle in the bend of his elbow. *Not yet. Not yet.* He'd done his share of IVs. They would release the rubber tubing first, and then inject. *Not yet.*

The needle guy was clumsy as he crouched over Roman's arm, poking around to hit the vein. It took him far longer than Roman would ever have needed, even doing it one-handed. He mentally urged the guy to go faster. It took all Roman had to lie still, breathing evenly, trying to hold out as his head spun deeper into muzzy darkness.

Then the man grunted, a satisfied sound, leaned off-balance over Roman's legs, and loosened the tourniquet. Roman slammed one knee upward as hard as he could, right into the guy's 'nads. The man yelped and fell away. A sharp pain ripped Roman's arm. He desperately hoped it was the needle dragged out through flesh, and not the flush of the drug. He rolled sideways, not sure where he was aiming, kicking out violently as his vision faded.

A minute later he was pinned again. This time he had no resistance left. Through buzzing static, he heard the men cursing, as the cheerful voice of the auto-drive said, "Approaching on-ramp to Tollway Twenty-Four. Sharp left turn. Please hold on."

Someone snarled, "Son of a bitch!" He was slammed by a hard blow to his side, even though he wasn't moving any more.

He took some final, fading satisfaction in the high-pitched whine of that voice. He might be an effete college professor now, and fifteen years past his fighting days, but he'd landed that balls-shot hard and on target. A retaliatory kick in the ribs hardly registered over the bliss of the drugs.

"Did he get the cognoB?"

Roman strained to hear, to understand. The men's voices were fading into the crackling background in his head.

"Yeah. I think. Most of it anyway."

"You must've fouled up the tranq dart. No way he should have fought it like that."

"Well it's done. Yeah, look, the syringe is empty. He got it."

“Okay. If there’s a problem I’m blaming you. The boss has a special interest...”

Roman Janz wondered, in his last coherent moment, what interest a guy called “boss” could have in a middle-aged academic. Especially if that interest didn’t involve his mind. Soon he wouldn’t have a mind. Cognoburn would wipe out his higher functions. He’d have been screaming, if the drugs hadn’t combined to sink him into a soft emotionless fog. He tried to cling to the puzzle, this inexplicable value he had, but he couldn’t hold the problem in his thoughts. And then he couldn’t hold thoughts. And then the world went away.

Xavier Faulkner woke with a start, and sat up in bed. The room was dark and quiet, but he had the impression he’d just heard something. Not simply one of the creaks and clicks that this old house was prone to, but something purposeful. A human cry, short and full of emotion. Perhaps Tam, calling for him.

He slid out of bed, grabbing a robe because he slept naked. His sister’s room was toward the back of the house, where it would be cooler when the summer heat arrived. He padded barefoot down the hall. The wooden floor was uneven and rough under his feet, in real need of sanding and refinishing, although not splintery enough to put it at the top of the job list. Another project to tackle this summer. He’d been hoping that renovating the antebellum glory of Silverlee House would keep him occupied for the next couple of years, and was beginning to think that was an underestimate.

Tam’s door was closed. He stood outside, listening, but there was no sound. Maybe it was all his imagination, as apparently it had been the last four times he’d heard a noise, imagined a cry, and hurried to her side. He would *swear* this time it had been a human voice. But he’d have said the same thing before. He hovered indecisively, reached for the doorknob, then pulled back. Tam would *not* be amused to be woken up again for nothing, and she had a sharp tongue, well-honed to protect her mushy heart.

As he debated, he heard it again. Surely that was a voice? He would have called it a moan, short and low, coming from nearer the front of the house. It was the clearest sound he’d heard yet. He turned away from Tam’s door, listening intently.

The cry didn’t repeat. Xavier was new to Kentucky, and there could be critters here that he didn’t know, perhaps strange birds nesting in the

overhanging eaves of this antebellum house. Or possums or raccoons or something. He walked back toward his room, moving slowly, and as quietly as he could, his senses alert, wishing he'd thought to pick up some kind of weapon.

The door across the hall from his bedroom was open. He'd barely spent any time in there yet. It was a dark, empty space, cobwebby and bare, waiting until some later date for its share of attention. As he glanced in, he saw a faint blue light, as if someone had dropped a glowstick in the corner, but more diffuse and unfocused. The bare boards, the elaborate moldings, the patina of dust, all looked untouched, but eerily limned in faint blue.

For a second, off to his right, he thought he saw something move. But when he whirled to that side, his pulse pounding in his throat, there was nothing to be seen. The blue light faded quickly and was gone. He was left standing in the door to the smaller spare room, with his heart beating in double-time and the silent darkness all around him.

He stood there, frozen and waiting, until his body ached from the tension, but the sound and light never came again. Eventually, reluctantly, he made his way back to bed. Before getting under the sheets, he laid the robe handy and pulled on a pair of printed-flannel PJ pants. His sister had meant them as a kind of joke, when they'd moved in together. But if he was going to have... something... wandering the house at night, he wanted to face it with pants on.

He slept fitfully the rest of the night, waking to every hint of sound. He kept bolting upright, certain he'd heard a voice or a cry. He identified the flap of the canvas over the porch roof, the rumble of a truck on the road beyond the trees, the daybreak caws of crows in the chinkapin oak outside his window. All normal. All expected. Twice he got up and checked the front spare-room, and once he did an inspection of the whole house. By morning, he was in a foul mood.

He gave up on sleep eventually, got up, and showered, enjoying the plentiful water. Before he'd moved in, he'd had the plumbing upgraded. True, his wide showerhead sprayed into a claw-foot tub that had seen far better days, but the water was a benediction. He didn't spend his money on many luxuries. Having this much wealth still felt like a dream, one that he didn't trust. But he was glad to be able to pay the astronomical water-use taxes for long showers and deep tubs. Being rich was at least good for that.

It was still cool when he got out of the shower. He dressed in vintage real-cotton jeans and a wool sweater, over a synth-T-shirt. The T-shirt was slick and clung to his shoulders. He tugged it straight. Damn, he missed the days when cotton was easy to find. He ran his fingers through his hair, and didn't bother with anything else. No point in primping when the only person around was his sister.

The scent of coffee beckoned him toward the kitchen. Tam looked up from her seat at the small table. "You look like you spent the night losing a wrestling match with The Swarm."

"Why, thank you, kind lady." He reached for the coffee carafe.

"Neither." When he stared at her, she elaborated, "Kind nor lady. So what's on the docket today?"

He'd planned to start ripping the shingles off the canvas-draped porch roof, but he hesitated, then said, "I want to check the house over a bit more, top to bottom."

"Huh? We've been here three weeks already, and I'm betting you checked it with a microscope before you ever bought it. What don't you know about the place?"

I think it's haunted. He couldn't actually say that to Tam the ex-cop, but he did say, "I heard a rumor that this house might have been a stop on the escaping slaves' underground railway. So there might be a secret room or tunnel or something. I want to look for it. It's a bit of a puzzle."

She grinned suddenly, and the brightness of her expression made his chest hurt. He realized how long it had been since he'd seen her really smile. Not since the acute kidney failure that had cut her law enforcement career short, maybe. Not for the weeks they'd lived here together. A hint of a mystery was apparently good medicine, because she bounced to her feet. "Excellent. Where do we start?"

As much as he wanted to keep her grinning, a brother had to have certain sibling-y standards. He grabbed a sweet roll from the bag and sat down in the chair she'd shoved aside. "I start by having some coffee and rolls, and enjoying my nice breakfast. After that, well..." He wanted to rip the upstairs room apart, but that would be hard to explain. "Start in the basement, maybe, and work our way up." If there'd been a real priest-hole for slaves, it would most likely be on

the lower floors. They'd have to work their way up to the spare room eventually.

Tam bounced on her toes. "I could go get started."

"Or you could have more patience than a two-year-old and wait for me," he countered.

She stuck her tongue out at him, then went to rummage in the rolling tool chest he'd left in the corner of the kitchen. "Halogen flash, screwdriver, stud finder, electrotape measure..." She stuffed an assortment of small tools into a canvas bag, as he savored his cinnamon bun.

"Hey, if you're being all helpful, why don't you stick the battery pack out in the sun to recharge?" he asked.

She looked pleased, which was a reward for biting his tongue and letting her move the bulky electrocell herself. The first week he'd barely let her lift a teacup and she'd been ready to wring his neck. She carried the cell out the kitchen door into a sunny spot in the yard, unfolded and angled the panels to catch the rays. He made a note to move the whole-house solar conversion up on the list; the mini panels were a clumsy stopgap, almost not worth the bother.

The air coming in the open door was damp and brisk, and he shivered. April was supposed to be a lovely month here. Today was clearly not Lexington at its finest.

Tam came in dusting off her hands. She gave a stink-eye look to the new sweet roll he was holding. "How many of those are you having?"

"My share." He took a big bite. "More than a scrawny thing like you gets."

"I'll show you scrawny if you take the last one. I'll have you on the ground with your feet saying hello to the back of your head."

"Fierce woman."

"Both." She grinned. "Woman. And fierce. As you'll find out if you flop around eating much longer when there's work to do."

He laughed, and licked his fingers clean. "Okay. Let's see what we have."

What they had in the basement was a whole lot of dust, spiders big enough to eat a CitiCar for breakfast, crumbling mortar in a corner of the foundation brick that made his repair priority list, and not much else. The floor was dry

cement, which was better than damp or cracked, but hid nothing. Bare, empty, and boring.

Tam shoved a rickety wooden shelf over a few inches and ran the stud finder across a section of brick that she thought had newer mortar. “Nothing, even with the power kicked up. No variation, no hidden spaces. How boring. Up a level?”

“Are you doing okay to keep going?”

He should have just suggested a break and a snack, because of course she straightened and looked down her elegant nose at him. “I can still work you into the ground, little brother.”

“Well, I want another cup of coffee. This dust is killing my throat. And then, yeah, ground floor next.”

He stretched their coffee break with a bathroom run, and then they began working the ground floor. Tam got excited about a space under the first riser of the big staircase. Since he couldn't explain why he wanted to move on, he helped her carefully work off the side panel and shone his flash into the space. The bright LED beam caught something flashing back, and then they both recoiled as a furry shape leaped between them, scurried across the floor and was gone.

“What the actual hell?” he sputtered. “What was that?”

Tam sat on her heels laughing at him. “They call that a rat, bro. *Rattus norvegicus*. Cute buggers. Not.”

“We have rats?”

“Apparently. Maybe we need a cat.”

“That thing would eat a cat for breakfast. We need a dog. A large dog.”

“I'll take out an ad. *Two hundred pound man seeking twenty-pound terrier to protect him from rats. Cost no object.*”

“I only weigh one-seventy,” he said with dignity. “And I think we need a mastiff.”

“Not for rats. We saw them all the time when I worked a city beat. Some of the civilians had dogs, and the little terriers were the best.” She suddenly dropped her gaze, her lips flattening into a tight line. No doubt from the reminder of her suddenly aborted career.

Silently, he cursed the greedy bastards who'd allowed contaminated wheat to go unreported for months, hoping no one would track down the responsible source, until a celebrity case brought it all into the open. Heaven forbid you should poison a cute blonde singer, but a bunch of nobodies including a hard-working cop... He forced the familiar simmering anger down. There was nothing he could do about it now. "We'll get a terrier then. You can pick one out."

"Seriously?" She looked brighter. "I wouldn't mind a dog. I never had the time for one when I was on the job."

"Seriously." He should have thought of it before. "But you have to feed him and train him and clean up his messes." He affected a nagging sing-song. "He'll be your responsibility, missy, and if he digs in my flowerbeds..."

"If he digs in your weed-beds he'll be doing the neighborhood a favor." She stretched out on her front to shine her flash into the now rodent-free space. "You know, if they weren't claustrophobic, a person could actually hide in there. I wonder."

"With the rats." He shuddered.

"Seriously, for a guy who grew up like we did, you're awfully prissy."

"We never had rats," he said firmly. Their father had flipped old houses for a living, and they'd grown up in some shambling dumps, but they hadn't dealt with more than a few mice and spiders, and maybe bats in the attic.

"Well, this might have been a slave-hole, but it's hard to say. I could crawl in for a better look."

"Not without a face mask." He tugged on her sleeve. "I want to check the upstairs too."

She gave him a sharp look, but slid backwards and stood up. "Okay."

He left the smaller spare room for last. When they stood at the door, he felt oddly reluctant to go in. He wasn't sure if he was afraid they'd find something, or afraid they wouldn't.

Tam looked past him. "You know, I like the shape of this one. And it's close to the master bedroom without sharing a wall. It'd make a nice nursery."

He stared at her, momentarily distracted. "For whom?"

"Well, you. And whatever guy you meet and manage to bribe to stay with you. I want nieces and nephews."

"I'm not buying you surrogate children," he managed, over a mixed rush of feelings. "Or housing them in a haunted room."

"Haunted?" She turned on him like a pointer on a bird.

"Well." He covered quickly, waving at the dim space with its dust-lined curtains, its shadowed, cobwebby corners. "Doesn't it look like Miss Havisham should appear out of thin air, rocking in the corner?"

She narrowed her eyes, and poked his chest with a finger. "Not more than any of the other unused rooms. All right, out with it, Xavier."

He flushed. "Just, um, noises. A couple of times at night."

"Noises."

"Like, groans, maybe. There's probably a bird's nest in the attic overhead or something."

"Is that why you keep waking me up to see if I'm all right?"

"Yeah. I guess. I wasn't sure where it was coming from, but last night it seemed like it was this room."

"Huh." She looked back at the room, and when he would have stepped inside, she flung her arm out to bar the doorway. "Just wait."

He stopped, and she dropped her hand and ran the light of her flash across the floor. Faintly, in the filtered sunlight from the window, they could see tracks crisscrossing the dust of the floor. After a minute she shrugged. "Lots of people, different times. Nothing obviously recent." She grinned at him. "No giant paw prints, no suggestive drag marks."

"Bite me."

"Not my kink."

He stepped past her, heading for the right-hand corner. She took the stud finder out of the bag on her shoulder and began checking the walls.

The room was disappointingly ordinary. Peeling paper didn't reveal any hidden doors. A stain on the ceiling suggested an ancient roof leak more than ghostly messages. In the daylight, there was no hint of that odd blue color. He even knelt and ran his fingers over all the dusty trim and floorboards. He pulled off his sweater, and shadowed the corner, peering at it in the near dark. Nothing glowed blue.

“What the crud are you doing?”

He jumped guiltily, and dropped the sweater. “Just, um, checking.”

“You’re weird.”

“You’re weirder.”

“You’re sticking your head in a corner.”

“There was this thing that I, um, wanted to check.”

“Gee, can you vague that up for me?”

He flushed. “No, I don’t think I want to. Let’s look at the attic.”

The attic was reached by a small circular staircase, so narrow and steep that even his not-over-wide shoulders brushed the walls. He remembered the sales agent calling this the servant stair. There was a separate trapdoor in the upstairs hallway ceiling, no doubt needed to haul up items for attic storage, because you couldn’t have carried more than a picnic basket up these steps.

When they reached the top floor, he took a good look at Tam. She was a bit flushed, was maybe breathing too hard. He felt that familiar little clutch of anxiety that he’d been battling for weeks. She’d done well since leaving the hospital, but it had been too damn close. He’d nearly lost her. She was the only family he had.

She caught his eye and frowned. “Quit staring. You look like a dead carp. What now?”

He looked around. Most of the attic floor was open space, cluttered with decades of discards. The house agent had offered to have it cleared out, but some of it looked interesting. He’d figured sorting through potential antiques might be a nice, low-stress job for Tam. Along the back there were three small servants’ rooms, each with a high dormer window. They’d be tiny for one person, claustrophobic for two. He had a feeling they’d been used for two.

“I want to figure out what lies over the, um, spare room,” he said.

“You do that. I’m going to check and see if there’s a way for something to get inside up here.” Tam strode to the bigger dormer on the front wall, and ran her light along the cracks.

He paced the layout of the floor below, and located his spot. The attic floor was dirty, but the dust looked undisturbed, and all the boards seemed solid.

Tam finished with the dormers, and then did one last sweep across the vaulted roof. "Nothing obvious. Although a mouse can get in a pencil-hole."

"It wasn't a mouse. I'm not that crazy."

"I didn't say you were. Just that there's nothing here." She walked to the front window and looked out. "Nice view though. If it wouldn't be about a thousand degrees in the summer up here, I'd take this for my room."

"It could be insulated, and cooled." Whatever Tam wanted, she should have.

"Nah. Mine's decent, and the en-suite bathroom makes up for the lower view. Still, this is pretty."

He went and stood beside her. Below them, grassy hills rose softly under the arch of blue sky. The fields were dotted with oaks, beech, sugar maple, and hemlock. Clusters of pink and white blossoms flourished amid the masses of green, apparently growing wild. There were a few houses visible at a distance, each large, most white, and every one surrounded by well-tended gardens with a scattering of outbuildings. White fences lined the roads and drives, and behind many of them, sleek, elegant horses grazed. High-class horse-country. Even with its four levels, multiple bedrooms and turret, this house was the ugly stepchild of the neighborhood.

At his shoulder, Tam said, just barely above a whisper, "Sooo. You hear anything yet?"

It was a dash of cold water, a reminder that the reason he'd picked this house over the Connecticut Queen Anne he'd looked at wasn't just because he'd fallen for the tower room. "Not so far," he returned in the same voice.

"I suck at waiting," she muttered.

"It could be a long time. Or never."

"I know that." Her tone held a hint of acid.

Of course she did.

But they both were hoping for more. They were here as bait, at the request of the FBI. A chance to redeem her forced retirement into something useful. All because one night, when he'd hunched over his computer in the hospital waiting room, as they struggled to pull Tam back from the brink of multi-organ failure, he'd received a message. Short, anonymous, sent through so many relays even he couldn't trace it. "*Organ donors can be found, for a price.*"

Nothing more. He'd tried to reply, but there was no way. He'd posted a cryptic "*Tell me more about the price,*" on every online profile he had. And heard nothing.

Tam's kidney failure was complete, irreversible. What's worse, the kidney-cancer threat from the contaminant hung over their heads like a sharp blade, waiting to fall. The doctors had tried to soft-pedal it, but it was all over the news. Everyone exposed to this shit would die, sooner or later, unless they got a transplant before the cancer hit. Tam had been put on the national lists, looking for a donor. At the bottom of the list in her turn, of course. Like the law demanded.

Xavier had been more than willing to donate a kidney, but they were nowhere near biocompatible. So he'd gone online, researching, wondering if there was somewhere they could move to, or fly to, where she wouldn't be a thousand names down the waiting list. The temptation to buy her way up was sharp, burning in his chest. He had money now, lots of money. Why not use it to buy his sister's life?

He'd stumbled on whispers, rumors that anything, any body part, any tissue match, could be had for a price. A rich person, with a need, could be hooked up with a source. Whether the source was willing... well, there were ways around that. Some of those rumors led overseas, and he saw the horror stories there. Stolen lives, murdered donors. Botched surgeries. Incorrect matches. Multi-drug-resistant infections. But some rumors whispered at a source closer to home. Confidential. Highly funded and technologically perfect. Illegal. Yours, for a price.

And then he'd hit a wall. Apparently, whoever was running this was very careful. Xavier might be rich, but he didn't have a reputation for cutting illegal corners. The little feelers he put out weren't taken up. No one came to take his bait, offering to hook his sister up with a match.

Computer security had been his profession, before he sold his company and became a man of leisure, but even he couldn't track this rumor down. And before he could decide if he was trying to do that in the name of justice, or otherwise, the Feds had come to him.

He wasn't the first to get that teasing message. Not even the first to report it. The FBI's research had suggested that somewhere, possibly in these pretty Kentucky hills, was an illegal business bringing in a fortune from organ-

legging. *Need a kidney, or a liver, or a heart? Low on the list for donors? We can find you a match. Just don't ask where it came from...*

So here they were, set up in this house, wealthy, clearly and obviously in need of that service. They were handy in the epicenter of where the Feds thought the ring operated. Tam's dialysis system had been set up in her room as openly as they could manage. The service truck came to the front door every week. Tam used a local doctor, a local supply company. No fakery. Anyone with a minimum of hacking skills could check her record and see this was for real.

Xavier had set up his web links, his sim site, presenting himself as a gentleman of money indulging himself with a home restoration. No expense spared. He'd paid cash for the house and land, and when he bought anything around here it was top drawer, money to burn, well beyond what law enforcement could finance. And then they waited.

And waited.

They stood silently at the high window. The sun brightened, faded, brightened again, as clouds glided by. Sleek horses grazed innocently on the green grass, as they had in this area for hundreds of years. Tam said, "I think I could live here forever. If it wasn't for the damned organ-legger out there. As it is, I'd always wonder..."

"It's not like we'd ever go through with it." That was partly a reminder to himself. The temptation was there. You could legally sell blood, sperm, human eggs, bone marrow, why not one kidney? You could live without one.

It wasn't like Tam needed a new heart. They could take up the offer of a kidney transplant, and do it, and turn the supplier in afterward and take care of the donor for life. Or they might offer the pre-matched donor a fortune... He bit his tongue hard, as a reminder. Because you could live without one hand too, or a cornea, or one lung. And when you started down the slope of buying irreplaceable parts of people, it was only a small step to buying whole people, for whatever purpose you chose. And that way lay slavery, and murder.

There were parts of the world where you could buy a person. For sex, for adoption, for work, for sadistic fun. He was never going to be part of that.

They sighed in unison, and glanced at each other. Tam forced a grin. "So, since we've obviously failed to track down our house ghost, what else do we have planned for today?"

“Lunch, I think. It’ll be here soon.” He had lunch catered most days. It fit his image, and meant neither of them had to cook. “And then I need to look into repairing that cellar brickwork.”

“Does that mean I can get up on the porch roof and start ripping off shingles?”

He wanted to say no. Her challenging glare dared him to try. “Yeah. I guess. Just don’t climb the ladder when I’m not there. And don’t work too hard. And call my com to help you come down if you feel hot or dizzy or... All right?”

“Yes, Mommy. God, you’re worse than a nursemaid.”

“You don’t listen.”

“You’re not the boss of me.”

They went downstairs in cheerful insult mode, stopping on the second floor to clean up. Xavier pulled off his good sweater and sighed at the dirt ground into it. He didn’t know what had possessed him to dress up like he was going to meet the ghost for drinks. He stripped off the lightweight jeans too, and pulled on some tougher clothes, before going down to let the caterer in.

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Chapter 2

Roman struggled to surface, through a thick, clinging fog.

A man's voice above him grumbled, "I hate dealing with the zombies."

He knew that voice, disliked it, didn't trust it. He couldn't remember why.

A deeper voice said, "Shut up. It's easy duty. Easier than working the snatches."

That voice he hated.

He kept his eyes closed, as his wits fought to come back online.

Hands touched him, turning him over. He lay on something resilient. Now that he'd been turned, he could tell he was faceup. Something touched his mouth, wet and sweet as it trickled between his lips. He swallowed reflexively, and another drop touched his tongue. He fought to open his eyes.

Nothing worked. His body lay inert, heart beating, breathing, but unresponsive. His eyes wouldn't open. Another squirt of food was pressed past his lips. He swallowed again, automatically.

The hated voice said, "That one's been around a while."

"Yeah." His feeder pressed another dose of mush on him. "On ice, I guess. Longer than most. Must be worth something."

A grunt. "Must be. I wonder..."

Roman lost the thread of the conversation in the fuzz of his brain. Sounds faded, the taste of the food and the sensation of it in his mouth dimmed, although he had the impression his body was still taking nourishment, one reflexive swallow at a time. But he was leaving the world behind again.

He floated. All around him was a haze, formless, grey, soft, yielding, darkness, untouchable, unchanging. From somewhere, he heard his grandfather's voice. "*Focus. I taught you better than that.*"

"Yes, Grandfather."

"*Find the light.*"

"I'm trying. I keep trying!" He wanted to cry. He was trying, he really, really was. Trying over and over, lost in the dark. *Help me? Please help me?*

No one wanted to help him. No one came for him. The moments when he emerged, whether into the imprisoning bulk of his body, or into the strange flashes of blue, of odd spaces and shadowed rooms, never lasted.

Never. At most he got a breath. A moment of feeling lucid, and then it slipped through his fingers. Slipped through his mind. He was crazy. He must be crazy.

Even crazy, he wasn't a quitter though. He tried to look around in the dark, the formless, the void. God, he hated this place and yet it sapped him of strong emotion, until that hate was a pallid, feeble thing. He looked around for an unknown time. A long time. He thought it was long...

There, off to his left, was a thread of blue. He'd seen those before, leading him to brief flashes of dreams, where he wandered for a moment out of the dark. The blue beckoned to him. Maybe this time would be different. Maybe this bright beam would finally lead to a way out.

He headed toward it, not sure if he was walking, gliding, flying, wishing he could run. His body seemed irrelevant somehow. The blue opened up, wider, like the entrance to a cave. When he stepped through the gap, he was in another unfamiliar room. But this time he saw it clearly. His motion sense steadied until he felt like he was standing still, and he took a breath without being immediately yanked away into the dark.

The room seemed deserted. There was no furniture, and the drapes on the windows hung in faded folds, filmed with dust. As he turned in a slow circle, he spotted the doorway. Through it, a hall led off in either direction. He hurried to the doorway, and froze there. The blue light held him cradled, and the darkness beyond was thick and impenetrable. When he thought about taking one more step out of range, it felt like trying to step off a cliff. Perhaps it could be done, but every fiber of his body said it would be a bad, bad idea. He couldn't force himself forward.

He groaned with frustration. He knew there was something important he needed to do. He couldn't remember. He pressed the heels of his hands to his eyes.

The light in the room changed. Whether that was his fault, or something external, he couldn't say. The bright cave-mouth crack was swiftly getting thinner. He wasn't sure what would happen if he lost it. The idea made his heart race and his breath come fast. Reluctantly, he turned away from the doorway of

the room, hurrying toward the light, desperate to pass into it before it closed. As he slipped through, losing that wooden floor, the tattered curtains, and the smell of dust, he heard someone behind him gasp, and call, "Wait!" But he was too far gone to turn back. The darkness swallowed him.

Xavier skidded into the room next to Tam's, and stopped short. The blue light had faded. The man he'd seen was gone. He slammed his hand on the wall in frustration.

Was he going crazy? He'd swear he'd seen a naked man walking away from him into the wall and disappearing. A nicely built naked man too—tall, fit and lean. With a really nice ass.

Maybe he had a case of blue-balls-induced psychosis. If this was something real, would he have bothered to notice the guy's ass? Real, vanishing, naked guy. Hah!

He searched the wall, running his hands along the wallpaper. It felt cool and solid, unchanged to his touch. Different spare bedroom, same ordinary, boring, doubt-his-sanity shit as last time. He pressed harder until the heels of his hands ached, but there was no way for solid flesh to just... pass through. He was going crazy.

Behind him, Tam said, "What's wrong?"

He whirled around. "Huh?"

"I heard you shout."

"Oh. Um." He didn't have a quick answer ready.

"The ghost?"

"I don't know. Maybe." He rubbed his face. "Would you say I'm overimaginative? Prone to hallucinations?"

"Well, there was that invisible bear living in your closet when you were seven," she teased.

"Tam!"

"No. As a rule, I'd say you're pretty levelheaded."

"I don't do drugs. I'm not addicted to virtual reality games. I don't get caught up in Net-walking."

“You’re as physical-world grounded as any computer geek I know.”

He gritted his teeth. “Then why the hell am I seeing spirits? Or illusions? Or ghosts?” He slammed his hand on that solid wall again.

“Calm down,” Tam said. “Tell me what happened.”

“I heard a groan. I came to look. There was a blue light again, and I saw...” He trailed off. “I’m going crazy.”

“Just say it.”

“I saw a man. A tall, naked man with a great ass, walking away. He walked into the wall, right here.” He thumped it again for emphasis. “And when the light was gone, so was he. Just like that.”

“Okay.”

“That’s all? Okay? I’m totally losing my mind here, and you say it’s okay?”

“Xav, if you think you saw something, I’m betting you did.”

“Now say, ‘*Sure, Xav, you saw a naked guy walk into a wall.*’ And keep a straight face. I dare you.”

Tam sighed. “You’re right, it doesn’t sound likely. At the same time, I was a cop for almost fifteen years. I’ve seen more weird shit than you can believe. I’m keeping an open mind.”

Xavier nodded. He paced to the door and turned to look at the room. Nothing blue. No hallucinations. Just Tam, looking at him steadily with her problem-solving expression on. “So. Possibilities?”

She gave him a brisk nod. “Well, the paranormal has to be on the list. Ghost, spirit, whatever.”

“Okay. Anything that *isn’t* from a *Twilight Zone* rerun?”

“A secret door? A holo-projection? Hallucinogenic mushrooms?”

He paused, taking stock of his physical state. His heart was beating a little fast, and his head ached, but he didn’t feel dizzy or off balance, or disoriented. He felt as normal as a crazy person could expect. “I doubt it’s mushrooms. Or drugs. Although if it keeps happening, I might get you to take a blood sample.”

“I’m a cop, not a doctor. You can get your own blood sample. Or pee in a cup.”

"Thanks for the support."

"That *was* support. Go on."

He paced again. "So a secret door isn't likely. We went over all the rooms pretty well yesterday. And last time, it happened in the room next door, not this one. It's not impossible that we missed something, in two different rooms, but it's not likely."

Tam nodded. "I can ask the local cops if we can borrow an ultrasonic search unit. But we also measured dimensions. There's no space unaccounted for."

"A holo-projection. That could actually be the answer." He felt better for a moment at having a real non-paranormal possibility. "Except it opens the question of who and why. Unless *you're* trying to drive me crazy so you can lock me in the attic and take over my financial empire."

"Basement, not my nice attic. Plus, if I want you locked away, I just have to show the local cops your stash of bestiality porn."

"My what? I don't have bestiality porn!"

"That you know of." She grinned, then sobered. "A projection also raises technical questions. There would have to be a projector in a straight line from this room. The nearest hillside is half a mile away. There's no convenient tree outside the window. I guess you could beam a holo over half a mile, but it would get pretty damned blurry."

"He wasn't blurry," Xavier said, and bit his lip.

She raised an eyebrow, but went on, "Or you could project from inside the house, from an adjacent space. Top, bottom, sides."

"There'd have to be a hole. Although a pinhole with a fiberoptic would do." He shifted uncomfortably, imagining someone on the other side of the ceiling, looking down. "Crud."

"They'd still need the projector. And a remote, if they weren't on-site to control it. There should be something to find." Tam looked all energetic again, glancing around, evaluating angles.

"We can check in the morning, when it's light."

"Or we could check it right now. I'll get the flashes."

"And your gun?" He didn't want to seem like a weenie, but if there might be someone in the house, it made sense to take precautions. Right?

"I turned in my department Taser with the badge," she said.

"Tell me you don't have a back-up."

"Maybe." She grinned, looking awfully happy for someone woken by a strange noise in the middle of the night. "Wait here. I'll be right back. Oh, and by the way, nice pants."

He glanced down at the yellow smiley-faces on his PJ pants. "You bought them," he called after her.

They did a thorough search of every inch of the adjoining walls, the attic floor, and then with the help of a stepladder, the downstairs parlor ceiling. There was nothing, unless you counted insects, cobwebs and dust. For good measure, they got the surveillance-device detector that the FBI had given them for the sting operation, and ran it over the whole space. It didn't so much as blink.

By two a.m. they were done. Xavier followed Tam back to her room, where she put the bug detector in its case, and stowed the little snub-nosed gun in her bedside drawer. Next to a personal Taser.

"You didn't see those," she said.

"No, ma'am."

He sat on the edge of her bed. She eased back into it, and lay down with a tired sigh. It hurt to hear that. A year ago, she could have run him into the ground without breaking a sweat. She was only thirty-six. *And a month out of hospital after a life-threatening illness*, he reminded himself. Give it time. She was getting better.

"So," he said. "We're back to me being crazy, or seeing ghosts."

"I vote for crazy." But she winked at him to take the edge off that.

"You really think there could be something spooky going on?"

She shrugged, and closed her eyes. Her red hair, a shade darker than his, clung to her damp, pale skin. He wanted to brush it back, but she'd bite his hand off at the wrist if he tried. Without looking at him, she said, "There was this one time... One of the patrol officers in my department found a house where, um, bad things had happened. Mutilated dead bodies. And even after they were taken away and the scene was cleared, people kept thinking they saw more blood. Or they would see another body out of the corner of their eye that would vanish when they turned back."

“You too?”

“Not me personally, but the detectives were trading weeks of vacation time not to be the one to go do the interviews in that building. Finally, Ramirez had his grandmother come in on the quiet and do some kind of purification ceremony. After that, things got quiet.”

“You believe that?”

She shrugged again. “It was a bad enough scene. Maybe everyone was just traumatized. But there were some tough, tough cops involved, and everyone was nervous walking through there for weeks. So yeah, I think there was something uncanny going on.”

“D’you think Ramirez’s grandmother would like a nice Kentucky vacation?”

“I might be able to persuade her, maybe with a gift from you to sweeten the pot. But do you want to just get rid of this ghost? Or do you want to figure out what’s going on?”

He said slowly, “Yeah. I guess I want to know.”

“Thought so.” She sounded smug.

“Why do you say that?”

“You told me you were ogling his ass.”

“I never. Well, maybe. Crud.” He had been, hadn’t he? For the all of three seconds he’d had to look.

“So for now, let’s get some sleep. Tomorrow we’ll do some investigating. A house this old has to have some history. Maybe we can figure out who this guy is.”

“Right.” He stood up slowly. “See you in the morning.” When he would try to find out just how long the guy he’d been ogling had been dead. Double crud.

Helpless was bad. Out of control was a short step to insanity. He was probably crazy anyway, but it made Roman even more crazy to be jerked around in his own damned head. He hated the grey formless floating, but he also was teeth-grindingly sick of the uncontrollable flashes of clarity. One moment he would sink into awareness, facing the realization that he was

trapped in a body reduced to nothing but swallowing water and food. The next go-round, he'd be slipping through blue-lit gaps into empty rooms, only to be yanked away again a minute later.

Roman decided he was damned well going to get the hang of this meditation stuff. His grandfather's voice seemed to approve. Of course, his grandfather was dead, a spirit or ghost or hallucination, which made this whole thing messed up. More messed up. But he was willing to pretend he had someone on his side.

At first it felt pointless, controlling breathing he didn't even know he really had. Repeating his centering phrase, chanting it, building up a mental image of how he wanted to swim through the soupy fog toward a real goal—it seemed futile. He began to wonder if he would ever again know what was real and what wasn't. Maybe this was hell. Or limbo. He'd never believed in either one, but thinking that all this was just random nerves firing in his brain was almost worse. He could hope to escape hell, but not his own mind.

He had to try. He focused on the image of swimming, using his body and his will, moving through the grey toward a blue light. Sliding down the light to a door, and out into that house. He'd involuntarily come out in half a dozen different rooms by now, although he never got to stay long. Each of the rooms matched the rest in feel, in size. It had to be one house. And however weird it was to be there, he at least walked and spoke in those rooms, or thought he did. Better than lying blind and paralyzed sucking down mush, which seemed to be his other option.

The light, for all its weirdness, was less frightening than living in his inert shell of a body.

He yearned toward the light, as hard as he could. Disciplined his thoughts, his breath, his whole self into one goal—seeking the blue. He got a sense of vibration, of tension, and turned his attention that way. When he saw something, a flash of color, a hint of light, he dove for it, imagining himself an arrow, riding that beam out of the dark.

He emerged in a bedroom. Another new room, but clearly the same house, with its high ceilings and tall, narrow windows. This room was oddly shaped, with a hexagonal bay, and set in that curved space was a big sleigh bed. On the bed lay a man, fast asleep.

Roman froze, staring, working hard to breathe. It was the first time in all his wandering that he'd seen another person. He didn't think he'd ever met this

man before, but his memory didn't seem to be working right. Maybe this was someone he knew. Maybe this was a friend, waiting for a clue to come find him. Or maybe this was the person who had him trapped, who didn't know he'd found a way out. Enemy? Friend? Stranger? He didn't know how he could tell.

The sleeping man was younger than him, perhaps thirty. He had red hair, cut short enough to just barely curl. Roman couldn't see his eyes, although he was betting they were light, maybe blue or green, since the guy's skin was fair with a scattering of freckles. His features were fine, with a high forehead, pointed chin, and elegant cheekbones. One bare arm above the covers looked more wiry than muscular.

Roman wanted to shout, to reach out, to see if the man would wake, but he was torn between hoping and being afraid. He moved closer. He'd sometimes wondered, as he'd gotten little glimpses of empty rooms, whether he was somehow going back in time. Some parts of the house had the feel of centuries gone by. But now he saw modern touches. A pro-screened tablet was laid aside on a table. There was a tiny cell-com on the stand beside the bed, the earbud looking like a brand new model.

Newer than the one he'd had, that he'd bought... sometime. A while ago. It was fuzzy and he couldn't remember when. It bothered him, that not remembering. The last day he remembered was... today was... He tried to recall, and the darkness tugged at him, pulling him away from the bed. The blue doorway began to close. "No!" he said. "I'm not done."

Still the doorway narrowed, and he had to hurry, turning his shoulders to slip back through. Behind him the man sat up in bed, calling, "Wait. Don't go. Who are you?"

But he couldn't stay. The question followed him into the darkness. *Who are you?*

Things were muted in the grey. His dismay, his fear, his uncertainty. In the grey, he floated. He was Roman, he was a man, he'd fought, he'd lost. In the grey, his sobs were muted too, and ended soon. He needed to get out of the dark, before he faded to match it.

It took an untold time. It took all his will. But he made it happen again.

The next blue beam he found let him escape from the dark into the doorway of a kitchen. Ahead of him, a fridge hummed softly in one corner, and a small table stood in the middle of the floor, flanked by two classic wooden chairs. A

quick glance behind showed him a dim, tiled hallway. It bothered him more to be naked here than it had in the bedroom. Standing looking at the kitchen, feet bare on the tiles, his junk hanging out, made him feel really exposed, in more than one sense. He thought he felt eyes staring at his back.

He'd planned to fight harder against being pulled through the doorway when it shut this time. He'd decided to jump off that fucking metaphorical cliff, and let the door close without him and see what happened. But when he saw the light fade he hurried through it, unable to hold out, escaping the odd vulnerable sensation of being watched.

For a longer time than usual, he wandered in the fog. Once he nearly woke in his paralyzed body. The voice he hated, that he'd dubbed Nasty, was saying, "...not like they use those parts of her. Seems like a waste not to take advantage. She'll be gone in a few days."

Another man replied, "Well, you can if you want to. I'm not risking this job for a piece of ass. Especially a zombie ass, no matter how pretty she is. If the boss looks at the monitor recordings at the wrong moment..."

The voices faded out again, no matter how Roman tried to stay in the moment. His stomach twisted. Something bad had been happening, something he should have stopped, but he was gone again and the two men's voices were lost. Frantically, he looked for a blue thread, for the doorway, for a way to get free and do something. He had no idea how long it took before he found it.

He landed in a parlor. Another empty space. He moaned in disappointment. At least this room was furnished, and there was enough new tech to confirm that he could stop worrying about time travel. He turned slowly, looking about the room, and caught a movement out of the corner of his eye. He whirled around.

The man from the bed wasn't sleeping this time. He stood in the doorway, a tiny weapon in his hand. His eyes were open. They weren't blue or green, Roman realized, but a clear, light grey.

"Who are you?" the man said, not raising the gun, although his fingers tightened on it.

Roman didn't answer. He wasn't sure if he *couldn't*, or if it was the shock of being spoken to after so long. *How long had he been lost?*

While he was still wondering, the man asked, "Are you a ghost?"

Was he? He couldn't remember dying, but then he couldn't remember really living either. A few voices. A taste of sweet liquid, or perhaps he'd imagined that. That wasn't life, was it? But surely it wasn't death. He suddenly remembered three men, fighting them, struggling, heart pounding, a burning pain. Had that been death?

"What's your name?"

"I don't know," he said, still stuck on the ghost question. He realized he'd spoken aloud, and dragged in a ragged, grateful breath.

"I'm Xavier," the man said. "I won't hurt you. Can you tell me why you're here?"

He shook his head. He had no clue.

"Where do you come from?"

Roman felt the light behind him going, robbing him of strength. He glanced over his shoulder. The doorway was fading. "No!" He glanced quickly back at Xavier. He wanted to stay, desperately. A person, conversation, how long had it been since he felt this real?

He'd planned to stay. He fought to brace himself, but as the light faded so did he, thinning, like he was being sucked out of even this ghost form. He couldn't stand it. Not again. There was so little of him left. The pull of the darkness was imperative, sucking him into the void.

He wanted to say something, leave something real of himself behind. Something he might come back to. As he turned and hurried for the doorway he called back over his shoulder, "I'm Ro..." The dark took him, swallowing his last word.

Alone, in the grey-black nothingness, he cried. His chest heaved, his eyes burned, and he choked as the tears ran down his throat. But he made no sound.

"...and then he ran into the wall and was gone," Xavier finished, glancing at Tam. She sat at the kitchen table, her hair still sleep-mussed but her eyes bright. He'd woken her, dragged her down to the parlor, and after another fruitless search they'd retired to the kitchen for fortification and brainstorming. He wasn't sure what to do next.

Tan looked at him with fascination, her coffee going cold in her untouched cup. "He said Ro?"

"Yeah. I think maybe he was cut off short, though. Roland?"

"Roger?"

"No, definitely a long O. Roberto? Or... I'd asked where he was from. Rome?"

"I wish you'd recorded it."

"Me too. I wasn't expecting him back so fast."

"Tell me again what he looked like." She pulled out her mini-tablet and set it to record.

Xavier closed his eyes to remember better. "Tall. Maybe a little taller than me. Lean, but still with some muscle on him and nice wide shoulders. Midthirties, maybe? Dark hair, cut short. Eyes... I don't remember." Dark, he thought, but he hadn't seen their color. "That blue light seemed to be behind him, so he was more like a silhouette. Colors were odd."

"He's Caucasian, though?"

"Yeah, with just a hint of a tan."

"So there's no way he's, say, the ghost of one of the slaves from *pre-Civil War* days."

"No, not a chance."

"What else do you remember about him?"

"He was naked again. Well-hung." Yeah, he'd looked. It was kind of right there. Although he hadn't really meant to say it. Maybe he was more shaken than he realized.

"You're sure this isn't one of your fantasies? When was the last time you got laid?"

He opened his eyes to glare at her. "None of your business. And yes, now I'm sure."

"Does he fit any of the deaths you were researching?"

"Not really." He'd spent a fair bit of time yesterday, searching archives for men who might have died in this house. "Most of the men who lived here and died young did it elsewhere, in wars, or off in the city. Not that a ghost couldn't come back to haunt the old homestead, I guess. I don't know if ghosts have travel restrictions."

Tam snickered, and he frowned at her. "You were the one who told me to keep the ghost concept on the table."

She rubbed her mouth and tried to look sober. "Yeah. Go on."

"There are no rumors of the place being haunted. The only recorded death of a young white man actually in this house was in the flu epidemic of 1918. But he was barely seventeen. Way younger than this guy."

"Huh." Tam picked up her cup, sipped it and made a face.

Xavier got up and went to the counter. Outside the kitchen window, it was pitch dark, with the velvety softness of a country night that cities could never match. He was coming to like it. But out there somewhere lurked a man named Ro. Or from Ro. Although *lurked* didn't seem the right word.

"He wasn't threatening me," he said, taking his sister's cup to dump and refill it. "He seemed anxious. Confused. Maybe even afraid."

"Maybe he's the ghost of a murder victim. Someone killed him on the grounds, and now he haunts the house, waiting for his murderer to come back..."

"You're taking this pretty damned lightly." He set the full cup back in front of her.

"Well, ghosts?"

"Or your brother and only flesh-and-blood relative quietly losing his little mind."

"Aw. You have a big mind, bro. That's how you made all the lovely money." She sobered. "I'm sorry. It's just hard to believe. I mean, faint specters of the violent dead making people uncomfortable is one thing. A naked man introducing himself in your parlor is another."

"It wasn't much of an introduction."

"Still. Weird."

"Very." That was a major understatement.

"It's more of a puzzle than anything. Which isn't bad, since I'm about to go out of my own tiny mind with boredom."

"The stuff stored in the attic isn't interesting?"

“Well, in a dry and dusty way, yeah. And I think a few bits of it might fetch us some good money on Vend-it. But you have enough money already, which kind of dilutes the thrill.”

He turned to look back out at the darkness. “Look for diaries. Notes, maybe a Bible with births and deaths. I really want to know who this guy is.”

“Sure.” She drank her coffee, then came to stand behind him. Their faces, reflected in the glass, looked similar, their kinship obvious.

“Look for pictures,” he added. “Even if they show women or older kids. Maybe I can find someone who looks like him.”

“I can get a professional Identi-Kit program set up, to help you draw a picture of him,” she offered. “You could fool around with it. See if you can make a decent likeness. We could maybe post it online.”

“No!” He wasn’t sure why refusal came so fast. But maybe it had something to do with the look on Ro’s face, as he turned to go. “I don’t know who he was or what he’s scared of. But there’s something wrong. If he was a murder victim...” He swallowed. *If someone had murdered Ro, and they turned out to be still within Xavier’s reach, they were going to pay.* “I don’t want to alert anyone that he’s talking to me.”

“Hm. That almost makes sense.” She set her cup in the sink. “So, should we stake out the house for the rest of the night? He’s appeared multiple places by now, so we’d want some kind of patrol.”

“Yeah. He was up in my room two nights ago, then down here yesterday. He hasn’t shown up twice in one night, though.”

“That we know of. You wouldn’t have known he’d been here that time in the kitchen if you hadn’t had the munchies at just the right moment.”

He sighed. “Well, I’m not going to get back to sleep, regardless. I’ll do some more searching.”

“Why don’t you keep watch upstairs? I’ll stay down here, maybe go online. I still have my LEO access to departmental records. I can probably search the Lexington missing persons database.”

“They didn’t rescind your police department access?” He said it before thinking, and bit his lip.

She looked sour. “I guess my lieutenant figured he’d have pity on me. I’ll see if I can find anything about local murders or missing young men. Add the name Ro into it. Maybe you can do a civilian-type search yourself.”

He hesitated. Ro hadn't seemed dangerous, and he'd been seen upstairs more than down. But still, he hesitated to leave her down here alone. "You sure we shouldn't stick together?"

"You go upstairs. Stay sharp. Yell if a blue guy tries to get in your bed."

"Fuck you," he muttered.

"Incest is also not one of my kinks," she replied cheerfully.

"I'm going to give you back your gun." He took the little weapon out of his pocket and set it on the counter. It made him uncomfortable, but she'd insisted he keep it by his bed. "I don't think he wants to hurt me, and if he did, I don't think the gun would make a difference. I'm certain now that he's not someone physical sneaking into the house."

She took the gun and made it disappear somewhere on her person. "We should get a Taser maybe. Electromagnetic. Might disrupt a ghost where a bullet would just pass through. Or a laser. Do you have a pointer?"

"Sure, a couple," he said, because she would feel better if she thought they were armed with something. "You can use the one in my desk drawer. I'll get the one from my briefcase upstairs and keep it handy."

He climbed the staircase reluctantly. In his bedroom, he pulled out his tablet, and went hunting the Net for a guy named Ro, or a visitor from Rome, or anyone associated with the house who might fit his visitor. Search as he might, with all his extensive skills, he found nothing relevant. When the sun had risen enough to banish the last shadows from the room, he crawled back under the covers and went to sleep.

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Chapter 3

Xavier joined Tam for lunch on five hours of sleep, unable to spend another minute in bed. The catering service had done them well, with nicely seasoned tofu-salad sandwiches. The bread was freshly baked, and studded with sunflower seeds. The cookies were orange-peel and anise. He made a mental note to put up a *Like* on their company links.

Tam ate less than usual, pushing half her sandwich toward him.

"One whole sandwich meets your diet guidelines," he told her. The caterer had Tam's needs clearly laid out, with instructions to feed them both the same. He could stand to eat healthy for a while.

"I have a med appointment later. I don't want to eat too much."

"Oh." He took it, picking at the crust. He wanted to ask if she was meeting with her FBI handler, or just the doctor, but they'd been warned that if the organ-legger took the bait, he might bug the house, to check for traps. They hadn't bug-swept the kitchen for several days. So instead, he said, "Any side trips?"

"I might get my hair done." She nodded at him, significantly enough that he took it as a *Yes, I'm meeting the FBI* sign.

"Your hair looks fine to me," he muttered, playing his brotherly role. "But okay. Will you take a car or call for a rick?"

"A rickshaw would be too slow," she said. "I need to go into the city. I'm not trusting this hair to any small-town scissor-jockey. I'll take a car."

"Use the sedan. It should be fully charged." He picked up one of the cookies and broke off a bite, carefully casual. "When do you think you'll be back?"

"Late afternoon? I might drive around, if the battery is full up. Enjoy the local scenery."

"Call me if you're going to miss dinner." He suspected she was looking forward to doing something cop-like, from the gleam in her eye.

"Will do." She stood, scraped her leftovers into the compost, and bent to kiss his hair.

"Wow." He changed, '*you're in a good mood*', to, "You must be looking forward to the haircut."

“A woman likes to look her best.”

They avoided meeting each other's eyes. Primping had never been high on Tam's priorities list.

Once he'd heard the crunch of tires on the gravel drive that signaled her departure, he headed upstairs. Rather than another session of futile research, he changed into work clothes. Tam had stripped the damaged tiles off the porch roof. He'd spent that morning hiding his heart palpitations while Tam walked around casually up there, oblivious to the height. By the time she made it safely down, he'd decided to put the new tiles on sometime when she was gone. To hell with the risk of doing roof work alone. He figured his chance of a fall was lower than having a Tam-associated heart attack.

It was pleasant work. The air was still springtime-cool, and the porch was shaded by the house. The historical-society-approved shingles were a bit finicky to get placed, but there was a satisfaction to doing things the old fashioned way. He let himself enjoy the pop of the nail gun, the brightness of the sunshine, and the faint scent of the Carolina allspice blossoms near the steps.

He managed to finish before Tam got home. He was cleaned up and settled in the kitchen when she came in the door.

“How did the haircut go?” he asked, because she'd made it clear that her doctor visits were off limits.

“Went fine.” She made a silent, long-suffering face.

“I like that hair color.” Her curls were cut shorter, and there were shimmery gold highlights hidden among the dark red.

“Me too. I found a great place.”

Suddenly, he noticed the kitchen wall opposite the window beginning to change color. It wasn't exactly glowing, but the soft gold of sunlight on the wallpaper took on a faintly green tint. Then, against the bright backdrop of the green-lit wall, Ro came into view.

“Crud!” Tam took a big step back, reaching for her hip. She must have been unarmed, because her hand came up empty. She froze, staring. “Holy phantasms, Batman!”

Xavier said quickly, “Ro. Welcome back.”

Ro looked at him blankly. He was still tall, well-built, short-haired, unchanged from last night. Except now it was daytime in a sunny kitchen, which made this feel more unreal than ever.

Ro stood stock still, in front of the botanical herb print that hung on the wall. Xavier noticed that he looked solid, for a ghost. His skin had texture and density, and the picture wasn't visible through him. He had faint tan lines, as if he'd been in the sun in shorts some time back, and failed to use good sunblock. And yeah, he was still naked. Xavier jerked his attention back up to the guy's face.

Tam said softly, "Hi, Ro. I'm Tamara. People call me Tam." She took a couple of steps sideways around the table, putting more space between herself and Xavier.

Ro turned to look at her. "You can see me?" His voice was rough and unsteady, his eyes wide and a surprising blue.

"Yes. We both can."

Ro glanced back and forth between them. "Where am I?"

"Silverlee," Xavier said. When Ro frowned uncertainly, he added, "It's the name of the house. We're in Kentucky, about an hour out of Lexington."

"Lexington?"

"It's a city..."

"I know that!" Ro hesitated. "Sorry." He put a hand out toward the back of the nearest chair. Flesh and wood failed to connect, and his fingers passed right through the chair with an odd optical effect. He stopped the return motion with his hand appearing merged into the wooden rail, flesh and wood blended. Ro's, "Whoa. Fucking weird," merged with Xavier's grunt of surprise.

Xavier moved closer, staring at where Ro's hand and the chair combined strangely in the same space. Ro suddenly turned, flashed a terrified look toward the kitchen window, and gasped, "No! Nooo!" He lurched toward Xavier.

Xavier tumbled back trying to avoid the ghostly touch. Quick as a cat, Tam whirled, grabbed something off the counter, and swung it to point at Ro. "Keep back."

A red light flashed out, striking Ro in the thigh. He screamed, a high, sharp sound. Tam swept the red beam sideways, and Ro tumbled after it, almost as if

pinned by it. The beam hit the open doorway; Ro fell back into the hall with the red spot still on his thigh, staggering three steps into the dim space. Then he began babbling loudly, "Keep it on! Keep it on me! Don't turn it off! Don't turn it off!"

Tam snapped, "What? Why?" but held the beam locked on Ro's leg.

He panted through his teeth, as if in pain, then unclenched enough to say, "Whatever that is, the blue is going and I'm still here. Don't turn it off!" He gasped another harsh breath.

"Huh." Tam's hands were admirably steady. "Explain that."

Xavier took a step toward the hallway, staying out of her range of fire, and peered at where the laser's red dot hovered on the meat of Ro's leg. Ro wasn't bleeding or fading or whatever ghosts did when shot. The red spot on his thigh remained steady.

Ro trembled, and lowered a hand to rub at his leg a few inches above it, keeping his fingers well clear. "What *is* that thing?"

"Laser range-finder," Tam said. "I had it out yesterday, measuring some of our trees. I thought a laser might have an effect on a ghost."

"Effect. Yeah." Ro stared down at himself. "It feels hot, really hot. But I'm here."

"Huh? You were here before I turned it on."

Ro nodded. He looked up at Tam, and moved his hands to cover his groin. Xavier thought he saw a hint of a blush. "Yeah. I came in on the blue light. I've been here before, downstairs and up, I think."

"At night," Xavier said. "In my room."

"And hers." Ro tilted his chin toward Tam. "Although she was asleep. I've been all through this house, a minute here, a minute there. Half a dozen rooms. I don't know why."

Xavier remembered the noises in the night, the times he woke thinking he'd heard a cry, or a voice calling. "I heard you, a couple times, maybe."

"I don't know why it happens," Ro said. "I'm floating in the dark, all alone, in the thick, grey, dark, lost. It's... not good in there. But if I can find the blue light, I can follow it. And it always leads here. The, um, doorway doesn't stay

open long, and until now it's always been nighttime. When the blue light fades, I have to go. Back into the dark."

"I've seen you run away and vanish."

"I had to. I don't understand it, but when the door is closing, I have to get back."

"And now?" Tam asked.

Ro said, "I don't know. This is new." He rubbed his thigh, frowning. "I can't see the blue door from here. I don't know if it's still there. But I don't feel it pulling me."

Tam said, "How can we tell?"

Xavier looked over his shoulder to check around the kitchen. "At night, there was a blue glow behind him. There isn't now. But a few minutes ago that wall was, well, green, I guess, when he appeared. Blue plus yellow? I don't see that color now."

Ro shivered, a convulsive shudder that rocked him from head to foot. "I don't feel it. Maybe I'm out of the dark for good." He reached out a hand, and pressed his fingertips into the hallway wall. They sank into the plaster to the first joint, and he pulled them back sharply and shook them. "I don't know if this is better..."

"Than the empty dark? Do you want to go back there?"

"No!" Roman said loudly, then hesitated. "I want to stay here, but..." He looked at the floor, and shifted his weight to one foot. His sole began to merge with the floor, and he quickly went back to a balanced stance. When he looked up, he seemed scared. "Is this what I am now, in this house? Am I a ghost? Or are you ghosts? Is this whole thing some kind of hallucination?"

"I'm pretty sure we're real," Tam said gently.

Xavier asked, "If you're a ghost, do you remember, um, dying?"

"I'm not sure. I think I remember a fight, thinking something bad was coming. But not actually getting killed. I don't think."

"Tell us how to help you. What can we do?"

Ro met his eyes, his pupils blown so wide they almost hid the blue of his irises. "Do you know how long it's been since someone simply talked to me like a human being?"

“How long?” Tam asked.

“I don’t even know...” Ro was cut off by a series of beeps from the range-finder in Tam’s hand.

She glanced down. “Crud! Low battery warning.”

Xavier glanced around quickly. “Where’s the charger?”

“I’m not sure!”

He remembered having it outside; he’d put the panel in the sun, and then kept it handy for the nail gun. “Frack! It’s by the front porch.”

Before he could run for it, the tool beeped again. A tinny voice said, “One minute to auto-shut off. Please recharge.”

Tam said quickly, “Maybe a laser pointer? Ro? Will that work?”

“No clue. Try anything.” He sounded breathless.

The room Xavier was using as a home office was a lot closer than the front porch. He ducked past Ro, careful not to touch him, and ran down the hall. Tam had put the laser pointer back in his desk drawer. He scrabbled it out, hurried into the hall. Ro was trembling, his eyes wild, his hands held out aimlessly. Xavier passed the pointer to Tam, in case the direction or aim mattered.

She clicked it on, aiming right above the range-finder spot on Ro’s leg. For a moment, there were two red dots, one above the other, on the tanned skin of Ro’s thigh.

Ro said, “That one doesn’t hurt.” And then the lower red dot went out. His eyes widened, and his mouth opened. And then he was gone. The little dot of the laser pointer made a tiny bright spot on the faded paint of the hallway wall.

“No!” Xavier dove forward, reaching, as if there was something to grab. “Get him back.”

“We’ll try.” Tam shoved the range-finder into his hands. “Get that charging. I’ll get the electric tape measure, any other laser device we have, and turn them on. We’ll try.”

But although they lined up three different pointers, the tape measure, and even the range-finder piggybacked into the charger, even when they aimed them precisely into that dim hallway, there was no sign of Ro.

Xavier collapsed against the wall, and then slowly slid down to sit on the cool tile floor. “He’s gone.”

"It looks that way." Tam pulled out a kitchen chair and sat where she could see him. "I wonder if he got back into his dark."

"How can you be so calm!" Xavier slammed his hand on the tiles. "We failed."

"Hey, little bro. We tried, right? We still have no clue why any of that worked, or didn't. Or why he's here in the first place. Maybe he's an evil spirit."

He gave her a withering glance. "Most confused evil spirit ever?"

"Maybe he's an evil spirit with amnesia." She snorted. "Maybe that confused act is all a ploy to lure you into its arms."

"What the actual fuck?"

"Well, he spent a hell of a lot more time looking at you than at me. So he's probably not here to lure me."

"If he was luring anyone he wouldn't have held his hands over his dick like a kid. Not sexy." Although it had been kind of sweet. Many people were totally casual about nudity these days. And he was getting way off track. "He seemed more lost than evil or seductive to me. Maybe you're projecting. How long since *you* got laid?"

"You are *never* going to know the answer to that. Anyway, I tend to agree. If he meant any harm, it sure didn't show."

Xavier slumped, pulling up his legs to wrap his arms around them. "How long do you figure he's been dead? Naked and short hair doesn't give us many clues."

"I'd say pretty recently. When I asked about the laser pointer, he didn't ask what it was or seem confused by the term."

"True. Yeah." When had those come into use? Back at the end of the twentieth century, he thought. Within about fifty years anyway. "So I probably don't have to worry about a Civil War era soldier who might be buried under the floor." He hesitated. "Unless an old ghost can learn new stuff."

"KISS." When he stared at Tam, she said, "*Keep It Simple, Stupid*. I'd start with assuming he's modern."

"So, why is he a ghost? Why come here? What is the blue light? Why did the range-finder work and the pointer not? Just general what-the-fuckery."

“You said there were no reports of ghosts in this house before?”

“Nothing believable. Hah, I just said the word *believable* about ghost stories. But no. The plantation house down the road supposedly has a wailing slave girl by the pond, hunting for the baby that was taken from her. Nothing for this house.”

“So it’s not like you’ve bought ectoplasm central.”

He glared at her.

“What?”

“You’re taking this so, aargh, so *lightly!*”

She shrugged. “That’s my style. Dismembered dead bodies in a restaurant back room. Guy decapitated by malfunctioning Auto-bus. Naked ghost. I’m smooth.”

“Well, you may be smooth, Officer I’ve-Seen-Worse-Shit. I’m losing it all over the damned place.”

“You look okay to me.”

“I want Ro back. Now. Yesterday.”

She tilted her head. “Why does it matter that much?”

“I don’t know. This is my house. I hate unexplained stuff.”

“And you like naked guys.”

“That has *nothing* to do with it.” It wasn’t the naked, it was the lost, scared and lonely, that made him wish he could have kept Ro with them.

Roman cursed and struggled, trying to get back to Xavier. And Tam. Fighting against nothing real, arms and legs moving aimlessly against unsubstantial drag, like he was wrestling a wet blanket. He couldn’t see anything but familiar dim fog. No blue light, no red, no kitchen, no man with clear grey eyes looking at him kindly. No voices, good or bad. He floated, unmoored, and nothing he did changed anything.

When his first panicked struggle ebbed to twitches and shudders, he drew a long breath. He *thought* he took a breath. Was he even breathing? *No, that way lay panic again.*

So, he was a ghost. But people could see him. Even talk to him. And not just cryptically about the specters of fathers past or something. But he apparently had no control over his coming and going, and he *hated* not being in control. He wasn't sure how he knew that, but he was sure it was true.

Perhaps next time he was at the house, he could have them turn on the range-finder, hooked up to steady power. And leave it on. The pain that burned like a heated brand on his thigh had been so completely worth it, to just talk to another human being. He could stand that pain for a long, long time.

For unknown hours, or minutes, or days, he flailed around in the dark, caught between bitterness and fear, and a sliver of hope. When he was too exhausted to do anything else, he fell into what seemed like sleep. And thought he heard a voice in his ear. "*Roman. Concentrate.*"

"Grandfather?" Grandfather would be ashamed of his pointless thrashing and panic, that was certain. The old man had been the most centered, grounded person Roman had ever known. He remembered Grandfather's expectant tone well. Remembered the sound of his voice, the sharpness of his dark eyes. That certainty, that *knowledge*, was a blessing. That was part of who Roman was, a man whose grandfather had spoken to him, taught him, guided him. *Grandfather...*

When he didn't fight too hard, but let himself sink into the quiet, he had a vivid memory of standing on a high place. The ground under his feet was dry and sandy. Below him, a cliff dropped away, opening almost at his toes into miles of clear air. The landscape was bleak and beautiful, shades of grey and red rock, and dusty green, and the air smelled clean. An elderly voice behind him said, "*Look out there. See that. Feel it. This is your place. When you need clarity, when you need stillness, when you need vision, come here and look out over that valley.*"

"What do I do now, Grandfather?" There was no cliff in this darkness, no clarity. But maybe there could be stillness.

He'd been taught meditation by that same dry, steady voice. He could hear the words now, patient, simple. He slowed his breathing, despite his doubt that he was actually breathing to begin with... *No, no, not good.* He slowed his breathing. Relaxed his muscles, ignoring the question of what they were doing for him otherwise. He closed his eyes, although the grey darkness was about the same behind his eyelids as in front of them.

Slow, relax, quiet. Tried to turn off his brain. Matched his breaths to every third heartbeat. *Beat, two, three, in. Beat, two, three, out.* Focused on that one thing, inside him, closing out the craziness of the outside, for the quiet inside.

Gradually, he heard voices. One was unfamiliar, cool and educated, with a little drawl. The other was, was... *Nasty*, his brain supplied. He had the impulse to run away, but even evil was better than nothingness. He held onto his control, breathed, listened, in a dark that had more features now, rustling, beeps, a faint stale smell.

The cool voice said, "Do you know how long he wants to keep this one? It's already been longer than the usual. I'm seeing a little muscle wasting."

Nasty answered, "I'm not about to ask. *But...* I heard this zombie may be a long-term acquisition. Kept on ice, so to speak. They grabbed him before he could run off somewhere inaccessible. I heard he's a perfect match for someone important."

"Who?"

"Oh, hell, no. I don't even want to know."

"Ah. Well, I'll put in an order for an electrostim bed then, to maintain muscle tone. And you should tell the attendants to be more careful with hygiene. He's on an air-float mattress. There's no good reason for that pressure sore. If they happen to need skin, that's a prime graft site, and I won't be responsible if it's infected."

"I'll tell them." Nasty's voice came closer, which made Roman want to run. He couldn't, though, so he froze into even greater stillness.

Cool voice said, "What about her?"

"Two kidneys, I heard. And maybe liver. They're in negotiations, so it shouldn't be long."

"Right. Standard protocol then." There was a pause. Roman thought he could maybe feel a touch on his upper arm. He struggled to open his eyes, and failed. Cool voice said from much closer, "And try to feed this one a bit more. Maintain body mass. Less metabolic stress, and besides, who knows, maybe they'll end up needing him for a leg or something. Poor bastard."

Nasty said, "Since when do you care?"

"It's one thing to bring them in for a few days, do the harvest and dispose of the remains. After all, there are much worse deaths for the underclass. It's

another thing to keep a body here, week after week, maybe month after month. Just in case he's needed."

"He don't care. He's never gonna care again."

"True."

"Don't go getting a conscience on us, Doc. That could be dangerous."

The cool voice went positively glacial. "Don't worry about me. You try taking care of the donors better, or it won't be me who's in trouble. In fact, I'm going to order turning every two hours for this one, instead of every four. See to it."

There was a pause, and some garbled sounds, and then Nasty hissed, close enough to Roman's ear to make him jump, if he could have moved, "Slimy pissant. Thinks he's better'n me." This time Roman was pretty sure he felt hands on his arm and back. "I'll turn you, all right. And then I'll give *her* the standard protocol. My favorite version." He tugged on Roman.

Dizziness swooped over Roman. He was torn between hating the looming darkness, and wanting to escape that gleeful, cruel voice. In the end, as his body moved around uncontrollably in space, he lost his hold on it, and fell into the waiting void.

This time he managed not to panic. He wasn't lost or scattered to the wind. He had threads to find the truth of himself. *Nasty. Doctor. Mattress. Pressure sore.*

He wasn't dead. The certainty swept over him with a relief more dizzying than anything before it. *He. Wasn't. Dead.* Not dead. In hospital, comatose, sedated, something, but not dead.

In some kind of coma though, apparently, and he didn't know why. Already bits of what he'd heard escaped him, his memory failing to hold onto the words. *Hospital.* He was in hospital. Had he hit his head, in that fight he vaguely remembered? Could that put a man in a coma like this? He was a botany professor, not a physiologist... *He was a botany professor.* He was...

He was Roman Janz. Age thirty-eight. Ex-troublemaker, ex-soldier, now peaceful tracker of rare plants. The sudden rush of memory, of *self*, of thirty-eight years of life pouring back into him, unnerved him. He felt his thoughts shaking apart in dozens of directions. He had a past. He had an identity. But he was terrified, down to the marrow of his bones, that he didn't have a future.

In his mental flailing, a hopeful thought came to him. *Xavier*. He focused on the memory of a strong, clear voice and grey eyes that looked at him and *saw* him, even now, even in this disembodied state. Xavier wanted to help, if he could just get back to him.

Or if that didn't work, maybe he could go the other way. He vaguely remembered the doctor hadn't sounded evil. Or perhaps there was another nurse, or a sympathetic attendant. Maybe he could get back into his flesh and blood self enough to do something. To move. To ask for help. Something. He wasn't even going to breathe loudly around Nasty unless he had the strength to run. But maybe there was someone who would help him.

Hope hurt. But not half as much as the bleak, hopeless confusion had. He turned his attention inward again, slowed his breathing, listened to his heart. *Grandfather, help me*. He went looking for the light.

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Chapter 4

Xavier was expecting a restoration specialist to show up the next morning with some samples of kitchen tiles, so when the driveway vehicle-approach alarm sounded, he didn't look out. A few minutes later the doorbell rang. He pulled the door open, then stared at the man on his doorstep. Unless selling tile paid a lot better than he'd thought, this guy was not into home restoration. That was a ten thousand dollar suit, and a half-million-dollar car at the end of the walk.

"Xavier Faulkner?" The man's voice was cool and unaccented.

"Yes," he said cautiously, sliding his hand up toward the alarm pad on the doorframe.

"Your sister is Tamara Faulkner? Her health has been... precarious."

"Yes." His heart sped up. Tam was still asleep upstairs, after a night spent patrolling the house with him, watching for a blue light that never appeared. He suddenly wished she was awake and behind him. Perhaps with her gun. Of course, this might be an insurance salesman, or local businessman, or even some kind of garden-variety con man. It didn't have to be their target.

"I have an item of business I wish to discuss with you, Mr. Faulkner. An acquisition, shall we say?"

"I'm in the market for a lot of things," he said carefully. His cell-com could be set to record or transmit, but he'd had no warning this was coming. He had a feeling that any command, even subvocalized, or any gesture toward his ear, would be taken very wrong. The man might look calm and unruffled, but his eyes were cold as steel.

"I believe you will be interested in these." The man handed him two sheets of lightweight old-fashioned paper.

Xavier looked at them. He wasn't an expert at reading gene-scans, but he knew the basics. The banding and codes on the charts marked the genetic material that made one individual different from another. Or similar. This was the histocompatibility marker scan for Tam, if the name on it could be trusted. And the second page with the name carefully cut away, was another chart. Someone whose chart superficially looked a whole lot more like Tam's than Xavier's own did.

“Hold them up to the light,” the man said. He took the charts out of Xavier’s hand, stacked the pages, and handed them back.

Xavier took them slowly. They hadn’t planned for this kind of face-to-face contact. The FBI had thought the chance of the organ-leggers reaching out to him was minimal, even with the perfect profile and all the backing evidence in place. And if he was contacted, they’d expected a slow and anonymous approach. Not some guy pulling up in a dark limo—Xavier glanced toward the driveway where the car waited—and just making him an offer.

“Hold them up superimposed,” the man repeated.

Holy, holy crud. This was really it. Xavier had always thought of himself as a Frodo. He was mostly a homebody not a hero, although willing to step up when duty called. Or maybe a Samwise, even, backing up his sister when she did the hard parts. He’d had a few nicely vague and heroic dreams of helping to catch the bad guys. They’d never included having the bad guy standing on his front porch. It was embarrassing how his heart rate threatened to top two hundred, just from realizing this sting might actually happen. And involve him, personally.

He did as he was told. As the sunlight shone through the paper, he could see that this anonymous woman, whoever she was, was an almost perfect antigen match for Tam. There were a couple of bands Tam had that this person didn’t, but none in the reverse. After long talks with the doctors about why he and the other more distant relatives he’d tracked down were not good matches, Xavier could see how well this donor worked. He didn’t have to fake the tremble of his hand, as he passed the papers back.

“Who is she?” he asked, because it would be unnatural not to. And then, as if had just occurred to him, he asked, “And how did you get Tam’s chart? Or the, um, donor’s?”

The man gave him a steady stare, and pulled an old-style flame lighter out of his pocket. He clicked it, and set fire to one corner of the stacked pages. The flame raced up one edge, and Xavier fought the impulse to snatch the pages back. The man held the burning paper between two fingers until half of the pages were gone; then he walked down the four front steps and set the smoldering fragments on the flagstone walk. They stood silently, Xavier in the doorway, the stranger on the path, watching the flames burn themselves out. When they were done, the stranger put one shiny shoe on the blackened ashes, and gave them a twisting crush, obliterating any remnant.

Then he looked up at Xavier. "One-time offer. Twenty million. No haggling, five mil up front. If you're interested, you can follow me to my car, where we can discuss it. If not, I'll leave now. No hard feelings."

"You'd just leave, after I've seen you? No precautions?" He'd read all the crime-story rules about not leaving witnesses behind. He hoped there was a satellite cam on them right now, but you never knew.

"This isn't my real face." The man smiled thinly. The little wrinkles at the corners of his lips formed neat creases, typical of an expensive syntha-mask and not bare skin. "That car will be gone in an hour. And if you become too troublesome, well, money is a good defense against trouble." The sharp edge to his tone suggested he could buy more than just lawyers.

"So you want me to just get into a car with you? Like that? Just because you know something about my sister?" Xavier tried to look calm despite the pounding of his heart. "I'm not that stupid."

"You've been bumbling around, looking for options for her. This is an offer that only comes once. Your choice." The man turned away.

"Wait!" He hesitated. *What would seem plausible?* "I want to raise the driveway defense rack before I get in any vehicle."

The man said, "This is not a kidnapping. But you'll have to take my word for that. At this point, I've done nothing but burn a piece of paper. Quietly. If you're too scared to go further, say so."

Everyone Xavier's age had vivid memories of the home-jackings that had made a spiked defense grid a standard part of home security. He'd installed a good system for the property perimeter before moving in. But... but if he was too careful, he had no doubt this man would walk away. And Tam would be bitterly disappointed in him.

"All right," he said. "I want to hear more."

The man led the way down the walk and opened the back door of the waiting car. Xavier hesitated another second, staring at the shape of the driver, just visible through heavily smoked glass. Then he slid into the back seat. The other man got in too, sitting opposite him, and pulled the door shut.

The deep hush told him this was a soundproofed limo. The comfort of the seats was luxurious. He tried not to relax too much into the memory-foam cushions, perching on the front edge and bracing his hands on his knees. "So tell me what you're offering."

“First.” The man reached over slowly, and brought out a metal box with a hinged lid. “Please place your cell-com in here.”

Reluctantly, Xavier unhooked it from his ear and laid it in the box. It wasn't like his tracker implant wouldn't still let Tam find him, anywhere. But the cell-com was such an ingrained part of his life that he felt naked without it.

The man closed the lid. “Just a precaution. Thank you. And one more precaution. I'm going to scan you for recording devices. I'm sure you understand.”

Xavier nodded, but said, “What about you? What if you're recording this, and are planning to blackmail me later?”

“You'll be fully able to claim entrapment.” The man pulled a slim wand out of a pocket in the armrest and ran it around and over Xavier. “If you're clean, I'll make the offer. You just say yes. Or no.”

“Am I still able to say no?”

“Of course. No evidence, no risk. Yet.” The man set the wand aside. “If we do business, there will come a point, though, where having second thoughts could be *quite* dangerous to your health. And your sister's.”

Xavier tried to look smooth and calm, and not gulp as he swallowed the spit pooling in his mouth. He was such a ween. He tried to channel Frodo. “Go on.”

The man settled back in his seat, and opened a minibar beside him. “Drink?”

“No, thank you.”

“Pity. You can't find scotch like this anymore.” He shut the door without taking any thought. “So we both know the score. Your sister ate some of the snack cakes contaminated with mutant pipevine. Like all the other unfortunates who got that bad batch, her kidneys shut down. Permanent, irreversible damage.”

“I'm well aware.” He heard his own tone, dry as dust now, no weakness. Good. He pushed back memories of those days.

“She gets dialysis, and you're able to afford the best. She could live a full lifetime that way. Hooked up to the machine for an hour every evening, getting treated. Many of the poorest victims would envy her.”

“Get to the point.” He knew this. In those early days, he'd watched the pictures on the link-news of the families, thousands of them, waiting like him to

see if their loved ones would survive, wondering how life would go on. He'd anonymously donated ten traveling dialysis units for the local community health services in their hometown. It had wiped out one investment account, but he'd needed to do something.

"We all know that this isn't the end, though. Mutant pipevine isn't just toxic, it causes cancer. Sooner, rather than later. What's the average time from exposure to renal epithelio-sarcoma? I'm sure you looked into it."

He licked his dry lips. "Nine years." The words echoed through him. *Nine years.*

"Uh huh. Not long."

Xavier wanted to punch the complacent look off the guy's blandly masked face, but he clenched his fingers on his knees and waited.

"Now, your sister will rise to the top of the transplant list one day. Maybe even before the nine years are up. Your resources will have kept her in good health. She'll get a new kidney. One new kidney, because that list is long and that's all you really need. Except when the other is a ticking time bomb."

"She can have the second one removed, once the transplant is done and healed." He'd looked into it. He really had.

"She can. But if she rejects the new one, what then? Autoimmune diseases crop up faster than the drugs to suppress them these days. If her new one isn't a perfect match, if it's only as good as the eighty percent minimum? Will you take that risk?"

Xavier only realized how hard he was shaking his head when the world got blurry. He stopped with an effort. Crud, he would make a horrible secret agent. Although to be fair, he assumed their cases usually weren't this personal. "We'll do what has to be done." Then, because Tam would probably hit him otherwise, he also added, "It will be totally her choice."

"Or there's an alternative."

"Go on."

"What if she could have two kidneys, perfectly matched, right now? What if we could remove both the rejection and the cancer risk, before it arises? Some of the victims are gone as fast as two years. It's an ugly cancer when it happens. What if we can reduce her risk to near-zero?"

"I'm told organ cloning may be a reality within the next ten years."

The man said flatly, "Which is more than nine years, and purely speculative. This is a one-time limited offer."

"Removing two kidneys from a donor is..." He didn't want to say murder. Didn't even want to express the concept around this man. "Certain death. I can't condone that."

"This donor is already brain dead, I assure you. She meets all the LifePoints criteria for a full donation with euthanasia. I would never, never suggest otherwise." He managed to look shocked and sanctimonious, despite the face-smoothing effect of the mask. Or maybe aided by it. "All I am offering is a *redistribution*. Without my intervention, this young woman's organs will be distributed down the list, to the highest ranked recipients who meet the minimum eighty percent match. Your sister is nowhere near the top of that list."

"But you can fix that."

"Let's say, I have early access, for that very reasonable fee I mentioned. Really, it's a public service. With a match that perfect, your sister won't need all the expensive anti-rejection drugs and testing. I'm saving public money by spending private money. The Health Services should thank me."

Xavier could tell the man thought this was funny. Maybe after he got out of the trap of the back of this limo, it would be. "My sister was a cop." He figured it was best to say that himself. They hadn't tried to hide it—that would have been futile. "Why would you offer her this chance?"

"Well, first because the perfect donor just *happened* to be available. And because I checked, and your sister isn't some holier-than-thou, lilywhite public servant. For the last seven years, in Juvenile Crimes, she bent a hell of a lot of rules. There's even a misdemeanor or two in there, if you know how to look. She was all about the individual over the system. Maybe it's time for her to be that individual who benefits, if she wants to."

"I didn't know..." He remembered that her background had received a little minor adjustment from the FBI. Rule bending for the kids was all Tam, breaking the law wasn't. It probably wouldn't hurt for him to have looked surprised. There was no doubt a reason he hadn't been told the details. His lack of a poker face, maybe.

"One hour."

“What?”

The man held out a slip of paper. “Within one hour, you can wire five million to that offshore account. Your money will immediately be forwarded to another account, of course. When that has cleared, I will be notified that down payment has been made, and the next phase will begin. If you miss that window, I will assume my offer has been declined.”

“You want me to just hand you five million dollars? Like that?”

“It’s a seller’s market. There may be billions of people on this planet, but there are very, very few who will be perfect matches. Even if you had access to the gene scan registries for the whole world, what are the chances of finding another match this good? And then finding that donor in a, shall we say, plausible condition?” He shook his head sadly.

“But...”

The man opened the box, handed him his cell-com, reached and touched the button for the door, which swung open silently. “We’re done. One hour.”

“There are a hundred details!”

“All of which wait on your answer.” The man gestured out the door.

Reluctantly, Xavier slid out of the car and stood. Without another word, the door shut in his face. The car pulled away, its electric engine almost flawlessly silent. Gravel crunched under the tires, as it gathered speed down the drive, not hesitating as it crossed the retracted rack at the perimeter.

He stood staring, until it rounded the bend toward the road, and disappeared behind the lilac hedge that screened the fence.

Eventually he turned back to the house, climbed the steps, and almost ran into Tam as he went inside. She stood against the doorframe, her hand on the alarm panel, an angled mirror letting her see out the peephole viewer.

“What the crud?” He tripped on the doorsill, stepping back.

She took her hand off the alarm to grab his elbow. “Your com went blank. Your tracker said you were still here. I looked out and saw that limo, sitting there.”

“Yeah. We got an *interesting offer*.”

Her eyes widened for a second, then she said, “That can wait until I’m done harassing you for getting into a strange car without telling me.”

"No, it really can't." He pushed her toward the kitchen, closing the door behind him. "You need to listen."

As they went down the hall he recapped the conversation in the limo. He told the story straight. For all he knew, the man had planted a bug on him, and was now sitting half a mile away listening in.

They'd discussed how to play this, and the conversation went as planned. He paced the kitchen, as they debated. Tam let herself be persuaded slowly, while she sent a message out with silent touches on the wired FBI com he'd thought they might never use. Xavier used the little tidbit about her supposed lawbreaking as a wedge to help convince her. He hoped there were no hidden cameras pointed through those historically authentic, clear-glass windows to catch the smug grin she gave, when he accused her of already being on the wrong side of the law.

"So we're agreed?" he said at last. "Five million is a lot, but it won't bankrupt me by any means. It's worth that much to hear the rest of the story?" He tapped his cell-com for the time. "We only have ten more minutes."

Tam huffed theatrically, then said, "Yeah. Let's play along for now."

As Xavier pulled his tablet toward him, and set the slip of paper beside it, he heard Tam take a sharp breath. When he looked up, Ro was standing against the kitchen wall. "Crud!" He hovered between tablet and Ro.

"You get that," Tam snapped, surreptitiously passing him the little data link. "I'll get Ro." She hurried for the range-finder, set ready and fully charged on the counter.

Xavier wanted to go to Ro and ask if he was okay. He wanted to make sure the damned laser worked again. But he had nine minutes to send the FBI the bank account number and then transfer five million dollars. His own bank security measures would take most of that. He cursed under his breath, took time for a glance up and saw Ro wince as Tam put the finder on his leg.

Ro said, "Yes. Good. Is it charged?"

"Full battery and the charger is handy. You caught us busy though."

"Can we... let me try backing into the hall, like last time."

Xavier wrenched his attention down to his tablet. He entered codes, worked his way through the system. He forced himself to ignore the murmurs as Tam and Ro apparently managed to maneuver into the hallway and away from the

kitchen. He entered his retina-scan and fingerprints and passcodes. *There. And that one.* He hesitated for a moment with his finger over the screen. But really, it was just money. One last click sent five million winging on its way, somewhere. He checked and confirmed that the transaction time was still three minutes in the clear. *Done.*

Turning off the tablet, he hurried into the hall. Tam was herding Ro, a step at a time, further from the kitchen, keeping him pinned by the beam.

“Yes,” Ro said to Tam. “It’s working. Holy crud, it’s really working.”

“Another step.” They did a slow slide to the left.

Xavier asked, “What are we doing? Does that hurt, Ro?”

He looked over, eyes wide and bright. “Who the fuck cares? It’s working. I’m out of the blue, and I’m still here.”

Xavier suddenly remembered he might be bugged, and if so, he was probably not giving limo-guy the most sane appearance. He laid a finger behind his ear and said loudly to Tam, “I’m kind of sweaty. I think I’ll go have a shower, and then we’ll talk more about this situation.”

Ro stared at him, but Tam pressed a finger to her lips and nodded, “Sure. Go do that. We’ll talk after.”

He climbed the stairs two at a time, cursing in his head. He wanted to be down there. The FBI had given them a couple of scanners, to check for surveillance. He ducked into Tam’s room, and found one, running it from his feet up his body. It stayed green until he got to his chin, at which point the light flickered to red. *Double crud.* A little checking told him that his toad-fucking *cell-com* was bugged. He hesitated, heading for the bathroom while he thought about it. He turned on the shower, then grinned, undressed loudly and stepped in without taking the cell-com from behind his ear.

It was supposed to be waterproof, but he’d cracked the casing a couple of weeks ago, and not replaced it. For a bonus he stuck a finger in his ear and held it under the flow, until the com crackled and went dead. *Hah.* Just in case the bug was made of sterner stuff, he loudly cursed his stupidity in ruining it as he took off the dead cell-com, and dropped it in the trash. And muffled it with a giant wad of tissues.

He left all his clothes on the floor too, and hurried to his room. A pair of sweatpants was the fastest option, and then he hurried back downstairs. To his shock, the hallway was empty.

Before he could panic, he heard faint voices from behind the cellar door. He opened it, and looked down. At the foot of the stairs, Tam and Ro faced each other, wearing similar looks of satisfaction. Xavier closed the door behind him, and headed down to join them.

“Hey guys, why are we in the basement?”

Ro said, “I don’t know why this range-finder even works, but we thought if I got away from any of the places I’ve been in the blue, somewhere without outside light or windows, then maybe I can stay here. So far it’s working.”

“Oh. Wasn’t that taking a chance of losing you?”

“We did it inch by inch,” Tam said. “And now we have enough space to actually sit and talk. How about you? Anything?”

He nodded, but said, “Tell you later.” Not that it wasn’t relevant, but the bug had been pretty much what he expected. Ro was definitely *unexpected*.

Ro said, “I don’t think I’m dead.”

Xavier stared at him. “You’re not?”

“I think I’m spirit-walking.”

Tam said, “Like, astral projection or something?”

“Something like that. Is that any crazier than being a ghost?”

Xavier blinked. “I guess not.” Something warmed inside him at the thought. It really wasn’t any less likely, was it? Or any more likely, but he pushed that thought away. Either he and Tam were sharing neighboring straightjackets, or something paranormal was going on, and he’d rather have Ro as a live spirit than dead ghost. “If you’re not dead, where are you? Your physical self, I mean?”

“I’m not sure.” Ro looked uncomfortable. “A hospital, I think. Maybe a mental hospital. A few times, I thought I was in bed somewhere. Listening to, um, orderlies. Maybe a doctor once. It’s a bit vague.”

“Can you remember anything else about yourself? Maybe I can do some research.”

“Hell, yeah!” Ro took an eager step toward him. “That’s the thing. I *do* remember now, most of it anyway. Who I am, all of that.”

Tam said, “Your full name?”

“Roman Michael Janz. I’m thirty-eight, born November second, two thousand two. I’m an associate professor in biology, specialty in botany, for Saint Torvenas College. I also have a five-year travel grant from Kilon Pharmaceuticals to collect plant specimens for research.”

“Wow.” Xavier blinked. “Okay. Ro. Or do you prefer Roman?”

“No one calls me Ro. Although you could.”

“Roman.” He adjusted his perceptions, trying not to get too distracted by the comforting thought that his Ro wasn’t a ghost. Well, probably not a ghost. And not *his* anything, either—all that research, trying to find Ro, had somehow made him possessive. But Ro was alive, somewhere. That had to be good. That was *really* good. “So do you know what happened to you?”

“Not really.” Roman frowned. “The last thing I remember, it was the end of winter term. I think. I was walking across campus to the shuttle, and someone called my name. I turned, and a bug stung me on the back of the neck. I think. And then, I’m not sure. I remember a fight, but it doesn’t seem real. A dream maybe. A nightmare. Maybe I had an allergic reaction and went into shock?”

Tam said, “I bet Xavier can find out. He can do a hospital search for you. He’s like a genius, a Hawking-hacker with a touchpad.”

Xavier said quickly, “She’s exaggerating. But I can look.”

Roman said, “Um. Maybe carefully? Because I just, I don’t know, I feel like there’s something off. Something really wrong, not just me being sick. When I’m there, in that hospital, it seems like a bad place.”

Tam said, “I don’t get it.”

“I’m not explaining it well. It’s just a feeling. It’s not safe there. Like, I don’t want anyone to know I’m out here walking around instead of back there, sleeping. I don’t want anyone to see you online looking for me.”

“I always have good computer security,” Xavier reassured him. “It’s my profession—the way I made my money—selling and testing security systems. Let me get my tablet; it’s better than the house system.”

Roman shifted from one foot to the other, biting his lip. Xavier hesitated. “Or is there something more urgent. Does it hurt standing like that? What can we do?”

“I don’t know. Yeah, it’s not comfortable.” Roman looked down, and eased his leg sideways just enough to shift the laser an inch. “But... damn. Crap.” He

looked up again and his eyes were haunted. "I will do anything, *anything*, not to be jerked back into the grey at someone else's whim. Ever again."

"We'll help. But you can't stand here forever."

"I don't even know why this is working. And I'm so fucking scared it'll stop. I was a kid in a rough part of Chicago, I was a soldier in Uganda in some of the worst fighting, and I don't think I've ever been as scared as when the laser went off last time, and I felt myself sucked away." His voice rose. "It's *nothingness* in there, I mean, not life, not death, just waiting. I can feel my sanity shredding away in that place."

"Like sensory deprivation?"

"Yeah, I guess so." Roman frowned. "I wonder if the real me is being put into sense-dep. It makes no sense though. That's a torture technique, and I have nothing anyone would want."

"We'll help," Xavier promised. He started to touch his cell-com, then remembered what he'd done with it. Crap. "Tam? Maybe you could call a local hardware store. Order three more range-finders like this, same model if possible. And have them delivered?"

"Good thought." She clicked her com, and placed the order.

Roman said, "I'll pay you back."

"Not a problem."

"So, is it okay if I ask who you are? Where we are?" Roman flicked an uneasy glance at the laser Tam still held, then looked back at Xavier.

He realized that they held the key to Roman's life right now. It made him a little ill, to think that they could, with one touch of a button, condemn this vibrant man to a torture of sorts. But he couldn't think of a way around that. Maybe stability would help, though. He said, "How about if you sit, and we can set the laser on the floor. Then you can have more control over where you take the beam."

"Good idea," Tam said. "Trying to hold it still is getting annoying."

"Are you tired?" he asked Roman, as they managed a careful dance to get everyone safely seated. "Can you get tired?"

"I don't know." Roman's laugh was almost genuine. "I assume that about twenty hours from now, when I still don't dare fall asleep, we'll find out. If it's okay for me to stay that long?"

“Of course you can.”

Roman folded his legs, glanced down, then shifted over carefully and raised one knee. “Sorry. I don’t mean to flash you. I don’t know how to fix the no-clothes problem.”

Xavier didn’t like the careful deference in Roman’s voice. “It’s not a problem from where I look at it. *Definitely* not a problem.” He was relieved when Roman laughed, instead of getting angry.

“For me either,” Tam said brightly.

Roman laughed again. “Thanks. So. Um. Who are you two, beyond just your names?”

Xavier wasn’t sure where to start, but Tam jumped in. “He’s the nerdy but kindhearted millionaire, and I’m his damsel-in-distress sister.”

“I’m not kindhearted,” Xavier protested. “And since when have you been a damsel?”

“Shut up and let me tell this.”

Xavier sat and listened as Tam and Roman talked. Tam didn’t reveal anything that wasn’t in their cover story, but she made it a good tale. Roman mostly nodded. Xavier watched and wondered. Tam was animated, interested, better than she’d been in a month as she spun their story, her hands waving and her curly red hair bouncing with each vigorous gesture. But he thought Roman’s eyes turned his way more than hers.

Maybe. He reminded himself that Roman was a ghost, or at least, not really present. *You’ve gone far too long without a fuck when you’re crushing on a naked ghost, just because he’s in the same room.*

Although to be fair, Roman was pretty much his type. Tall, lean, fit, and he must be smart, given his job. *And brave.* He added that, because there Roman sat, laughing at one of Tam’s jokes, with a laser burning on his leg, one click away from oblivion.

Xavier broke in to say, “Tam, you want to check on that hardware order?”

She looked irritated at the interruption, but said, “Sure. In fact, I’ll go up and get your tablet, and some bottled water. You want one? Roman?”

“I doubt I can touch it,” Roman said.

“Hell. Right. I forgot. You seem so real, sitting there.”

As Tam went up the stairs, Roman said quietly, "I *am* real."

"She didn't mean it like that."

"I know. But this is almost as crazy to me as it is to you. What if I'm actually in a coma somewhere, dreaming all this?"

"Or I'm dreaming you." Xavier scooted a little closer. "No. That'll just drive us nuts. More nuts. Pick the simplest explanation. You're having an out of body experience that somehow we can share."

"That's simplest?"

"Given that Tam can see you too, yeah."

"How sick is she?" Roman asked softly.

"She's fine, right now. In treatment, but fine. There's some long-term risk. Um." He wasn't going to give the cancer more power by even talking about it. "She'll be okay."

"So you're both retired. And restoring the house." Roman dropped his gaze, moving his leg a fraction back and forth, watching the red dot slide around on his thigh. "If you have some spare time, is there a way I can persuade you to try to find me?"

"Your body, you mean?"

"Yes."

"Of course!" He reached out to touch Roman without thinking, and his fingertips passed into the space occupied by Roman's arm. He jerked his hand back. His fingertips had felt something, yielding, insubstantial but not just thin air. They tingled oddly. Unless he was imagining things. "Crap. Sorry!"

"Are you okay?" Roman asked urgently.

He flexed his fingers, looked at them, carefully rubbed the tips against his sweatpants. If they'd been numb, it was wearing off already. "Fine, I think. You?"

"I'm still here. That's all that matters."

"So, I can't really touch you. I guess that's good to know."

"And that it won't kill you if you try. Also good."

They looked at each other. There was a moment of silence. Xavier felt his breath speed up, as he forcibly kept his eyes focused on Roman's face. He was glad he was clothed, so that sudden hot flash of awareness wouldn't show.

But maybe he didn't hide it that well, because Roman said, "Just for... if I ever get back to flesh and blood... Are you bi or gay? Not that it matters, but I just wondered."

"Gay. Well, K-five maybe, not pure six. If a young Michelle Pfeiffer in her classic Catwoman suit happened to want to blow me, I wouldn't say no, but most women don't do much for me."

"Gay, definitely," Roman said. "A six. So they do less than that for me."

Xavier lost the thread of the conversation, caught in the realization that he was face to face with a gorgeous, naked gay man whom he liked, for the first time in far too long. Although no. Gay *ghost*. Or whatever spirit walkers were. He really needed to remember that.

"And your sister?"

"Tam's a three. I've never been able to figure out why she dates who she does, but gender's never been an issue. I'm sure she thinks you're worth a second look."

Roman dropped his gaze, looking almost shy. In a softer voice, he asked, "Do you?"

"Are you kidding? I've been watching your naked ass walking away for days. I'm well past second looks."

Roman flushed. "Oh. Right."

Change the subject. "Won't someone have missed you by now, back home? I'd expect a missing person report to have been filed. No?"

"Maybe not. I live alone. If it really was the end of term, well, I was all set to take a sabbatical for spring term. I have—had—a permit for a research trip to Brazil, and a plane ticket waiting. People at Saint Torvenas would assume I went off as planned. People in Brazil, well, they might curse unreliable Americans when I didn't arrive, might even send me a few messages. But none of them would care enough to come looking for me."

"Do you have a tracker implant?"

"No." Roman looked embarrassed. "When I got out of the service I did, of course. But there was this time when I, um, had this idea that they were

following me. Waiting to draft me again. It was crazy, but when I got the tracker removed, the nightmares stopped.”

“Whatever works.” He’d seen net-vids of the war, and the things the rebels had done. He’d seen the vicious fighting, and the poisoning of water sources, ending in a scorched-earth nightmare of death. He’d seen the hollow eyes of returning soldiers. Taking out a tracker was probably one of the saner things some of the veterans had done.

Roman gritted his teeth. “But if I’d just been man enough to wait it out, let the nightmares fade without pulling the stupid device, it would be simple to find me—the physical me—now.”

“You don’t know that.” He leaned toward Roman, speaking earnestly. “After all, they’re useful, but not foolproof.”

“They weren’t proof for this fool.”

“Don’t. You’re not a fool. And we will find you.”

“And then what?” Roman rubbed his hand over his face. “Don’t answer that. We can’t know yet. I should just be grateful someone is actually talking to me. I *am* grateful.”

“But you can’t live in our basement forever. It’s natural to worry about what comes next.”

Tam came back down the stairs with a box in her hands, which she set on the floor. “Your tablet.” She passed it to Xavier. “My water.” She set it down near the wall. “A pillow, because your bony ass may like two-century-old concrete, but mine doesn’t. Three range-finders, because that hardware store seriously wants to please a good customer. Their delivery guy probably broke a speed limit getting here.” She placed them side by side on the floor. “And this.” She held up one of the bug detectors. “Because paranoia isn’t just for Sundays, it’s a way of life.”

Roman watched her as she circled the room and then checked the new devices over. The light stayed green. When she was done, he asked cautiously, “Um, what that looks like—are you seriously checking for a bug?”

Tam shrugged nonchalantly. “He’s rich. I’m a cop. Paranoia comes with the territory.”

“Oh.” Xavier thought Roman didn’t look convinced, but he let it drop, and said, “Can we look me up on the Net now? See if there’s a clue?”

“Sure.” Xavier scooted over so Roman could see the tablet, since the angle was crap for the heads-up projection. “Tam, you want to set up at least one more laser, just in case?”

She got one out, connected it to a charger, and turned it on. She drifted the target dot around on the floor, sliding it toward Roman. “So, big boy, tell me where you want it.”

Roman hesitated, then tapped his other leg. “Other side, maybe. Then if I move away from one, I move into the other.”

“Got it.”

Xavier watched them line the beam up. Roman flinched visibly as the new laser touched him.

Tam said, “Sorry.”

“No, it’s good. It’s fine.” Roman settled into it. “It does make me feel like a bug pinned to a board, but it’s good. It’s grounding.”

Xavier tapped his tablet and activated his security and anonymity to online search levels. “So... Professor Roman Janz of Saint Torvenas College, and Cincinnati, Ohio.”

“My fair city. Right.”

There was quite a lot to find, but most of it was old history. Papers, awards, classes taught—clearly Roman was good at his job. A couple of biomedical shared patents. A link to his military service that Xavier didn’t follow.

“That?” Roman pointed at a link about the college faculty for the current spring term.

“Sure.” Xavier sent an info-bot out to harvest what it could. But all they could find was that Roman was listed as on-sabbatical, and unavailable. He checked the local news for a few days on either side of end-of-term, but there were no police reports of a medical emergency, and no missing person notices. Roman’s passwords got him into the college system far enough to make sure that grades had been posted for the classes he’d taught.

“Well, that gives us a boundary,” Xavier said. “Somewhere between March twentieth when the last grades went up, and March twenty-second when you should have left the country on that plane, you went missing.”

“What date is it again?”

He couldn't refuse to answer. "April eleventh."

"Almost three weeks. And no one's noticed," Roman said. "What does that say for my life?"

"That you're self-sufficient? And a bit of a loner?" Xavier shrugged. "Takes one to know one. Seriously, if Tam wasn't around I don't think I'd be that different."

Tam said, "And don't think he's kidding. In all the time we've been here, with Lexington, the gay Mecca of the region, just an hour away, I haven't been able to drag him there."

"I'm glad," Roman said, then flushed. "I mean, it's nice to not be the only guy who isn't burning up the club scene."

"I hate clubs," Xavier said. "Meat markets, most of them."

Tam stood. "Well, I'm going to leave you guys to bond over search bots and Tri-Power superhero vids, while I go get my nails done."

"You *what*?" Xavier asked.

She wiggled her fingers at him. "Don't you think I need to check in with my manicurist?"

He stared at her hand, trying to remember the last time he saw her actually wear polish, then realized what she was saying. Their FBI contact liked physical meet-ups, in populated venues like malls. "Oh. Right. Go for it."

"Call if you need me." She headed up the stairs. Xavier saw that she had a bounce in her step, and a little smile on her face. Clearly, this whole messy situation was working for Tam. Lucky her.

He turned back to Roman. "I don't *really* watch Tri-Power."

"No?" Roman tilted his head, one corner of his mouth curled up. "I do."

"Well, occasionally."

"So what does it say when a cop is more interested in getting her nails done than in a missing man whose disembodied ghost is haunting her cellar?"

"Um."

"Don't worry. I can tell you all have something else going on. I don't mind playing second fiddle."

“Not second. First, really. Well, co-first. It’s complicated.”

Roman had a great smile. “I bet. And this is simple?” He gestured at his naked form, which had sunk an inch into the floor while he wasn’t paying attention, and at the two laser devices pinning him in place.

“Completely,” Xavier said, keeping a straight face. “So. Now what?”

“You got any of the new Tri-Power accessed?” Roman shifted position, spreading his legs unconsciously in a way that was rather distracting. “I’m at a loss for what else to do. I mean, if you have ideas, say so. If I can give you more access codes, anything that might help, I will. But...” He bit his lip.

Xavier pulled his attention from that lip up to Roman’s shadowed eyes. “But?”

“More than anything, I just want to talk to someone. Casually. While I do something normal. And it’s clearly been weeks since I saw Silverman do one of his trademark bad guy takedowns.”

“I don’t have the virtual reality headsets handy. I hate to leave you to get them.”

“No!” Roman shot out a hand, but stopped just short of touching Xavier. “I don’t need VR. Flat video is fine.”

“I’ll keep our searches running in the background. Nationwide, for hospitals and institutions. It’ll take a while, to get into patient rosters without triggering privacy alarms. We might as well enjoy the wait.”

“You can do that? I thought they upgraded medical security laws.”

“Sure. But that’ll hardly stop me.” Xavier let himself grin wickedly. “If we were on Tri-Power, I’d be the grey-hat hacker that Silverman agonizes over arresting.”

“I always did like a guy with brains.”

They each caught a breath, looking at each other. A little flush of color marked Roman’s cheekbones. Without comment, Xavier tilted his tablet a bit closer, and went looking for the best of Silverman.

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Chapter 5

Roman glanced across the basement room. He had no real sense of time, but he knew he'd been down here for hours. Tam had come back from her mysterious errand. Xavier had taken a couple of bathroom breaks. The solid-flesh members of their little secret club had eaten pizza.

Roman had found that he could smell it, and even want it, but with a little twist of his stomach that said actually eating might be a bad idea. Anyway, when Tam set a bit on a plate in front of him, he could lick at it until his tongue merged with the cheese, but there was no flavor and only an odd sense of yielding pressure. It had crept him out enough to make him gag, but Xavier just pulled the plate away calmly, like the idea of ghost puke didn't revolt him.

And then Xavier had started a conversation about where spirit-walking puke would go, and whether it would be visible, that had ended with Roman spitting on an empty plate, just to see. They'd all watched as his spit thinned in the air and was gone before reaching the surface. The shudders that traveled up and down his spine were a nice complement to the nausea.

He was trying damned hard to seem cool and confident, and wanting, more with every minute, to curl up and sob. Preferably against a nice male chest, although there didn't seem to be one he could actually touch. Not to mention how unattractive emotional breakdowns were.

Xavier had gone upstairs a minute ago, leaving his sister as the live person in charge. Tam sat on her cushion, her attention fixed on him speculatively. He fought the impulse to hide further behind his raised knee. It was stupid to keep coming up against the fact that he was naked. There were plenty of nudie types out there who walked around their homes with no clothes full-time. Maybe it was because it wasn't a choice, that it made him so uncomfortable. He'd tried to picture clothes, zen himself into clothes, but he hadn't even managed a pair of shorts. He slid his knee over more.

Tam smiled, although not unkindly. "Don't worry. I'm not interested in a guy who's not interested in me."

He tried to relax. His thighs ached, down to the bone, from the lasers. It didn't seem to get worse, but it wasn't getting any better either. "Am I messing up whatever it is you two have going on?"

"No. You're making life more interesting while we sit around watching paint dry. Which is good, up to a point."

"What point?"

"The one where Xavier gets attached." She sighed. "It might work out okay. Maybe. And I'm not the kind of sister who interferes with her brother's life."

He snorted involuntarily. Even a few hours around Tam had pretty much convinced him she was exactly that kind of sister.

"Be quiet, you." She flashed him a grin. "Okay, I feel a bit responsible. He's my little brother. And for all his brains, he's made some bad choices about men. He's also like a white knight. Well, maybe a slightly grey knight, but once he tries to help somebody, he's in all the way. He'll shred himself trying to help a friend. So you understand why I'm worried about him getting attached to someone who is only half here, and who might be..." He could almost hear the fact that she discarded both "*crazy*" and "*dying*" before going for, "...in deep trouble in his physical life."

"I do understand. I just have so fucking few choices here. I can't go anywhere else. I've never managed to speak to anyone but you two. It's this, or the dark." He swallowed back bile, dreading the idea of returning to his body, paralyzed, blind, listening to things that whispered in his brain with foul meaning.

"Yeah, just, I don't know. Try not to be so perfect, huh?"

"Perfect?"

"The last guy willing to sit around watching superheroes with him was probably when he was fourteen."

"She lies," Xavier said from the top of the stair. "Tam, for all you know I've been with a dozen guys who love The Protectors, and Tri-Power. Maybe I even had a guy who was into Silverman and Masque role-play."

"Role-play?" Roman couldn't help smiling. He'd never come close to going there; still he couldn't help teasing, "I'd be Masque."

Xavier said, "I'm Masque," at the same time, and then smiled back.

"Uh huh." Tam folded her arms. "Not buying it, brother. You told me about enough of your guys to know you weren't dating superheroes."

"Well, in my young and stupid days I did tend to go for the strong silent type."

“And recently?”

“Not so much.” Xavier shrugged. “How the hell did we get onto the subject of my sex life? Roman, I checked the progress of my searches. You’re not listed in any hospital in the continental US. These days, with ninety percent of the population gene scanned, there are almost no John Does, and the few there are, are all older.”

“My gene scan was done when I was in the military anyway, so I’d be on file.”

“So unless someone screwed up or misregistered you on purpose, you’re not in any of those places. The quasi-medical facilities are harder. There’s a ton of rehab and assisted living and other institutions. And some of them keep pretty crappy records.”

“I don’t think I’m in a big, professional place.” Roman closed his eyes to remember what he’d heard, then opened them fast. Dark was not good. Dark was not helpful. “I don’t recall hearing many hospital sounds, just one or two attendants, a word or two of conversation.”

“Well, I’m scouring the smaller ones too. I started locally, on the theory that you’re less likely to spirit-walk across the continent. Nothing so far, though.”

Roman tried to hide his disappointment. Probably not very successfully, since Xavier looked sympathetic. “So we should talk strategy,” Roman said, trying to channel the Staff Sergeant he had been at the end of his tour. “Worst case scenario, if you can’t find any record of where I am, what then?”

There was an uncomfortable silence, as they all thought about it.

“Let’s not all jump in at once,” Tam muttered.

“You can simply stay here,” Xavier said.

“Pinned in place inside a cellar forever?”

“Well, maybe not. The lasers are movable. Tam managed to bring you down here. So if one of us had the device, we could walk with you, go places. Maybe even outside.”

It sounded like being walked on a leash. His instinctive, “Hell, no!” was perhaps a bit forceful. Xavier recoiled. “Sorry. I know you meant well, and really, maybe, as a last resort...” He let his voice trail off. “I guess it’d be like being paralyzed, sort of. Experiencing a very filtered kind of life. Never

touching anything. Never eating, drinking.” A dry-dust life, although if Xavier was there, that would be like a little water in the desert. Or maybe like a mirage, untouchable.

“It won’t come to that,” Xavier said. “I’m damned good with searches. I’ll find you. I promise.”

“Don’t promise,” he said fast and hard. “Or, just promise to try. I’ve seen how useless good intentions can be, if the fates aren’t with you.” He slid his hand into one of the red-light beams, feeling the bite of the laser shift from his thigh to his palm. He winced, thought about aiming it at his head. Maybe later. “I’m a scientist. You’re an analytical type. There must be something, some kind of experiment to try. Something that might help.”

“I’m running a search on spirit-walking and finding your way back from it. Some of the stuff is pretty woo-woo crazy though.”

“Like?”

“Well, some of the most mundane say your body’s physical needs will pull you back.”

“They haven’t so far.” Although he’d never stayed away so long, and it was still possible.

“You’re supposed to have a silver cord between your astral and physical selves, leading back to your body. Lots of people say you find that and follow it home.”

Roman looked himself over, trying to take it seriously. Because even if it sounded like total marshmallow fluff, he was hardly one to talk about rationality at the moment. Unfortunately, he didn’t seem to have some silver cord waiting to be found. “I don’t see one. I’ve never seen one.”

“There are supposedly spirit helpers on the astral plane you could petition. Although also evil spirits, so making a big noise out there is frowned upon.”

“I never saw a trace of anyone but me.” He wanted to sound amused, but perhaps it wasn’t a success.

Xavier said quickly, “Or mirrors. There was a bunch of stuff about mirrors, but one place said seeing yourself in a mirror will suck you back to your physical self.”

“At this point, I’m about ready to pray to my left toe, rub two goats together, and try to create a fire if it would point us in some general direction.”

Tam said, "I'll get a mirror. Hang on."

But when she brought one down and held it up for him, no matter what his angle, he couldn't see himself in it. He ducked his head lower, twisted it sideways. "Do you see me? Is my reflection there for you?"

Xavier crowded closer and he and Tam tilted the mirror, angling it around, as Roman sat very still, fighting back a new panic. Xavier's reflected face was clear, looking drawn and anxious, already so familiar. His own was nowhere to be seen.

"Nope," Xavier said. "Let me try my tablet cam."

It turned out he was invisible to cameras too. "Maybe you're a vampire," Tam suggested.

"Not funny!" He turned to her and the left-side laser slid over his thigh to touch his groin. He yelped and jumped, almost losing contact, then froze, trembling. "Fuck. Crud. Hell." His whole body was shaky and aching, even though until this moment he hadn't felt the strain of sitting still.

"Hey, easy." Xavier kept his voice calm and low. "It's getting late. Tam needs to go up and detox. I'll hang out here for a while. Maybe bring down some blankets and sleep here. Tomorrow's another day, right?"

"Sure," he said, because it would make Xavier look less worried. "It's a plan."

Xavier brought down bedding. Tam went off to bed, with a soft "Goodnight, guys." They watched another two hours of a classic Batman tale, and then Xavier checked his fruitless searches again.

"Nothing." He set the tablet aside. "I'll leave them running." He yawned widely. "Sorry. It's been a long day, but I'll stay up with you a bit longer. Do you feel tired at all?"

Roman tried to feel for that, but he couldn't tell what his body needed. It was too distant. "Not right now."

"Any requests? I've got some classic humor films on here."

"You should sleep. Really. I don't know what you have to do tomorrow, but I'd hate for you to be too tired from babysitting me to manage."

"Hell, in my development days, I stayed up three nights in a row sometimes."

"We'll save that for when something is actually critical, huh?"

"Smart man." Xavier said, "Let me just get fresh lasers set up." When that was done, and Roman's thighs ached from the process, Xavier told the autoswitch to dim the lights to twenty percent. In the resulting gloom, he settled down in his blankets. "I wish..."

"What?"

"Well, everything you do, probably. I wish you were whole, and here."

"Me too," he said softly. "Oh, yes, me too." And in that moment he wasn't thinking about sex, or even kissing Xavier. He was thinking about pulling Xavier into a hug. He was thinking about having the right to take Xavier's time and energy and attention, because he would have something to give back. "If wishes were horses."

"Huh?"

"Something my grandmother used to say. *'If wishes were horses, then beggars would ride.'* She was a realist, very down to earth." She'd had to be, saddled with a wild young boy, when she'd thought she was past raising children.

"We'll find a way. Something real. Don't give up hope."

"Hope is good," he temporized. He was trying.

"Hey, you're not dead, right? It was so fucking painful when I was searching for you as a ghost, thinking you were already past help. Because I may have an ego, but even I can't fix dead. But you're not, and that means maybe I can help, and I will. Trust me."

Roman thought, *I do*, as he watched Xavier gradually sink into sleep. He moved enough to make the lasers slide across his skin, welcoming the pain. It meant he was here, even as the house grew quiet and the touch of the floor against his ass and legs was a nebulous pressure he didn't want to think about too hard. He didn't want to sink into the ground. The lasers were sharp and focused, bright and piercing.

But. But. He couldn't stay here forever. Or technically, maybe he could. But what kind of existence would it be, living in a basement, tethered, with Xavier giving him pity visits? Or maybe marching him around the house on a laser leash. Never touching. Always naked, which made him feel less real. If he was

real and had a choice, he might choose to be naked around Xavier. But not always, and definitely not around Tam.

Would he age as his body did? Or would his astral self, whatever the fuck that was, stay unchanged, built only from his memories? How long before he turned bitter and jealous? How long before he just went a different kind of crazy?

He stood, carefully, keeping one laser focused on his leg as he moved. The other beam slipped off him, and he took a breath of mingled relief and anxiety. Nothing else changed. His left leg stopped aching. So he could sit back down and wait through the night. See if he could sleep, although he didn't feel either tired or hungry. Or he could find his damned courage, and choose otherwise.

Last time, when he lost the beam, he'd snapped from the house into the dark. Yeah, it had been scary as fuck. But he'd survived. He hadn't gone crazy. And eventually he'd found his way back here.

And in between, he'd gone back to his body, and heard things. He was pretty sure he'd heard things. His memory of that time had faded strangely. He couldn't remember words now, but he remembered his feeling of uncertainty, of fear, even. If he was going to contribute to his own rescue, he needed to go back there, listening, maybe looking, if he could open his eyes. Anything he could glean might be helpful. And he was *so* not ready to just be the new damsel in distress in this scenario.

Slowly and deliberately, he moved his right leg over, further, further, hesitating as the beam danced on the surface of his skin. Then he took one full step away. And the darkness swallowed him.

Roman tumbled, weightless, sightless, reminded of the old, old vids of the first astronauts discovering free fall. He focused on that image. They'd been excited, gleeful to lose the confines of gravity. He tried to feel the same. Don't fight it. Go with it.

He wasn't as nauseous this time. But the panic, the feeling of being trapped without any restraint, was still bad. He tried to picture his body. Tried to imagine himself, lying flat, his skin touched by movements of air, a sheet, maybe, and some kind of mattress under his back. He imagined smells, the odd antiseptic-and-plastic tang of a hospital. That should be familiar. He'd been in more than one.

Instead of being sucked into his body, he saw a blue light. He had a moment of hesitation. He'd left the house, because it seemed like a dead end. He shouldn't hurry back there. But there was a chance this light led elsewhere, and it was at least something concrete in the vague and formless dark. He reached for it.

As he slid along it, he saw another blue beam nearby. And then another. He debated changing over, but as he concentrated, it seemed to him that the beams were converging, coming together as he moved along. There was the glimmer of a fourth one, off to his left. After a moment's thought, he let go and reached to his left, moving from one anchor to the next. It was more like a cluster than a highway, an array of beams in star shape, all leading toward some central goal.

He followed one at random, slid down it to its vanishing end, and found himself in Xavier's empty kitchen. Huh.

When he turned, the blue doorway was behind him. Instead of clinging to the real world, he stepped back through, and moved sideways in the dark to the next beam. It opened into the familiar living room. The beam next to it reached Xavier's study. He went back out, up and around, and found himself in Tam's room.

She was asleep in her bed. A complex device at her bedside showed a few dim indicator lamps, but she didn't seem to be plugged in anywhere. He moved closer. Her breathing was slow and deep. Lying there sleeping, without the energy she had when awake, she looked thin and pale. The remnants of her health problems had left purple shadows under her eyes, and her cheekbones stood sharp under her thin skin.

He hated to wake her, but if Xavier was still in the basement Roman had no choice. The blue light had never sent him down there.

He said quietly, and then gradually more loudly, "Tam, it's me. Tam, wake up."

Her eyes snapped open, and she rolled out of bed with startling speed, pulling a Taser from under her pillow. For an instant, she aimed it at him, then she relaxed visibly and lowered it. "What are you doing up here? Where's Xavier?"

"I don't know. I came a different way." He hesitated. "Tam, if a laser is a range-finding device then your house is being..."

"Hush!" She held up her hand, and spoke softly but forcefully enough to shut him up. "Come on. Downstairs."

"I can't." He stopped when she held up one of the range-finder devices, with a little smile.

"Don't leave home without it. We got extras." She clicked it on, caught his thigh in the beam without hesitation. "Let's go."

When they reached the ground floor, she led the way immediately to the cellar. The minute they closed the door at the top of the stairs, Xavier woke. He stared up at them. "What happened? Roman, are you all right?"

"Yeah. I'm fine." He glanced back at Tam.

She gestured with her free hand. "Go on down. Sorry for the melodrama, but we've had a problem with bugs."

For a minute, it didn't click. Then he said, "Listening devices?"

"Yeah."

"Okay." He hesitated, then walked over to the laser still running on the floor and stuck his ankle in it. "Ouch. Damn. Okay, I don't know what you two are into but is there a reason someone might have half a dozen lasers aimed at your house? Big ones? Is there a chance we're going to be in the middle of a missile attack?"

Xavier looked startled. "No. I can't imagine it. Why?"

"Because I was out there in the dark, and I saw a blue light like before. And it brought me here to the kitchen, also like before. But then there was another one leading to the living room, and another to your study, and then upstairs. Like someone was aiming to blow your house apart."

Tam suddenly said, "Holy crap. No. Not a missile. Damn."

"Don't be obscure," Xavier snapped. "Share it with our weaker brains."

"The difference between a range-finder and a laser pointer isn't just strength. One is Doppler, in a feedback loop, while the other isn't."

"And you think that matters? Which means what?"

Tam grinned at both of them. "You know what else Doppler laser is used for? Listening devices. Aim one at a window, and you can register the sound vibrations in the room, from as much as half a mile away."

Xavier said, "That's an old technology."

"But it works, especially when a place has regular glass windows and not the multilayer isolated low-E kind. Like this place with its historical authenticity."

"It makes sense."

Roman said, "You think someone is bugging you with laser beams."

"Sure." Tam spoke faster. "It makes a lot of sense. They probably got the devices in place ahead of time, set up and aimed at all the relevant rooms. That could even have been those single beams you came in on, over the span of several nights. And then we had the, um, contact incident that they are interested in. Now they're all turned on, listening to see what we say and do about it."

"Incident." Roman was getting a little tired of doublespeak.

Xavier held up a finger to hold him off, and said to Tam, "One problem. Eavesdropping laser systems don't have visible light. If your room glowed blue every time it was turned on, it would hardly be a secret."

"Maybe that's because of Roman," Tam suggested. "Maybe the blue is from him causing, I don't know, interference or resonance or something. Like, I don't know, a hologram?"

"We could try that out..."

Roman broke in, "Just stop. Wait. I'm sick of not knowing what the hell you two are talking about."

"Police business," Tam said shortly.

"Oh, fuck, no. You're retired, right? And Xavier never was a cop." He glanced at Xavier, who looked uncomfortable. There was something fishy in Denmark, for sure. "If there's something dangerous going on, I want to know."

Tam tilted her head, eyeing him. "So you can do what, exactly?"

He didn't know, but blindly following orders had never been his forte, even in the army. "Whatever it takes. I just like to know what I'm letting myself in for." And what Xavier was facing.

"This isn't your problem."

He gritted his teeth. "Yeah, it kind of is, because I'm not getting much choice about being here, am I?"

Xavier said, "Cut it out, both of you. Tam, he just wants to help."

That was maybe a generous spin to put on his curiosity, but Roman let it ride. Xavier turned to him. "If you had the choice to go elsewhere, would you? If it's really a surveillance laser, I can get another one delivered here in an hour. Two hours if we don't want our own surveillance to know about it. I can create a path for you to go, well, somewhere else within half a mile."

"No!" he said quickly. "No. God, finding two people who can take this in stride is already more miracle than I could expect. With my luck, I'd give the next person a heart attack. And, well, I'm invested I guess. But I feel like I'm missing something vital."

"Like a pulse?" Tam quipped.

Xavier shot her a look. "Oh, that's helpful."

"Well, he shouldn't leave himself open like that." She sighed. "Look, it's not that we don't trust you, it's just, well, I guess it is that. In a way."

He tried not to look hurt, but he must have shown something, because Xavier quickly said, "*She* doesn't trust you. I do."

Tam frowned. "If you were a stranger who wandered in our front door and seemed friendly, we wouldn't be telling you all our secrets within twenty-four hours, you know."

"I need something useful to do," he said. "So don't tell me the details for now. But how can I help?"

Xavier glanced at Tam. "What if he tried to follow the surveillance lasers to their source?"

She wrinkled her nose. "Odds are they're feeding the signals remotely somewhere. But... yeah, if we know where they're planted the FBI might be able to catch someone removing them or find where they were purchased or get something else helpful from the information."

Xavier turned to him. "So, can you do that? Follow the beams the other way?"

"I don't know. So far it's been, um, like going down a slide that shoots me off the end. Maybe I can reverse that."

"You'd feel better if you had some control."

"I would. In fact, I do. When I think about it, this time, with multiple beams, I was moving around, going back and forth. It didn't even register, but I *was* choosing where I went." The relief of realizing that was immense. He wasn't just some puppet caught in the damned beams of coherent light. He had made actual *choices*. "Yeah. I want to try."

"How? Do you have an idea?"

"Help me get upstairs to a room that's affected, and I'll try to step back through the blue door."

Tam said, "And as a side note, we should probably have some kind of plausible conversation in one of the bugged rooms. The you-know-who must be wondering why we never talk about anything where they can hear it."

Xavier said, "Good thought. Right."

Roman managed not to grit his teeth or ask again to be let in on the loop. Even though it was *his* spirit being jerked around, he'd have to wait for their trust.

Tam said, "Maybe we'll let it slip we've set up a still in the basement to brew bathtub gin. Or we're growing hallucinogenic mushrooms. Good reasons to spend time down here."

"Because a person on dialysis would be tripping. Maybe we're painting the walls or cleaning it up."

"You're no fun." Tam hefted the laser. "Ready when you are, Roman."

As he moved away from the stationary beam and felt the pang of it slide through his not-flesh, his involuntary tremor made his cock swing against his thigh. He casually slid a hand in front of himself. He really, really hated being naked without any choice. He felt so damned vulnerable.

Grandfather had claimed to spirit-walk all the time, and Roman couldn't imagine the old man let himself wander around in the nude. He tried again to clothe himself in his mind, as he walked up the stairs ahead of Tam and Xavier. Imagined his favorite pair of denim jeans, soft and warm. Imagined the texture, the weight of them, the restriction across his groin. Unfortunately, when they reached the kitchen, he was still naked. Damn.

As he stepped into the kitchen, Tam and Xavier both drew in a breath. "What?" he asked.

Xavier said very, very softly, "I didn't see the blue light until you walked into it. Tam?"

She shook her head and raised an eyebrow at Roman.

"It looked blue to me the whole time we approached down the hall," he whispered. He stuck his head out to peer back down the hallway. "There's blue light under the other doors too."

They both followed his gaze, then shook their heads.

"Huh." One more mystery. He set it aside for now, and gestured at Tam to shut her beam off.

As the red laser snapped off, he felt the shifting tug of the blue. Carefully he took a step toward the blue door, although it showed no sign of closing.

Xavier grabbed a tablet, typed and held it out. *~You're sure you can get back?*

He nodded with more certainty than he felt, moved closer to the doorlight, reached the brink, stepped through. He felt the tug, that odd dragging force, aiming him back into the kitchen. Resolutely he faced away from it.

Behind him, he heard Tam and Xavier, voices raised in a natural-sounding argument. Ahead of him, the blue beam led into darkness. Off to each side, he could make out the glow of others. Last time he'd side-stepped from one to the next. This time he followed his beam away from the house.

It was like wading against a strong current, but doable. He tried stepping a little to the side, and decided that yes, he probably could leave the path for the darkness. It was an experiment he decided to postpone. The beam lanced straight out through the dark, and he imagined striding out along it, forging his way forward. He got far enough that the other beams in their star-shaped array faded and were gone. He kept on, feeling as if he was walking although he was not aware of solid ground under his feet. When he paused to think about it too much, he began backsliding so he decided not to wonder too much. *A step forward, and another step forward.*

And then it ended. The beam just stopped, and beyond that flat, sharp end, the dark fog stretched in unending distance that felt empty and cold.

Now what? He could feel the tug against his stomach, the wash of energy pushing him back toward the house. There was nothing to indicate where he

was. So, could he do anything here? See anything? What if the source of the beam was ten feet up in a tree? What if it was daylight outdoors by now? He had no good feel for how long he'd been walking. Would he die from the light or a fall?

Did it matter? At some point, you just had to do the next thing. He hadn't spent his life being careful. Even as a mild-mannered professor, he'd left his civilized spaces to spend a month roaming the rainforest every chance he got. All he needed now was to figure out how to take that next step.

Unlike the other end of the beam, he didn't see a door. This end narrowed down, like a dot on a blank wall. A small dot, even though the glow spread out from around it. He pushed a finger through the dot, feeling spongy resistance. When he pulled his finger back, it looked unchanged. Of course, it wasn't even his physical finger. Maybe this body would always just look the way he expected it to, no matter how damaged the real one got. *Bad thought. That way lay the real craziness.*

Okay. He would never fit through that dot, but assuming this was all some kind of illusion anyway, that didn't matter. He stepped forward, aiming for the dot with the middle of his body, against increased resistance. Suddenly the resistance stopped. He found himself uncomfortably stuck, in a *goddamned fucking tree*, with a branch through his hip, another piercing his shoulder, and a laser housing embedded in his stomach. None of it hurt, but it was oddly uncomfortable and it looked grotesque. At that thought, he slipped downward, tumbling slowly, passing *through* enough bits and branches to thoroughly discombobulate him.

He found himself sprawled on the grass, under the tree. Overhead, the sky was an ebony dome full of stars, fading to smoky azure off to his left in the familiar glow of city lights. The dark bulk of the tree loomed above him. The blue beam of the laser wasn't visible at all.

He had a moment of mingled exaltation and panic, so strong that his vision swam and his chest hurt. He was *out. Seeing the world*. But he had no idea where his body was, or Xavier, or anything that linked to his life. Except the tree, and the laser housing. He didn't want to even blink his eyes. He stared up at the stars and counted his breaths in slow, steady rhythm. He wondered for a moment if his physical self had gasped and now breathed easy. Or was he totally disconnected from his body?

Fuck. He slowed his breathing again. Obviously, there wasn't a lot of point in applying conventional logic here. One step at a time. He rolled over and stood slowly. That worked, although leaning on the tree-trunk didn't. He jerked his hand away, out of the bark.

Since he was here, standing under the tree with the laser device, he might as well look around and find a way to identify the spot for Xavier and the FBI. *Item: one tree, large, in a field, with a white fence.* Yeah, that would be helpful. But he was scared to move too far, looking for more clues. Somewhere up there in this tree, maybe, was his route back to Xavier, and known territory. If he wandered away in the dark, he might never find it again.

Out of curiosity, he moved closer to the trunk of the tree, and tried to pick at the bark, wondering if he could mark it to make it easier to find. His fingers sank in without visible effect. Scratch that. Or rather, fail to scratch that.

He was out of ideas he was willing to try. Time to head back. Somehow. From down here he couldn't see anything blue, no beam, no glow. The camera had been up there about thirty feet or so. Maybe if he got back up to that level, he could line up with it. He reached up for a branch, and his hands passed in and then out of it, with the sensation of dragging his fingers through thin jelly. The branch didn't move a millimeter, just slipped through his hands. Literally through. *Double fuck.*

Several tries convinced him that climbing the tree was not happening. He shied away from the question of why he'd been able to climb stairs in the house, in case next time he convinced himself to fall through them.

Alternatives, alternatives... When he'd fallen out of the tree, he'd passed gradually through the branches, not around them. Maybe he could rise the same way. *Could rise... come on feet, rise.* Nothing happened.

He wished he'd paid more attention to Grandfather's talk about spiritwalking and astral planes. Back then he'd figured the old guy was a little cracked. Wonderful, but talking in obscure metaphors. Not giving him the help-links for his future life.

He'd fallen out of a tree. Well, that was pretty normal, right? Other than the reduced speed. Rising was more... unusual. *Picture a balloon. A bunch of balloons.* He raised his hand, feeling stupid and deeply grateful no one was watching. He imagined a long rope attached to a bunch of helium balloons,

gently tugging him upward. *Gently. Tugging.* To his surprise, he felt himself begin to rise.

His shock was enough to drop him down to the grass again. All right. This time he was more certain, and it took barely a moment before he started to rise. At the first branch he hesitated, hovering, four feet off the ground. He couldn't make himself go headfirst through it. With a bit of maneuvering, though, he could slide past it and up, gaining confidence. He even slid through a side-branch with his shoulder, and the pressure was no worse than it had been on the way down.

He moved on up the tree. There was the laser, fastened close to the trunk, aimed off into the distance. When he followed the line of sight, he could make out the turreted shape of a distant house. Although he'd never seen it from the outside, he could believe it was Xavier's, given the matching shape of the odd alcove in his bedroom.

That was an added welcome assurance. If he failed to get back there the laser way, he could probably walk it on two feet. But preferably he'd find the faster route. It took some juggling to get in front of the laser, and he almost aimed the beam at his head, before chickening out. Lasers and eyes were bad, and he didn't have enough faith to assume that wouldn't apply here. He tried to center the device on his chest instead.

Then he held still, closed his eyes and actively sought the darkness. He felt the world thin and fade as he slipped away. For a moment, it was too hard to accept. He clung to the tatters of reality behind him. He held to the shape of the tree, the field of stars, and they wavered and solidified again.

Dammit! He was no coward. If he could charge a sniper's position, he could handle a little fuzzy greyness. Right? He let go, trying to embrace the dark. It was empty and formless, and he shuddered at being back there, but he turned left and there was the beam close beside him, arrowing away at an angle. He leaped into it. Letting it tug at him, slide him inexorably forward, was exhilarating pleasure this time. Lasers as joy rides. Hell, yeah!

Then he was out and through, and there was the now-familiar kitchen, with Tam looking cool and Xavier looking relieved. He grinned with the sheer relief of having something work. He'd had control over his life for a few minutes, *personal control*, and it felt so good he could almost have floated up off the floor. *Oops.* He carefully returned to walking. *Walking is good.*

Tam put her finger to Xavier's lips before he could speak, and shook her head. She said to the empty air, "Well, I'm sick of discussing the whole situation. We'll see what happens next."

She lifted the range-finder and raised her eyebrow at Roman. He wanted to try to do without it, but he wasn't sure just where his newfound control ended, so he nodded to her and braced for the burn on his thigh. They trooped quietly down to the basement.

At the bottom of the stairs Xavier turned. "If you weren't insubstantial, I would hug you right now, Ro. I was worried."

"How long was I gone?"

"Over an hour."

"Oh." Subjectively it hadn't felt that long; clearly he'd lost his time sense somewhere along the way. "Sorry."

"I'm just glad you're back."

Tam said, "So, what did you find? Anything?"

"Yeah. Although I don't know if it'll help much." He tried to describe the location, the tree and fence.

Tam said, "I expect, if they know what to look for, the FBI can probably find it. Maybe even find all of them by their power signature. I'm not up on surveillance and counter-surveillance."

"I can try locating a different one. Maybe I'll find something more distinctive."

"You don't have to," Xavier said quickly. "You heard Tam. Now that we know what's going on, the FBI can take care of it."

"I want to. It makes me feel less,"—*useless, naked, dead*—"bored."

"Oh."

"Not that I was bored hanging out with you. Okay, maybe I should have gone with useless. It makes me feel like I'm still worth something."

Xavier looked like he wanted to argue about that, but he didn't. Tam said, "Okay. Maybe an upstairs room? The angle might land you somewhere that isn't the top of a tree?"

“Good thought.”

“How about my room? I’ll pretend to go to bed. Xavier can pause to get on the wire to the Feebs and then come up and check on me.”

Xavier said, “You should go back to bed for real. You look tired.”

“Are you kidding? Most fun I’ve had all month.” But after a moment, she added, “I guess I should, though. They must be wondering why we’re wandering around the house at all hours. One of us should probably bed down. Plus I haven’t hooked into my personal garbage disposal yet tonight.”

They paraded up toward Tam’s room, with Xavier peeling off at the kitchen to, in his clearly enunciated words, “...make myself a midnight snack before coming up to check on you.”

Tam said, “You don’t need to babysit me. I’m not going to leap out the window into the dark.” All three of them got the giggles. Xavier covered his by loudly clanking plates around while Roman and Tam climbed the stairs with hands over their mouths.

It was easier this time. Stepping in and out of the dark was less of a plunge off an unknown cliff, and more like walking into a familiar wilderness. A moment to gather himself and it was done. This time the laser was housed in what looked like a weathered birdhouse on a post, close to a road. There was another house nearby that made a decent landmark. And he didn’t even have to fall out of a tree. He fixed the details in his mind, turned and took the plunge and the swift ride back home.

When he came out in Tam’s room, she was sleeping. Xavier sat in a chair at her bedside, dozing. He hesitated, looking at his friends. Definitely friends, even after so little time together. He hoped what he was doing was actually helping them.

They both looked tired and thin. Roman wondered what these last weeks had been like for them. Awake, Tam was a powerhouse of energy, and Xavier was all smooth and elegant, but asleep the cracks showed. He wondered how close Tam had come to actually dying.

The surveillance beam still lit her room blue, so he didn’t want to speak. He leaned down and passed his hand across Xavier’s arm. His fingers sank in, and it felt just like the branch, but it was a connection, something physical, and he treasured that. Especially when Xavier reacted, jolting awake. They were close,

his face a foot from Xavier's. In the dim light, Xavier's eyes had soft blue highlights in the grey, and Roman could see his pupils dilate with surprise. Or maybe with something else, because they both were breathing faster, and those gorgeous eyes stayed blown wide. Xavier's mouth opened slightly.

Roman ached to lean forward, close the gap and kiss his parted lips. But touch was weird enough this way, with just hand and arm. Feeling a kiss become some kind of flesh-merger would probably send Xavier scrambling for cover. Roman wasn't taking that kind of chance. He stepped back and gestured at the range-finder on the bedside stand. After a long moment, Xavier picked it up, stood stiffly, and shepherded him down the stairs.

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Chapter 6

Xavier sat up from his nest of cushions and stretched out the kinks in his back. At some point, he'd clearly fallen asleep. He'd been hanging out with Roman in the cellar, just talking about spirit-walking, looking crap up. It was warm, and the pillows he'd brought down were padding enough. The conversation had slowed into comfortable silences, and then he must have dozed off.

He tapped his com to get the time, or rather, tapped the bare skin behind his ear where the com should have been. "Crap!"

"What?"

He looked over. Roman was still there, lying on his stomach on the floor with his head propped in his hands. His eyes were open, and the red dots from the range-finders shone on the smooth muscle of his shoulders.

What was the question again? Oh, yeah. "I killed my com. I'll have to replace it. Sorry, I guess I was tired."

"You looked it. I didn't mind."

He wondered if Roman had slept. Wondered if he could sleep, in this odd state of whatever-it-was. Roman swore his body was alive somewhere, but as much as Xavier wanted to believe that, it was probably healthier to remind himself that he could be wrong. A ghost might think that too, unaware that he'd already died. He had to keep reminding himself not to count on anything, unless and until they rescued Roman alive and whole. It gave too much hope.

He must have been lost in his thoughts too long, because Roman said, "What? Do I have something on my face?"

"No. Just taking in the fact that you think I looked all drawn and haggard."

"Did I say haggard?"

"I inferred."

"Now you're fishing for compliments."

Was he? Also a bad idea. "So it's probably morning out there. Now what?"

Roman said slowly, "I don't know. I don't think I'm like a vampire that melts in the sun. It was daylight when I arrived in the kitchen... yesterday? Was that yesterday?"

“Yeah.”

“So I can survive daylight. But as for what we should do next, I don’t know.”

“What do you want to do? You can stay here, if you want.” *You can stay here forever, if you want, watching movies and talking about nothing much.* He couldn’t imagine Roman being happy with that, though.

Roman shook his head before the words were even out of his mouth. “Don’t get me wrong. I like hanging out with you. But it’s not like I can just live in the basement like your pet phantom.”

“What, then?”

“I think, um, I want to use that out-of-body research we were doing. Use everything you found from any semi-reputable source on spirit-walking. I want to try to get back inside my physical self, and then do this out-of-body traveling right. Moving slowly. With control. If I can look around there, like I did with the lasers, maybe I can figure out exactly where my body is now.”

It made sense. That didn’t mean it was going to be that simple. “Some of that research was clearly mush-brained craziness.”

“Probably. Although my tolerance for craziness has been expanded lately.”

“Well, yeah. True.” Xavier frowned. “There was nothing in all the stuff I found about Doppler laser, and we have proof that works.”

Roman’s mouth tipped up in a little smile. “You gonna write a scholarly article?”

“That’s your job, Professor.”

Roman’s humor faded. “Right. My job. You know, if I could lure the students into a lecture hall, like in the old days, I could still teach like this. Even better if I could somehow figure out how to appear on camera.” He sat up, carefully staying in the beams, and glanced down at himself. “Well, maybe not naked. Hell, I keep forgetting that. Maybe we’ll keep any career plans in reserve.”

Xavier *hated* not being able to touch, having nothing to offer to ease that bleakness. “You’ll find your real, well, your *physical* self. I’m sure of it.”

“And the first thing I’ll do is put on a pair of pants.”

"Really? The first thing?" He tried to inject a little suggestiveness into his voice, to lighten the mood.

"Hell, yeah." But Roman did look less grim. "I'm not saying there wouldn't be a second and third thing though."

"And what now?"

Roman looked up toward the stairs. "Seems like I've done everything I can for your FBI case that you won't tell me anything about."

Xavier started to explain, but said, "Tam's rules." When he and his sister had decided to cooperate in this unlikely sting, he'd agreed that when it came to the law enforcement stuff, she would call the shots. "I'll ask her again, though. She has to be less suspicious of you by now."

"I'm worried, you know. About the two of you. And don't try to fob me off with saying she knows what she's doing. There's something big going on, if someone bothered to set up special technology to listen in on you. That's serious."

"It's actually a good sign." He bit his lip. "I do want to explain it all. I'll try to get Tam to tell you more when she wakes up."

Roman looked at him intently for a long moment. "You do that. And be really, damned, fucking careful, all right? Both of you."

"We are."

"Uh huh. Well. Right now, I want to try to get back to my body. I've already done it by accident, a few times. Once was when Tam's laser powered out, right here."

"You want to try that again?" He didn't like that thought. The idea of deliberately switching off the range-finder and watching Roman blink out of existence, again, made his gut ache. But he had no right to even say so. *Let me keep you here, like some kind of pet, because talking to you is the most fun I've had in years.* That was simply wrong.

"Yeah. I think it's my best chance." Roman stood up, keeping one ankle centered in a beam. "After all, as long as the listening devices are still aimed at this house, I can find you again. Right?"

"I hope so." He had a thought. "I'm going to order one of those myself. I'll set it up outside, aimed at a window, like theirs. That way, if they turn theirs out, you can still come home."

Their eyes met. There was something in Roman's gaze that looked warm and sweet, before it faded into regret or doubt, or maybe fear. Then he blinked and went stoic and blank. "I'll remember that. I'll look for it. Switch the range-finder off now."

Xavier tried not to make a big deal out of it. He took two steps, bent, put his finger on the switch. He wasn't planning to look at Roman, but he couldn't help it. As he hit the button, he thought he saw a flash of panic cross Roman's face, before he winked out like a VR character when the power was cut. Standing there; then gone. *He's gone.*

Xavier had to force himself not to switch the laser back on. Stupid. It hadn't worked that way before anyhow. Plus Roman was gone on purpose and wouldn't want to be yanked back. He had plans. He wasn't dead.

Xavier hefted the device in his hand, then set it back in place. He took three steps, bent down, turned off the other one. It was stupid to feel like he'd killed Roman. Although if Roman never came back, if he was trapped forever in that grey darkness he talked about, then it was almost the same, wasn't it? Or assisted suicide?

He pushed the morbid thoughts away, and hurried up the stairs. The light streaming in through the window over the front door told him it was early morning. He could make some breakfast and start his day. Roman would do whatever he needed to do. Time for Xavier to do the same.

But the first thing, even before telling the coffee pot to start brewing, was to order a long-range Doppler sound-surveillance laser online. With every precaution he could think of in place to hide the order. And same day pickup at a drop box in town.

Tam came downstairs while he was digging in the fridge, trying to find something he actually wanted to eat. She said, "And Ro?"

He almost answered, but he had no way to know if they were being overheard. He had to assume so. He shrugged and gave her a look. If it was cryptic, well, it served her right. She had her secrets. "Hey, g'morning. You look better."

"Better than you anyway." She reached for a mug and poured herself coffee.

He got out a bagel at random, set it on a plate, casually pulled his tablet close, making sure all the external links were off, and silently typed, *~He asked me to shut the laser off. He wanted to try to get back to himself. His body.*

Tam brought her coffee over and broke a bite off his bagel. As she chewed, she typed, *~Did he have an actual plan?*

Aye, there's the rub. *~Not so much. A hope, maybe.*

She eyed him, her eyes oddly kind, and then wrote, *~He still could be dead, or some kind of bodiless spirit, or something. You can't know for sure.*

He brushed her fingers, hurrying. *~He says not. I believe him.*

"Do we have any butter in this place? Plain bagels are boring." *~You want to believe him.*

~Don't you? "The groceries haven't been delivered yet."

"I wouldn't mind a shopping trip." *~I want to. But I think it's possible that he actually died, in that hospital. There's a lot more support behind ghosts than astral walking. And I can't believe I just typed that.*

~See. Either one is crazy, so either one is possible.

~Or we're both crazy.

~You, maybe. "Sure. The local village has some nice little shops. You could take a run out."

"I think I will." *~I know you like this guy. I like him too. But it's not like he's real.*

"Jesus!" He covered for that by adding, "Spilled my coffee. Sorry." *~He is fucking real! He may not be solid, or all here, but he's real.* He paused, added, *~We looked him up. Remember? Everything he told us was real. His codes got me into the college database.*

~Sorry. I didn't mean it like that. Just that you should keep a little space.

~Fuck space.

~Well, it's not like you can fuck him.

Xavier didn't think he could answer that, without some extra swearing. And maybe lying, because if he said, *"I don't want to fuck him,"* it would be a lie of sorts. He'd been spending hours with a gorgeous naked guy who rang all his bells. And who, judging by the occasional sign of interest, wasn't averse to him either.

Eventually, he typed, *~It's not always about sex.* Hadn't she said that to him often enough, about the guys he met? He added aloud, "You can finish that

bagel. I'm going to get started sanding the porch rail. Painting." Work would be a good distraction.

"Okay. You know, you can pay people to do the boring stuff. You have the money."

"I like doing it. You can go spend some of my money."

"I will." She gave him a look that maybe said she was sorry. Or, knowing Tam, said that she was willing to wait until he admitted she was right.

He left the room and went down into the cellar for the paint. The basement was an empty, hollow space. A pile of cushions and throw blankets were the only evidence that he and Roman had ever been together there. Well, that and the range-finders sitting on the floor, powered off. He picked them up, checked the charges, clipped the fuller one to his belt, and started looking through the paint for the outdoor white.

Roman had vowed he wouldn't panic. So he was definitely not panicking about how long he seemed to have been nowhere, in nothing. Time was subjective in the grey, he was sure of that. When he wandered out to look at those lasers, his estimate of time and Xavier's clock keeping hadn't agreed very well. So he might only have been drifting for a few minutes. Or an hour. He turned off the little voice in his head that whispered, *or a decade*.

The problem was he had no real plan. Getting back to his physical self hadn't ever been something he did on purpose, like following a laser, it had been something that happened. And it wasn't happening.

He closed his eyes again, pressing his hands over them until little lights sparked. That was good, because it was *something*. He took calming breaths, slowing them, more and more, counting evenly. He pictured himself for the hundredth time. As he remembered, he'd been lying on his back, naked, on something very resilient and soft. There had been a quiet humming sound, and then voices... He shied away from the voices.

Well, maybe he was picturing it wrong. He had a vague recollection that hospital patients who couldn't move on their own had to be turned over now and then. Maybe he wasn't on his back. Maybe he was on his left side, or his right. That thought had an odd resonance, so he calmed down, *and when the hell had every little thing made his heart race... if he even had a heart*. Calmed

down again. Wondered with bleak amusement whether they had a heart monitor on his body, and if so, whether these changes showed on it or not.

Okay, right side, naked, soft mattress, light sheet, hum, moving air... He tried to fall into that sensation. There was *connection* there. Eyes closed, breathing easy, hands down. He tried to orient himself that way in the blank enveloping dark. Raise one leg a bit, bend the knee. A brief flash of how this felt like preparing for sex, an imagined touch from Xavier's hand behind him, threw him out of it. His stupid libido could just go fuck off. Or not fuck, right now. It was irrelevant.

He tried again, this time falling faster into the sensations. Lower his elbow, move the other arm. Raise his head a fraction on a pillow.

Suddenly he was there.

He clenched his jaw not to cry out. And *felt* it clench. It was different from doing it in his astral body, because there was a hint of the unexpected. A stale, pasty, unfamiliar mint flavor coated his tongue. A twinge of pain lanced one cheek. It felt real, and for a second he battled back tears. He wasn't dead. He *wasn't* dead!

He lay still, trying not to move, because he was afraid of finding out that he couldn't. His jaw was still clenched tight. He could feel the pull. He tried to slide his tongue around in his mouth and thought there was some kind of response. Even though he was out of the grey, there was still a fuzzy distance between him and the world. So he counted his breaths, trying to change their rhythm, and listened for something that was clearly not inside his own head.

The mechanical hum was still there, faint enough that it could have been anything. A fan, a refrigerator, a medical device. But it was something he hadn't heard in the dark, and he valued it for that. *Nice, lovely hum.*

Okay, maybe he was a little crazy. He needed to man up. He tried to open his eyes and look around. Nothing happened. He did wonder if he felt a flutter, or a twitch of his eyelids, but it definitely didn't extend to opening. Fuck. Double fuck.

Tried again; more of same. Tried moving a finger, a foot, his tongue. He thought he got a little from the tongue, but it could have been an illusion. He tried holding his breath. That at least worked. He tried it again, longer, starting to see bright spots behind his eyelids. A loud chime startled him into taking a breath. There was the sound of hurrying feet.

“What happened?” A woman’s unfamiliar voice came, close to his side.

“Not sure. It was an oh-two alarm. Check the strip.” That was a man. Someone who made Roman glad his eyes were shut.

“There. Over a minute of apnea.”

“Strange. What does the oxygen sat look like now?”

“Looks fine. Respiratory rate twenty-six, oh-two at ninety-nine percent.”

“Well, let’s roll him over. Just in case.”

He felt hands on his body, grabbing, pulling at him. He was shifted up and turned onto his back, and then there was a different hum as his head was slowly propped higher.

The man’s voice said, “Move the oxy-tab too, just in case.”

There was a fumbling on his left arm, then a touch to the other side, near his right elbow. The woman said, “Still reads normal.”

“Okay. Well, keep a closer watch. The boss will be very unhappy if something happens to this one. He’s worth millions.”

“What about her?”

The man said coolly, “Her too, but she’s up tomorrow. So it won’t be much longer.”

“Oh, well, that’s good then.”

Both sets of footsteps moved off into the distance. Roman had no desire to get their attention and bring them back. He lay still, listening, long after the sounds had returned to that single hum. And also, he realized, a very soft sound of breathing that didn’t match his. He wasn’t alone.

Her. The voices had said, “*her.*” There was probably a woman in the room, perhaps in the same condition he was. The nurse or attendant or whatever she was had lumped them together.

Worth millions. She’s up tomorrow. There was a connection he wasn’t making. He couldn’t imagine how he was worth that kind of money. He had enough money to live on, but any extra had gone to his Amazon trips. He’d banked a nice finder’s fee for the anti-malarial *Cinchona* variant he found five years ago, but it was locked up in a pension fund and didn’t come close to being millions. As a rule, he didn’t do much more than break even.

Maybe they planned to ransom him to Xavier, who did seem like he had real money. Except that made no sense. He hadn't even met Xavier until after his accident or assault or whatever put him in here. Not to mention, there was no reason Xavier would care enough to spend millions on him. They'd known each other less than a week. That couldn't be the right answer.

He couldn't figure it out. His brain ran around in circles, and exhaustion weighed him down. He should leave this flesh prison and go do something else. Something useful. At least go talk to Xavier and put the guy's big brain and fast researchy fingers—long, clever, fingers—put him to work on the “worth millions” problem. But he couldn't bring himself to give up the actual, physical rise of his chest, the little skin-pinch of whatever was attached to his elbow, the occasional huff of breath from the sleeper across the way.

Eventually, he dozed. And sank deeper. And slept.

He woke with a start, which somehow didn't translate to any movement of his body. He listened intently. Someone was approaching. They didn't speak to him, just stood by his bedside for a moment. Then the head of the bed lowered with a buzzing mechanical sound, and the attendant bent over him and wrestled him to his left side.

He hated the way his body flopped over, unresisting. The person—man, he was pretty sure, from the smell of him and the size of his hands—the man's grip was impersonal, but not rough, and Roman was tugged about, rearranged, and left without a word. Quiet footsteps receded. A door whispered shut.

He lay there, wide awake. He thought if they, whoever *they* were, happened to be monitoring his pulse, they might see it racing. But perhaps that was a normal response to being turned, because no one came running to check on him, before he found his calm again.

Okay.

He was still in the hospital bed. The sounds, the temperature, the mattress under him hadn't changed. He still couldn't open his eyes, or move more than a twitch. But he felt less fuzzy and disoriented. So now it was *really* time for something else.

Xavier had collected a lot of information on spirit-walking or out-of-body or whatever you chose to call it. And some things people chose to call it were very froofy, and unhelpful. But many had agreed that you should relax and visualize yourself slowly rising out of your body, lifting up into the astral plane. Not

waiting around to be flung randomly and unwittingly into darkness. It was time for him to learn how to work this thing. Right the fuck now.

Or, you know, not exactly now.

It took a long time. A long, long time, because whenever he felt himself maybe rising from his flesh he either decided he was deluded, or made a frantic mental grab for his body. But eventually the fear of having someone come manhandle him again, maybe move him, or drug him, was enough for him to let go.

It wasn't like floating free, at least not for him. It was like deliberately stepping away. He found himself standing beside his own bed, looking at a blank wall. The wall was painted pale-sunshine-yellow. The universal hospital room color, calculated to the perfect degree from those studies in '24 about anxiety and PTSD and calming effects of color. He'd been in enough hospitals to recognize the exact shade.

For a moment he collected his thoughts, and then he turned. His body lay on a bed beside him. He was rolled facing away, and the oddness of seeing himself from the back made him dizzy. He looked thinner than he remembered, maybe paler. Even with the very best sunblockers, and he did use the best, he often picked up a little tan as a legacy of all his time outdoors. He hated sunscreen shirts. Now his neck and shoulders were pasty white. And yet that body sucked at him, called to him. He turned away, before the pull of his inert flesh dragged him back home.

There was a second bed beside his, empty and stripped to the mattress. And two more across the room. The further of the two held a woman. She was asleep lying on her back, or more likely unconscious. There was one complex fluid line hooked up to her, disappearing under the sheet. He resisted the temptation to turn around and see if he had a similar one, and instead walked closer.

She lay flat and absolutely straight, her arms at her sides, uncomfortably reminiscent of a corpse laid out for a funeral. Her face was pale, but her cheeks were plump and round, whether siliconed for fashion or because she carried extra weight he wasn't sure. Her body was covered by a sheet to her chin, although the shape under it suggested she was tiny. Perhaps she'd had implants.

He moved closer, and slowly reached out to touch her. When his hand passed through the curve of her jaw he felt an incredible flash of

disappointment. It wasn't logical. There was no reason to feel like someone kicked him in the gut. He'd done this already. How many times had he proven that he couldn't really touch anything solid? Not even Xavier? He had no reason to expect that just because he was out of body more deliberately, that would have changed. Still, he spent several minutes dipping his finger into the lobe of her ear and the tip of her nose, before realizing how stupid and intrusive that was.

He bent to put his mouth close to her ear. "Wake up." He kept his voice low but intense. "Wake up and look at me." He held his breath, waiting, dizzy with hope.

She didn't stir, but the door at the end of the room swung open. A young woman in scrubs glanced in, looked over his still body carefully, and eventually backed out and closed the door. Her eyes had passed over where he stood several times without stopping, without so much as a hint of surprise at a naked guy looming over her patient. Clearly, she hadn't seen him standing there, staring back at her. He blew out a breath.

So. He seemed to be invisible now. Was it the laser that was missing? Tam had suggested a hologram effect. Or was some kind of specific psychic ability needed to see astral walkers? Maybe Tam and Xavier both had some unusual skill.

Or was he just dreaming this? He didn't want to be dreaming. He urgently wanted this to be his choice, his deliberate walkabout. And yet, he was relieved at being unseen too. Despite the clean, bright room, he had a sudden desire not to be noticed by anyone working here. He wanted Xavier.

No, really, he wanted information. Which he could then take to Xavier, to work on together.

He stared intently at the sleeping woman, trying to memorize her face. Whoever she was, she was on his side of the bedpan, and that made her particularly relevant. He tried to fix the young nurse's face in memory too. Then he explored the room.

It didn't take long. There were the beds, the two patients, a couple of rolling stands with drawers that he couldn't open. He tried reaching into one, pushing his hand through the side, and trying to identify stuff by texture. Watching his hand disappear up to the wrist creeped him out too much to concentrate, though, and it all felt like the same indistinct mush, so he quickly gave it up.

He walked to the door. Looked at it. Put his hand on the push pad. Put his hand *through* the push pad. Crap.

For all the weirdo stuff he'd been doing, he hadn't actually walked through a solid object yet. Although he'd stuck his hand through a drawer and fallen through a branch, so this was really just more of the same. He just had to shove an apparently solid door through his head and his heart. Or vice versa. No problem. He took one quick stride forward.

The pressure was odd, wrapping around and through him, but he thought of it like diving into deep water and didn't freak about it. He found himself outside the closed door, standing in a short hallway. *Yes!*

He turned in a circle, looking around. At one end of the hallway another similar door stood shut. At the other end, a pair of windowed doors blocked the way. He spotted a camera, high up in a corner but unconcealed. He wondered if there were more subtle back-ups in place. The whole set up was odd, quiet and deserted for a clinic or nursing home.

The double doors looked promising so he headed that way. This time he stepped forward with confidence. The door pressed against him, tough and resilient against his stomach and thighs, not letting him through. After leaning into it and managing no more than another uncomfortable inch, he took a step back. He bit his cheek, breathing hard through his nose. Who the hell had astral-blocking doors set up? Did they know he was out of his body? Were they perhaps watching to see what he would do?

He took a slower breath, steadying himself. Back when he'd tried holding his breath, it had brought someone running. They hadn't hesitated or lurked and spied with cameras. So, odds were, if they could actually see him now, someone would have showed up to deal with him. But here was this impenetrable door.

He looked at it. A polished metal bumper plate protected the lower half of each door. Through the windows, he could see only the wall of another yellow corridor. He reached up tentatively and pressed his palm on the window. His hand passed through without much hindrance. Now that looked weird, seeing his hand wiggling on the other side of the door. He pulled it back, pressed down lower, and found that the metal plate resisted him, letting his fingers penetrate less than an inch while tightening around his fingertips.

Hm. Metal? Light reflection? Density? The scientist in him wanted to experiment with different substances, but he managed to stay focused. The way out was obviously through the clear lexite windows. Or the wall.

Hell, he'd been trapped by conventional thinking. Once you were walking through solid objects, why was a door better than a wall? Other than worrying about copper power cables and metal pipes and conduits and... okay, the door might still make more sense. Save walls for later.

He put both arms and his head through the window, and wriggled. For the first time, he felt like he was really making contact with the outer world. The metal edge below the window pressed against his stomach with unexpected solidity. He even thought the door moved slightly, as he kicked against it. Then he pushed up and through, and fell headfirst. This time he absolutely didn't mind the mushy give as he sank into the floor, sprawled, and picked himself up.

He had a near-irresistible temptation to charge the doorplate with all his weight and see if he could make the door move. But if it was alarmed, that could be a bad idea. He resolutely turned away.

A few feet down the hallway was an office, with the door standing open. It looked like a nursing station, a mounted split-screen showing camera feeds for eight hospital beds. Most of them were empty, stripped to the mattress, but in addition to the unconscious woman and his own immobile form, there was one bed that held a little child, equally motionless. He wrenched his eyes away from that tiny, still figure, and the unsettling image of his own body, to look further.

In a corner of the room, there was a data station, with a big heads-up screen displaying repeating blocks of numbers, probably monitoring the patients. The female nurse who'd failed to see his astral form sat tending the desk, scrolling something on a handheld, occasionally glancing at the displays.

Roman had only a moment's warning as a man in scrubs came barreling down the corridor, hurrying toward him. "Hey, Ginny," the man called.

The woman looked up. "What? I'm busy."

"We need to get ready..." At that point, the man collided right into Roman.

Fuck! He'd been trapped by habit, expecting the man to slow down, thinking he had nowhere to get out of the way. He realized as they hit, collided, *merged*, that he could have stepped into the actual wall.

The man jolted into him and through him; as they occupied the same space, Roman's body twisted and chilled. It felt immeasurably different from passing through a door. The man felt something too, staggering back half a step, prolonging that impossible sensation. "What the hell!" the man grunted, and his voice buzzed *through* Roman's chest.

It was too much. Roman twisted, desperate to get away, and fell into the dark.

Nothing. Grey. Silent.

He panted, shocked and nauseous from the collision and the abrupt transition. All around him was the dark, and for once, that was good. He took slower breaths, trying to feel all of his body. Or astral body or whatever he was wearing, that had been tainted and stretched and felt dirty on the inside, from sharing that space.

Slowly he felt more like himself. He made a mental note *never* to do that again. Although what didn't kill you couldn't be ruled out in a pinch. Still, he needed to adapt. Next time, he needed to fucking-well remember that he was not the same as his flesh and blood self. Right now, he needed to get moving. Somehow.

He could have tried to relax and sink back into his flesh. But something called him outward and away. He wandered, trying to feel that pull and follow it. He located the blue of the lasers faster than he ever had. There was a new blue beam too, a slightly different color and much shorter. A fat, bright beacon.

It had to be Xavier's promised addition. He smiled at the thought of Xavier setting that up to guide him home. He picked it to ride in on, and wasn't surprised to find himself in the kitchen, with Xavier seated at the table.

What he didn't expect was for Xavier to raise a haggard face, stare at him, and rasp out, "They have Tam!"

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Chapter 7

Xavier roused from his deep, stunned immobility when the kitchen suddenly shaded to blue. His heart leaped at the thought that Roman was coming back. Then he felt a wash of shame that anything could make him feel happy right now. He waited until Roman was solid. Or as solid as he ever got. Still naked, still tall and lean and steady.

He let himself take one more look, and then he said it. "*They have Tam.*" Saying it made it true.

Roman gestured at the range-finder urgently. Xavier grabbed it, jolting out of the misery of the last hour. He clicked it on, and they did the awkward downstairs trip almost at a run. As soon as the door was closed and they reached the basement he said harshly, "They kidnapped her right out of the grocery store."

"She was a cop. She must have a tracker," Roman said.

"Two of them. Her department one, and then when I started to be worth real money, I guilt-tripped her into a biosensor one. They were left behind in her car, in a clone box."

"Clone box?"

"Tube of blood, with a heater, oxygen, fake heartbeat. The biosensor stays happy. I brought it back here."

"So they cut them out..." Roman's eyes widened.

"Yeah." He really hated the image of Tam being restrained while they probed the trackers out of her flesh. Although it was a pretty minor procedure. Really minor. "I've had a security service monitoring the biosensor one, ready for an emergency, for three years now. But they've always been a passive service, because she didn't like the implication she couldn't take care of herself. And I kept it that way, when we started this case. I figured no one would be surprised they were there. It might look suspicious if they weren't. But I wanted to have space for something to happen. And this didn't even blip their radar. Frack!" He hid his face in his hands.

Roman's voice was quiet, calm. "What case? Do I finally get to know what's going on?"

Xavier looked up, and met Roman's supportive gaze. To hell with Tam's rules, he decided. She wasn't here to enforce them, was she? In a few simple words, he explained the organ-legger case, what they were doing in Kentucky, why there were listening devices aimed at their windows. "They contacted me, and I sent the first installment payment two days ago. I was waiting for their next set of instructions, but instead they grabbed Tam."

"Are you sure it was them? I hate to make it complicated, but if you're rich enough, this could be a genuine kidnapping for ransom."

"No. They left a note on her car with the clone box. *'Down payment received. We will send instructions for the remainder after the service has been rendered. You know how to keep this safe.'*"

"What does the FBI say?"

"I haven't told them," he admitted. "The last part is pretty clear. If I bring in the FBI, who knows what might happen to Tam?" He knew what Tam would think of him stonewalling the cops, but she didn't get to make that call right now.

Roman frowned. "What do you think they'll do next?"

"I don't know. We'd originally figured they would make contact again remotely, to arrange for the surgery to happen with guarantees on both sides. We'd planned to keep track of clues we could pass along, and when it got too risky we'd claim cold feet and bail out. The only reason we were allowed to be involved in the case in the first place was because I have enough money to pay the fee. Not many law enforcement departments can hand over five million dollars on the front end of a sting, with no strings attached. We figured that would make the organ-leggers feel safer."

"Five million. So." Roman paused, an odd expression on his face. "The donor—would you say he or she is worth millions? Just as a hunk of meat?"

"Yeah. I suppose." Not that he would describe anyone that way, but Roman spoke over his half-formed protest.

"When I was supposedly unconscious in the bed, I heard an attendant say I was worth millions and the boss wouldn't like it if I died."

Xavier stared at him. "You think *you* might be the mysterious donor? I had the impression it was a woman." He clenched his teeth as a sudden thought occurred. "If you *are* her donor, they might be getting ready to remove your

kidneys right now. Both of them!" The more he thought about it, the more horribly possible it seemed.

Roman's voice was amazingly steady. "Maybe, but I was thinking more along the lines of me being someone else's donor. I got the impression I was to be kept on ice for the long term. But there was a woman... Yeah, listen. There was a woman in the other bed. And they said something about tomorrow, for her."

"Other bed?" He didn't get it.

"Shit. Yeah, let me tell you quick what I've been up to."

Xavier listened closely, as Roman told the whole tale, from standing up out of his sleeping body to colliding *through* a male nurse. It sounded awfully plausible.

Roman's stoic expression couldn't hide the fact that he'd been badly shaken by the experience. Xavier couldn't imagine looking down at himself, seeing his own body unconscious and vulnerable. And if the unconscious patients really were intended to be donors, then the danger of being medically disemboweled was looming and real. Xavier reached for Roman, laying a hand on his arm in reassurance. They both jerked apart as his fingertips sank deep into Roman's forearm.

"Sorry. God, I didn't mean to do that." He rubbed his fingers on his own shirt. His mind kept wanting to shunt the out-of-body weirdness aside. Roman was just a guy, a friend, *this person he cared about and couldn't touch*.

He tried to return to logic. "So, if this is all connected—our case and what is happening to you—it gives us an edge they can't be expecting. An inside view from the donor end of the process."

"Except I didn't get much information. I should have tried to go back and learn more, but I felt like I really needed to come and see you." Roman glanced down at his bare feet. "Dumb."

"I'm glad you came. Really glad. I don't know how long I was just sitting here, staring into space, doing nothing useful at all."

"Well. Maybe not so dumb then. But we need a plan. Are you sure you don't want to contact the FBI? Dealing with kidnapping is their expertise, right?"

“Yeah.” Xavier hated the way his thoughts were scrabbling around without good data. “But I’m worried. No organization is leakproof. And these people are dealing in millions of dollars. How hard would it be for them to buy a Feeb? And if they find out this is a sting, they’ll kill Tam for sure.”

“Wouldn’t you be expected to call the cops? Wouldn’t they expect to hear you do that, if they’re listening in, I mean? Isn’t there something fishy about not doing so?”

“If I was serious about wanting this transplant for Tam, if this was the real deal, then I wouldn’t want anything to screw it up. I would just let it happen. I surely wouldn’t get the cops involved.”

“So you’re supposed to just sit by, let them do risky surgery on your sister, and then send them a boatload of money afterward?”

He had to breathe hard a few times before he could answer that. “I guess.” He wanted to pace, remembered at the last moment to keep the range-finder focused on Roman. “It’s my fault. I didn’t think it through. What the *hell* made me think I could play cop in the real world? Just because I know a little about security? I was all the fracking back-up Tam had, and now they have her!”

“Wasn’t back-up the FBI’s job?”

“It was my plan!” He clenched his fists. “My idea to throw my *damned* money around and make Tam bait. They didn’t think it would work. I got her into this!”

Roman drawled, “Oh, yeah. I can just imagine how hard you had to twist your poor, defenseless sister’s arm...”

“Screw that!” He turned on Roman, chest burning with anger. “Screw you! What the hell do you know? You’re just some floating useless image from a dead guy’s mind!”

Roman’s sharp, pained gasp stopped his rant short.

The look in Roman’s eyes made Xavier feel sick. He heard his own words echo in his head and winced, tried to stretch out a hand and remembered that was useless. “Sorry. God, I’m sorry! I didn’t mean it. I just feel so fracking helpless.”

“And I’m not good for much,” Roman said evenly, but the hurt showed through.

"You are. You really are. You're keeping me from going crazy right now, for one thing."

"Uh huh."

He tried to joke. "Although that was pretty crazy talk from me right there, so you need to step up your game a bit."

"It was true."

"No!" He moved closer, wishing there was a way to bridge the gap between them. "Well, mind image maybe, yeah. But you're not dead. And far from useless. And I am so, so glad you're here."

For a long moment, they stood there, face to face. Their breath should have mingled, but Xavier felt no shift in the quiet air. Roman's expression slowly softened, and a little of the stiff tension seeped out of him. Xavier wanted to give Roman something, to make up for those unthinking words. "I'm such a coward sometimes. Tam's the tough one, you're right. Without her, it's like I'm frozen in a useless lump. I'm so scared. But you being here... unfreezes me."

"It's scary stuff," Roman said quietly.

"Worse for you. I do know that." Xavier rubbed a finger across his numb lips. "I'm scared for both of you. I don't want to be. It'd be a hell of a lot easier if you were just like a VR character from my favorite show, the sexy unreal hero guy who goes away when you turn the power off. Untouchable, invincible, immortal."

"I'm not a hero."

"Yeah, you are." Xavier held his gaze, trying to make Roman see what he saw. "You keep trying. You don't let being unconscious, insubstantial, lost, any of that—you don't let it stop you."

"If I did there'd be nothing left." Roman raised a hand, and traced the line of Xavier's cheek, hovering a millimeter off his skin. "If I quit, I might never see you again."

"I'd try to find you."

"Thanks." Roman dropped his hand. "Me, that woman, Tam. All of us lost. You and I need to get our A-game going, whatever that may be. So. Any ideas? How would Tam's organ thing go down if we did nothing but play along?"

Xavier tried to focus. The kidnapping made the stakes really simple. "Any criminal exchange happens only if both sides feel safe. Both have some kind of security. Their security turns out to be having Tam in their hands, until it's done and we're committed. Mine is the fifteen million they're still supposed to get."

"That's a lot of money all right."

"Yeah."

"You already paid five, right? If this isn't a one-off then someone is already getting rich. But fifteen million is a whole lot more money."

"If all they wanted was the first five million, they didn't need to bother to kidnap Tam. They could just tell me they suspected a double cross and the deal was off. As far as they know, there would be nothing I could do about it. They'd be free and clear."

"So the only reason for them to go further is the full payment. Which means that Tam isn't in any immediate danger."

That was true. Xavier's heart rate slowed a notch. "Well, except for having surgery she doesn't want."

"But you do want for her," Roman said very softly.

"No!" He could taste the lie in that. But he repeated it. "No."

"Are you sure? Easy enough to just let this play out and then go to the FBI afterward. Safer for Tam, maybe."

Xavier dropped his gaze. Trust Roman to find the dark, little thought he'd been trying not to admit. But he needed to face this, and squash it. "I can't pretend I don't want her to have a transplant, especially one that good. But only honestly, from a real donor." Saying it, bringing it out into the open, did help. "If she gets her health back through someone being murdered, she'll have a hell of a time living with that. And if I could have prevented it, she'll never speak to me again."

"Maybe this *is* a real donor. Maybe she and I were, I don't know, diverted from the queue, but still real candidates. Brain dead."

Xavier said quickly, "You're obviously not brain dead, though."

"Well, not spirit dead, or soul dead, or whatever part of me's wandering around talking philosophy. But my body looked pretty damned uninhabited."

Only the hard swallow after the words showed that Roman wasn't as calm as he looked.

"No. I can't believe that!"

"When I'm in that body, nothing much is happening."

"Maybe you're drugged. Clearly, you're still thinking, even then."

Roman took a rough breath. "I guess."

"Tam's a firm believer in fairness. She'd hate even jumping the queue. And anyway, who knows how good their surgeons are, or what the risks might be."

"They'd have incentive to be good, if they want to be paid millions."

"That's true, of course. You can go to India or China and buy a donor under the table. Everyone knows it. But the match is likely to be crappy, especially if you're Caucasian, the surgeons who will do the job are a mixed bag, and the hospitals have lots of problems. Still, that's their competition. They have to be much better."

"You sound like you researched it."

"Yeah." There was nothing wrong with research. "That's how I heard rumors of a North American service that was ten times safer, if you could afford it. But no one is going to stand up and give testimonials."

"And no one has stood up screaming murder?"

"No. That could be due to threats as much as successes though."

"Maybe." Roman rocked back and forth, his feet sinking just slightly into the surface of the floor. Xavier watched that, his reminder that Roman was only half here, that he must *not* think of Roman as anything more.

Roman stopped. "So if calling the cops is out, then it's up to us. We have to find Tam, and stop the surgery."

"Yeah." He couldn't hold back a little hysterical laugh. "That simple."

"No. Not simple." Roman had an intense look, like someone giving a complex lecture. Smart, focused. "They'll need three things, no, four things for the surgery to happen, right? A facility, a donor, a surgeon and Tam. Maybe we can find one of those."

Xavier tried to match his objective tone. "The facility doesn't have to be anything fancy. It's not like a heart transplant."

“But the odds are they use it for all kinds of surgeries. Why move around? And I bet hearts are in big demand on the black market. Not enough of them available the honest way.”

They looked at each other. Roman dropped the hand he'd pressed to his chest.

Xavier said, “Yeah. True. I've had search bots out looking since we got into this, and the FBI has been searching for an unlicensed or overbooked surgery too, with no luck. And their programmers are good. Same goes for the surgeon. I know they've been looking for candidates with more money than they should have, or a history of cutting corners. The chance any further search of mine will find the place or the doctor in the next twenty-four hours is... not good.” He didn't want to admit how not-good it was.

“I guess the scumsuckers have to be practiced at hiding the recipient during surgery, if they commonly kidnap wealthy people. Even temporarily.”

“That clone-box was slick, almost commercial, not jury-rigged. Yeah, I bet Tam's not their first kidnapping.”

“But this time, we may have information about the *donor* that they can't be expecting anyone to find.”

Xavier met Roman's gaze, a spark of hope dawning for the first time since he'd received the call about Tam's tracker being *unusually stationary*. “Right. If the woman you saw really is the one.”

“Worth a try.”

“Absolutely.”

Roman stood straighter, feet apart, chin up, strong body poised, just solid and ready and so determined. So perfect. “We need a plan.”

Xavier remembered to nod, eventually. “Any ideas? You know more than I do about what you can manage.”

“I haven't experimented enough. I should try to get back to the facility soon.” His determination sagged slightly. “And I don't think I should try to come back here again until I have good information.”

“No partial reports?” He hated the idea of waiting, and wondering, and not knowing.

"It clearly takes me time to get here, wandering around through the dark looking for the blue. I don't know how long or what might be happening while I'm wandering. I shouldn't be away from the donor, unless I know enough to make it worthwhile."

"What will you look for?"

Roman shrugged. "Anything I can find out, I guess. Her name. The donor storage location. When or where the surgery will be."

"Which is where Tam will be." He closed his eyes. So much could go wrong. Would they just be making it worse?

"If I can, I'll try to follow her to surgery, wherever they're doing it."

"Do you think that's possible? You haven't had much control so far."

"I don't know. I was able to walk outdoors before, moving in and out of the dark. I was able to wander the facility. If the surgery is in the same building we're in, probably not a problem. If they move her in an ambulance... All I can do is try. Whether I can get there. Whether I can get... back."

The hesitation in Roman's voice made Xavier look up to meet his eyes, and quickly say, "Promise you'll come back here, if you can. If you find Tam, or if you lose track of the donor. Either way, come here."

"I'll try. And if I can't find the surgery, I'll try to snoop for more information. I'll do my best to locate Tam. That I promise."

"I know." Xavier rubbed his eyes. "I feel useless. I'll keep doing the searches, but I don't expect them to work. I'll do a new missing persons search, too. Young, small, blonde, twenty to forty, missing in the past week or so."

"If you could hack into the national DNA-scan database, you might find out who's such a perfect match for Tam. That could lead you to who the donor is."

"Maybe. Database security is supposed to be good."

"I bet you're better."

Xavier felt a flash of warmth at Roman's confidence. "Thanks. You know, there have to be ways into the data, no matter what they say. If doctors and law enforcement have access, then there's no way it's locked down tight." *He should have done that, weeks ago.* "God, I'm stupid."

Roman said, "The hell you are. And... if you get in, you could maybe find my scan, see who's my match. You might check on them..."

Xavier realized that the unspoken part of that was, “*And see how sick they are, and which parts of my body they want to take.*” “If I get in, and can find you there, I will.”

Roman bit his lip, then met Xavier's eyes. “So. You know everything I do. I should head back.”

Xavier clamped his fingers tighter on the range-finder, but didn't touch the power-off button. “I set up a Doppler laser outside the kitchen for you, just in case.”

“I saw it. Like a candle in the window.”

“Yes. To bring you home. Back. Will it work?”

“I came in that way this time. So yeah.”

“Good.”

For a long minute, and then another, they just looked at each other. Then Roman said quietly, “Switch the laser off.”

He didn't want to. Really didn't. But Tam was out there somewhere, and the rest of Roman too. This wasn't really a moment frozen out of time. Events were rushing on, outside this quiet cellar. He moved his thumb, said, “Good luck,” and clicked the button.

Roman's tight smile lingered in his mind's eye, long after the last trace of him was gone.

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Chapter 8

Either it was getting easier, or his time sense was just screwy, because Roman found his way back to his body in what felt like minutes rather than hours. He woke to the sound of movement, and voices.

“...bring it closer.”

“Lift together, on three. One, two, three.”

“Watch the fluid line.”

His own body was lying still; nothing had changed, no one touched him. It didn't take a genius to realize the commotion had to be about his roommate.

Shit! No more time! He tried to relax, tried to submerge himself in alpha state or whatever the hell that out-of-body state of mind was. It was difficult bordering on impossible, with the people moving around him and that sense of impending disaster.

He counted breaths, swore, counted again, and caught a wisp of memory, a moment years ago, desert heat and Sergeant Daley. *“Movement is the easiest thing to pick up. So if you think a sniper has a bead on you, go still. I'm gonna teach you to freeze your body, your emotions, your mind. Go deep, go still, and wait for him to lose interest.”* In the middle of a war zone, with drones dropping heavy loads only a few miles away, he'd learned to go into the silence or have Daley's large fist land on him.

Go deep, go still. He breathed without counting, breathed, breathed, stilled himself, and stood up out of his body.

The bed across from him was empty. The room was silent. He ran.

The first door was easy. He went straight through it with barely a hitch. The pressure registered, but it didn't even slow him down, although he did close his eyes before he hit it. And probably held his breath.

The corridor beyond was quiet too.

The double doors were closed, but he had their measure now. Thinking back to his Army days brought the obstacle course to mind. He envisioned the windows as gaps in a wall, took a breath and dove up and through. His hips hit the base plate, hard enough to bruise him if this form of his could get bruises.

Hard enough to make the door shake open an inch, which he noted in passing. But he was through and falling without much pause. No alarms went off as the door behind him quivered and closed again.

He scrambled to his feet. At the far end of the hallway, two men in scrubs stood on either side of a motorized gurney, in front of an elevator door. Neither of them looked at him. He waved, but their bored expressions didn't change. All right. Invisible then. He controlled a slightly hysterical snicker at the simplicity of that realization. Out of body and invisible, check. His life was so damned strange. But not being noticed was a good thing right now.

On the wheeled bed, still as death, was his roommate. He hurried toward them, managing just a glance into the nursing station as he passed. It was part of the weirdness to be reassured by the sight of his own still body on a monitor, but he was. This was working as planned. The nurse at the desk was an older woman, no one he recognized. She didn't react as he went by, and he didn't pause.

The elevator doors opened. The attendant with the bed-controller steered it in and his assistant followed. Roman managed to dive in after them, before the doors shut. Even though he aimed for a clear piece of floor, one shoulder smacked painfully against the stainless leg of the gurney, and the other passed uncomfortably through the taller attendant's ankle.

The man grunted and rubbed his leg, as Roman scrambled for the back corner of the elevator. There was just enough space for him to crouch there, knees against his chest, out of the way of random contacts. The elevator rose slowly. One of the men grumbled about it under his breath, but otherwise they didn't speak. The woman on the gurney lay still as a wax figure, flat on her back, and if she breathed, which he presumed she did, it was too softly for him to hear.

He'd worried for a moment about the elevator and whether he might tend to sink through the floor of it. Either it had unusual density, or his mind was leery of falling down the shaft, because it felt more solid under him than anything else had in recent days. After a pause, it slowed, stopped, and the door wheezed open. The attendants guided the gurney out, its motor whirring. Roman followed quickly. He didn't want to find out the hard way if the elevator was solid enough to trap him.

To his surprise, they'd entered a modest open garage space. The floor was concrete, the ceiling high, the walls insulated and lined with a few metal

shelves. The space was only big enough for a couple of vehicles at a time. At the moment, an ambulance was parked waiting, with the rear doors open.

Without a word, with the smoothness of practice, the men loaded the gurney in the back. Roman managed to slip in after it, brushing one man's arm but nothing worse. The space in the rear was tight, and he ended up scrunched down on the floor behind the end of the locked-in gurney. One attendant climbed in, taking the jump seat. The other said, "Good to go?"

"Yep."

The second man shut the back door, went around to the front, and got in.

Roman's position wasn't great. He could see forward through the windshield, but at a sharp upward angle. He could only get glimpses, first of the door rolling up and then of the overhanging shapes of trees as they pulled out. Clearly, his time sense was wrong again, because the light made it clear it was morning, not late afternoon. Presumably he'd wandered all night unaware. Unless it had been more than one night. Roman felt a pang for Xavier, waiting without a word. He set the thought aside. He couldn't afford to dwell on that.

The ambulance moved smoothly and silently, running on electric only, siren off. The driver guided them for several minutes, presumably over smaller roads, before they hit a tollway and the auto-drive took over. The robo-voice had been silenced, so Roman didn't even get to hear what road they were on, but the driver got up and turned to stand in the gap between the front seats, looking at his coworker. "Everything good?"

The man in back checked a telemetry panel and nodded. "Solid as a rock."

The guy up front sat back down and pulled out a touch pad to play some kind of game, the sound effects muted enough to be unintelligible to Roman. The guy in the back closed his eyes and appeared to be dozing. They rode on smoothly at tollway speeds.

Roman tried to keep track of time, but he couldn't see the clock, so it was a guess at best. He watched the little patch of sky he could see out the front. Occasionally a sign flashed overhead. The angle was crappy to read them. He thought one might have said something about Mount Vernon, but he wasn't sure what.

The motion felt odd. Sometimes his body was floating, almost left behind by the van, and he would come up against the back of it, pressure building

against his shoulder until he snapped back into place. He had a panicked worry that he might sink through the floor and fall out on the road. He knew he should be paying more attention to where they were, but it took everything he had to keep himself together, stay still and in the moment.

He guessed it had been about half an hour of driving when they pulled off the highway, and the driver took up the controls again. To Roman's surprise, the brief glimpses of signage suggested a major hospital, with directions to an emergency entrance, ambulances only. They drove into an underground parking lot. He braced himself for getting out of the ambulance, but when they pulled over down inside and stopped, the attendants made no move toward the gurney. There was a pause, as the guy up front fiddled with some controls. After a while, they circled around and drove back out.

Huh.

There was no conversation. The men acted like that was routine. They kept going, leaving the hospital behind. Another stretch of time on featureless roads, and they began passing three- and four-story buildings. The bits he could see looked generically grey and square against glimpses of sky. They passed close under some large, leafy trees, their green tops crossing his patch of sky. After another couple of minutes, they slowed, turned, bumped over some ridges, and pulled down into another underground garage.

All he could see out the front was a cement wall. By the time the driver came around and opened the ambulance door, the main door to the street was rolling down. Roman got a glimpse of a suburban downtown neighborhood, with the familiar striped facade of a Joe's JellyShop outlet, before the view was cut off. Roman tumbled out the back, away from the gurney as the men extracted it and powered it off across the garage bay. He found his feet and hurried after them.

On the other side of the double doors, they passed into what looked like a clinic or small hospital. More yellow walls. Roman decided he was never going to paint anything yellow. If he ever got the chance to make that call again. The halls were quiet but not deserted. Two people in scrubs passed, going the other way. They each gave the gurney a glance that was mildly curious but unsurprised. Clearly, none of them saw Roman either.

Their little procession, complete with phantom, passed through two more sets of automatic doors, down two more hallways, and ended up in a larger

room, lined with medical equipment. A young man in white and two women in scrubs stood waiting. The man looked over, his expression cool. "The donor?"

"Yes, Doctor," the taller attendant said.

"Good. Put the gurney a little further over there."

"Her scan and information are on her wristband."

"They'd better be. We'll double check it, of course. This is hardly my first time."

The attendant's mouth twisted, but he just said, "Yes, sir. Do you still need us?"

"No. Get the vehicle out of here. I'll let him know you made the transfer."

Roman watched the two men leave. He had a moment of panic—he wanted to run after them, and clutched futilely at a countertop to restrain himself, staggering as his hand passed through it. God only knew where his body was now. They were his last contact with his physical self. He reminded himself that they might not take the ambulance back there anyway.

The doctor turned to the two women. "Get her cheek swab, and the recipient's. Run them through the scan. I'm not taking anyone's word for compatibility. And hook up the brain imaging. Let's have a nice, flat, legal reading before we assume this patient is done with her own kidneys."

"Yes, doctor." The women bent over the gurney for a minute, one hooking a headset with contacts over the donor's unmoving face and skull, while the other slipped a swab inside her lip, then inserted it in a matte-grey metal box.

"I'll go get the recipient's sample," she said, picking up a fresh swab and turning for the door.

Roman realized almost too late that the *recipient* was potentially Tam. He managed to slide through the doors after the nurse before they fully closed. There was no window in these, and a leap over bumper plates through a solid door, while probably possible, was not on his bucket list. The nurse turned the opposite way down the corridor, and hurried off. Roman kept pace invisibly behind her.

They passed through two more locked doors, each opened by the nurse's retina scan, and then reached a third with an attendant sitting at a desk outside

it. The nurse said, "The doc wants a mucosal swab." She pulled an old-style facemask up over her mouth and nose.

The attendant scanned her ID clip, and pressed a control, swinging the door open.

The room beyond was far from being a dungeon cell. It was, in fact, perhaps the most luxurious hospital room Roman had ever seen. There were the usual monitors and connections for oxygen and who knew what, but the floor was covered in soft, cushion-tile in a faux-marble pattern. Three of the walls were—what else—yellow, but the other had a ceiling-to-floor flatscreen with a moving scene, a view from a New York high-rise with the sea walls and the harbor in the distance. The ceiling had a sky-projection, the lights were concealed and indirect, and there were comfortable-looking chairs spaced about.

The bed in the center was clearly a hospital bed with all the bells and whistles, but wider than the norm. Tam looked small on it. Her eyes were closed and her wrists were restrained in Velcro cuffs against the lowered rails on each side. Roman hurried over, and was reassured by the steadiness of her breathing. Sleeping, maybe drugged, but alive.

As the nurse approached, Tam opened her eyes blearily.

"Just a little mouth swab," the nurse said with professional cheer. "Won't hurt a bit."

"Eat crud 'n' die," Tam mumbled. As the nurse held her jaw still and slid the swab under her lip she made an obvious but futile attempt to bite.

The nurse managed easily, and let her go. "I don't know what your problem is," she muttered. "You should be glad someone with money likes you, because psych cases usually go to the *bottom* of the list, not the top."

Roman hesitated as the nurse strode to the door. Part of him wanted to stay and try to communicate with Tam, to reassure her somehow that she wasn't alone. But the door looked solid, and the last thing that would help Tam was for him to be trapped in this room. If he had to go into the dark to get out, he'd lose precious time before he'd gathered any really useful information. He slid his hand over and through hers, hoping she might recognize the sensation, and rushed after the nurse. Behind him, Tam muttered, "'s weird..." But it was all he could do.

Out in the hallway, he began a systematic search, trying to read name badges and signage. He found out that the doors were, in fact, damned hard to

get through on his own, but there was enough foot traffic for him to wait and follow people through. He'd accumulated a few names, but no location, by the time he went through a new door and found himself in a much more public area.

Patient exam-rooms lined the hallway, and a series of tiny cubbies held vid screens with nurses doing remote consults. The familiar setup of a small-town clinic surprised him, but perhaps it was a good cover for the illegal one behind it. Five minutes of peeking over shoulders and searching posted placards gave him the clinic name, street address and e-dress. *Rochelle Community Hospital*.

The feeling of relief and success made him dizzy. He could go home now. Find Xavier. Tell him everything. Stop, for just a minute, and be with someone in a quiet space, where he wasn't dodging, wasn't scared, and didn't care that he was naked. He needed that so fuckin' bad.

He backed away from the bustle of patients, the crying baby behind door number two, the nurse loudly losing her patience with the woman demanding a pain script over the vid. He waited for the staff door to be opened, and headed back into the calmer space beyond. It was a matter of a minute to find a quiet corner and sit, legs crossed, hands on his knees.

Go into the dark. Find the grey. He'd made the leap into the dark without choice when shocked by the laser switching off, or the collision with the nurse. Doing it voluntarily was harder. Twice he felt he was close. Each time some sound or distraction held him back, keeping him in his astral form, crouched in the corner. He thought of Xavier, of the route home, blue light in the dimness. Nothing.

Stupid. Now, when time really mattered, was not the moment to mess around. Abruptly he stood up. The next person coming down the hallway was a tall, thin man in scrubs. Who cared who it was, though. Roman took a breath, braced himself, and strode right through the man.

It was slightly better this time, or perhaps it was just a matter of being prepared. The abrupt twisting, the sharing of space that shouldn't be shared, nauseated him but didn't knock him as far off balance. He was thrust into the dark, and he welcomed it. The gasp of the man he left behind was useful confirmation, especially when it cut off short, like a door slamming shut between them.

.grey

.silence

.lost

.silence

.grey

The darkness was the same. It would always be the same. Absence of light that was not really black, absence of sound that was not true stillness, absence of touch that left him alone in the universe. He clenched and unclenched his jaw, flexed his fingers, searching for the ragged edges of himself. The grey clung to him, but had no real resistance. He heaved, nauseated. Bile stung his throat, and he welcomed it. Real acid. Real pain. A taste, however foul. Body. Self.

Xavier. He needed to find Xavier. Now. Fast. It was urgent, life or death, and he used that to drive himself forward, searching for the blue, the feel, the man, for the way home. A moment later, however long that actually was, he found it.

The star-array of eavesdroppers was still there. He chose the different short beam, for love of it, and slid home.

Xavier sat at the kitchen table, his head down on his arms. Before Roman could speak, Xavier sat up and looked at him, eyes wide and full of relief. Roman reached for him, and their hands met, and for an instant seemed to cling, before flesh and phantasm merged and then pulled apart. "Laser. Downstairs," Roman whispered urgently.

Xavier tried to pull himself together as they hurried down the stairs. He kept the laser in his hand steady, although he really wanted to shake apart. The last twelve hours had been a little slice of hell. Not knowing where Tam was, or if she was safe, was bad enough. Add in not knowing what was happening to Roman, or if he might try something dangerous or damaging, and Xavier's imagination had indulged in a horror-movie field day. He'd pictured Tam dumped and dead, Roman vivisected, Tam dying from botched surgery, Roman trying to follow someone out of his hospital room and burning his astral self to a crisp in the sun. And those were just the logical nightmares.

Roman whirled as soon as they were downstairs. "I saw Tam. She's okay. Here's the address." He reeled off street, city, com line, online tags. Xavier managed to fumble out his pad and get it all down. Roman finished with a breathless, "The doc was doing their gene match. There's a little time, but not much. Now you should call in the cops."

Xavier hesitated. "What if... what if they want to go charging in and she's in surgery? What if they aren't careful enough and the doctor runs off halfway done?" A dozen nightmare scenarios came to mind. Maybe it would be safer to wait.

Roman looked at him, his head tilted, and said softly, "Are you looking for reasons not to stop them until the transplant is done?"

"No!" The twist in his gut matched the skeptical rise of Roman's eyebrow. "I'm not! Not really. I just... Damn!" He took a sharp breath. "You know, it was never meant to get this far. We were going to back out and turn the case over. Actually having the surgery wasn't supposed to be in the cards." He'd always dismissed the temptation with the thought that it would never happen.

"She wasn't happy to be there," Roman said. "Although she did seem a bit doped up."

"But healthy? Safe?"

"For now, yeah, I think so."

"Thanks. Really. Thank you!"

"I'm just glad I was able to be worth *something*."

"God, Roman, do I have to tell you again what you're worth?"

Roman flushed. "No. Sorry, that was a bit needy, wasn't it?"

"I wish I had something better to give you than just words."

Roman's eyes met his. "Rain check?"

"Yeah. Definitely." There was another of those silences, full of subtext.

Then Roman coughed and said, "So. What now?"

He didn't want to ask, but he had to. "What about the donor. Was she... awake?"

"No. In fact, the doctor said something about confirming her brain death."

Xavier felt better for a second, until all the implications hit him. "It doesn't mean you're brain dead too." Surely it didn't!

Roman lifted one bare shoulder. "Not relevant right now. You need to get help to Tam. And you need to decide how fast you're going to do that."

There was only one real answer. "If I wait, she'll never forgive me. However it turns out." He took a long breath. "The wired link to the FBI is upstairs. Coming up with me?"

Roman shook his head. "Set the laser down and I'll wait here. Just, come back when you can."

"Yeah. I will."

Climbing the stairs was like wading through quicksand. He realized that at some point during the night he'd found a happy place by assuming that at least Tam might get her life saved out of all this. Even if she hated the idea, it could happen just by him being unable to stop it. But now, it would only happen if he did something she would never forgive. He reached the kitchen, grabbed the secure link, and punched in his code.

Getting to the right person, and convincing them he was serious and had good information without explaining how, took time. At every moment, there was a temptation to say, "A ghost told me so." It was the truth, or close to it. He couldn't be faulted for telling them the truth. If it slowed things down, that wouldn't be his fault.

Except it would. For all the razzing he and Tam shared, despite the teasing, sometimes fighting, and often misunderstanding one another, they never lied. There were a lot of ways of lying; he wasn't going to pretend he didn't recognize this one—telling the truth in a way so unbelievable that it's discounted. Instead, he invented a plausible story, an anonymous tip from someone who recognized Tam, a specialized search program. He named names and descriptions. It took perhaps an hour, for them to assure him that rescue was headed Tam's way.

They didn't warn him to keep away from the scene. Maybe they figured it was unnecessary. Idiots. As he hurried downstairs, Roman looked up at him. He said breathlessly, "Let's go."

"Where?"

"Where do you think?"

Roman nodded. "All right. Yes."

Xavier hesitated for a second in the garage, then gestured Roman toward the Excalibra. There wasn't room in the sports car for a third person, but there was basically no chance Tam would ride out with them anyway. The car was fast, agile, powerful and brilliant, and he wanted every ounce of that right now. He opened its doors.

He kept the laser aimed at Roman as he got in on the passenger side, and wedged it into the dashboard nookbox, centered on his chest. Roman gave him the flash of a smile. "Wow, I'll happily take a laser through the heart to ride in this thing."

"Sorry." He adjusted the beam up toward Roman's shoulder.

"Just drive."

He hurried around, slipped into his seat, and drove.

The Nav system had no problem finding the address of the clinic. It gave him a forty-two minute transit at the posted speeds. He hit the illegal override box under the dash, the car leaped forward, and Roman grinned. "I do love a man with style."

For a moment, he looked over at Roman's open, bright expression. For just a moment, a feeling of anticipation hung between them, heavy with promise. Then all the rest of the anxiety and fear crashed back in, and he turned away to glare out of the windshield, willing the car to go faster.

When the Excalibra powered back down and pulled off the tollway, leaving what was probably a fortune in overspeed tickets behind, he put his hands back on the wheel. The Nav guided him through a modest town, down a side street, and announced his destination in one tenth of a mile.

It was a suburban downtown, very middle-class. The ad-boards were big but not too bright and flashy, and the silence in his ear suggested they respected the ad-blocker on his new cell-com. He spotted what looked like a medical building in the next block, with signs for an emergency entrance and belowground parking. He pulled over to the curb, stopped and looked at Roman.

"Now what?" Roman asked.

"I don't know. I can't imagine the FBI wants me here." He didn't want to get in their way either. His sister the cop had some very forceful names for

amateurs who didn't leave policing to the professionals. He'd just needed to be close by. "Tam will kill me if I screw up their case."

Roman snorted softly.

"Well, she will." It was odd how that little sound had eased some of the tightness in his chest. "Maybe you can sneak in. See what's going on?"

"I can try."

Xavier popped the door open. Before Roman could get out, a middle-aged woman walking by looked at him and sniffed in eloquent disdain, her gaze dipping to his crotch and pointedly looking away.

"Fuck! Close it!"

Xavier triggered the door shut. They looked at each other and Xavier giggled helplessly. "You're naked; I forgot."

"I'm not sure I like you laughing at my naked dick."

"It's a very nice dick." Xavier leaned his head on his forearms, hands tight on the wheel. The lack of sleep was making him punchy. "I thought no one else could see you."

"Apparently the key really is the laser. But... we can't just turn it off." Roman frowned angrily. "This is such total crap! When you switch it off, it bounces me into the grey. Who knows when or where I'll come out? I might be back at the house, or in my body again. But if you leave it on, I'll be even more conspicuous than you are."

They stared at each other. Xavier said, "What if we do it slowly? Attenuate it down, bit by bit? Could you fade out?"

"I don't know," Roman said. "Maybe."

"Can it hurt? Right now, we're two guys sitting in a car we don't dare get out of to do anything useful. If it works, you can at least do *something*. If it fails, I'll just still be sitting here." He hesitated. "Not that I wouldn't far rather have your company than be alone, but..."

"Try it. We have to try something. Do the windows tint any darker?"

"Are you kidding?" He went for a superior smile, feeling it coming out a little wobbly around the edges. "It's an Excalibra, the limited edition. My best toy. Well, after the high speed comp-array back at the office." He hit the

control to one-way-smoke the side windows completely, then added front and back. "There. Complete privacy."

"Okay. Let me try to get into that alpha state first. When I think I'm there I'll do this." Roman flicked his index finger twice. "Then you try easing down the laser. If I do this,"—he spread his hand wide—"then stop there for a bit."

"Okay." As Roman leaned back in his seat and closed his eyes, Xavier did a quick mental inventory of what he had to work with. He needed to rig some kind of light-beam attenuator... Increasing sheets of paper? Starch-plastic candy wrappers? Or... the door pocket held a pair of his polarized shades. He dug them out, and popped out the lenses.

Roman glanced over at the first sharp snap, said, "Good thought," and closed his eyes again.

Xavier sat quietly, holding the lenses. Somewhere out there, only a minute away, Tam was either waiting for surgery or having surgery, or done with surgery. Surgery she didn't want that could save her life. Always assuming it was done right.

Suddenly, Xavier was glad that he had no doubt what her choice would be. He could just try to do the right thing, and not second-guess himself. Her body, her future, her choice. He'd always believed that was everyone's right, and if she chose to risk herself going into gang territory to try to talk the youngest kids out of getting jumped, that was her right. If she chose to walk away from a chance at a long healthy life, because it required her to break her moral code, that was her right too. Love didn't give him control, over his sister or anyone.

He turned his head. Roman looked solid, unless you stared really hard at where his naked body met the seat. He wasn't handsome, but his features were strong, his muscles lean and workmanlike, his chest would be perfect for leaning up against. That dusting of curly hair across his pecs would brush Xavier's cheek if he laid his head there. The pulse beating slowly in Roman's throat would be echoed by the steady, deep beat of his heart. If he was really there.

Xavier jumped when Roman raised a finger twice. *Showtime*. Slowly he eased one of the two lenses between the laser and the red dot where it hit Roman's shoulder. Held at a calculated angle, the beam passed through the polarized lens with only a little attenuation. Roman didn't move or change. After a moment, he raised the finger again. Xavier angled the lens, a fraction at

a time, watching the red dot fade slowly. When it started to brighten again, he held the lens still.

Roman sat motionless, at ease, each breath a little softer than the last. His finger moved.

Xavier took the other lens and slid it in, careful to match the angle. Even so, the dot faded abruptly. Roman's breath hitched, and then resumed. For long minutes neither of them moved. Then Roman's finger twitched again. Slowly, very slowly, Xavier rotated one lens against the other, crossing the polarizations so the dot faded, and faded, faded and thinned. And went out.

And Roman vanished.

Xavier cursed, and almost dropped the lenses. But if Roman was actually still there, slamming the laser back on him might undo all they'd accomplished. Holding the tinted glasses together in one hand, he reached out and switched off the laser. So. Invisible? Back in the grey? Was there any way to tell?

He wanted to reach out, to try to touch Roman. He might feel something, that odd brush of almost-flesh through flesh that had become welcome, rather than creepy. But he remembered how colliding with someone had knocked Roman into the dark before. He kept his hand well clear as he sat back, and tapped the control to open the door.

As the Excalibra unfolded her passenger door, Xavier felt it. Just a touch, above his wrist, as if ghostly fingers slid through his arm. He took a deep, shaky breath. "Good luck, Ro. Take care of yourself. And Tam."

There was no answer. The seat didn't creak, the dust on the sidewalk outside the car didn't swirl. Although he unsmoked the windows fast, there was nothing to be seen but a quiet suburban street on a sunny morning. He left the door open a long, long time, before tapping it shut.

His new cell-com behind his ear was silent too. He had it set to screen calls, and only let through the law enforcement codes. Apparently, none of them wanted to talk to him right now. He coasted the Excalibra forward half a block, electric engine silent, until he could make out the wide handicap-access entrance to the clinic down the street. He didn't dare go closer. Even this was stupid. How many luxury sports cars would usually park on this block? But he couldn't make himself drive away. Prayer was illogical, so he didn't pray.

Chapter 9

Roman stood for a second, getting his bearings outside the car. He had a hard time deciding if this felt different from ten minutes ago, but given the way Xavier's gaze had failed to follow him, he assumed that it was. No one was mocking his naked state, and the lady with the toddler coming out of the boutique didn't glare at him, so he assumed he was now fully astral. Or whatever. Invisible, anyway.

He walked toward the clinic, checking the surroundings for any hint of law enforcement. Patients were entering and leaving as if everything was normal. Surely, *someone* should be here by now. Xavier's car was fast, but they'd been half an hour away. The FBI had to have had someone closer, even if it was just town cops. Maybe they didn't trust the locals, or were waiting for more manpower or more evidence, or a warrant. Fuck if he knew how these things worked.

Tam was in there, though. And one thing he did know was that the surgery was probably moving forward. He followed a family of four through the front door. Chances were good there'd be nothing he could do, on his own and insubstantial, but he could at least go back and watch over her. At worst, Xavier was sitting back in the car. While Roman couldn't hold a gun right now, he knew that Xavier had a new Taser in his pocket, and he was willing to bet Tam had taught her brother to shoot straight. Somehow, he'd get the idea across if it came down to the wire and Xavier needed to play cavalry.

Or not... He realized, as he slid after a nurse into the back of the clinic, that there were more than the normal array of armed guards. Clinics had been hiring their own security for decades, given the drugs they kept on hand. But these guys weren't the overweight and greying ex-cops who usually pulled that duty. To a man, or in two cases, woman, they were young, fit and alert.

Whether they'd been warned to keep an eye out, or they knew there was more at stake than a few vials of narcotics, he couldn't tell. But if Xavier came in and insisted on going back to the surgery, he wasn't likely to get far. All the guards had legal Tasers holstered, and at least one had a bulge in the small of his back that suggested something less legal and more lethal. That settled it. Even for Tam, he wasn't going to encourage Xavier to come in here.

He had to wait five minutes to follow someone through the door from the clinical space to the hospital area. Once there, he wandered, following staff

through doors and halls, until he located the familiar pre-surgical area. The gurney was gone, and the room was empty.

He wished he knew more about the process. Would they take the donor to surgery first? Or both patients together? He tried to recreate the route to Tam's room. Once again, he came up to a closed windowless door with a half-bumper. This time he tried diving through the pressbond upper section. It turned out to be possible. Good to know.

The guard was still sitting outside Tam's room. That was a good sign, right? The man seemed at ease, watching something on a hand-held. Whatever the FBI was planning, clearly no alarms had been raised yet.

This door didn't have a bumper plate, and Roman strolled through with what he decided to call confidence. The room on the other side looked unchanged. Tam still lay on the bed, wrists bound and eyes closed, looking no paler, no different. Roman took a long, slow breath of relief.

He walked to the bed. Tam didn't rouse to his voice in her ear, or to his fingers brushing her arm. He tried a harder grip, flesh in flesh, and she flinched slightly, but her eyes remained closed. Crud. Not that he knew what he would achieve by waking her, but if this were him, he wouldn't want to sleep through things. He stepped back and then took a run at her bed. Sure enough, hitting the solid bed frame with all his force made it quiver. She blinked and muttered, "Huh?"

He immediately grabbed her arm, pressing his fingers in, three long, three short, three long. Three long, three short, three long. Or maybe it was supposed to be the opposite but it didn't matter. After a moment she whispered, "Roman?"

He gave one long squeeze.

She tugged against her wrist cuffs, although clearly without much force. "Not rescued, huh?"

He squeezed twice.

"Does anyone know we're here?"

Once.

The room door opened, and the guard looked in. "Do you need anything, miss?"

"I need to get out of here," Tam said tartly.

"I'm sure the doc will be along shortly." The man closed the door again.

Tam made a face at it. She muttered, "If someone's coming, it better be fast. I was prepped for surgery a while ago."

He went for one squeeze, even though he didn't know for sure what the FBI would do. Probably something, probably soon.

"I'm glad you're here. If you're not some figment of my damned imagination. Christ, I'll never live this one down. Snatched off the street like a fucking novice."

He squeezed twice.

She managed a laugh. "The least I could do would be agree with myself."

He made the next two extra hard, and they both shuddered. *Not* a good sensation.

He wasn't prepared when the door suddenly swung open. There was just time to jump away to a corner of the room before two attendants hurried in. The woman picked up the leash for the bed, while the man disconnected a cable from the wall and coiled it.

Tam said, "I'm here against my will, you know. I didn't ask for this."

Without a word, the woman pressed an injector to Tam's arm and triggered it.

"You're drugging a police off... off... pol..." Tam's eyes closed.

The man said conversationally, "I hate when they change their minds. You think she's really a cop?"

The woman shrugged. "Not our business. Let's go."

Roman followed behind as they guided the bed out into the hall. The guard got up and followed through the first set of doors before turning aside. Roman stuck with Tam and her nurses. They reached a surgery suite. The outer room was busy with three people in full gown, mask and glove regalia. The two nurses guided Tam up beside a steel table, stripped the covers off her, and lifted her limp body from the bed to the table, and the bed was rolled out.

A gowned male figure said, "She's two hours from pre-med. Full sterility from here on. Get her positioned, please, and move the organ box into the suite."

One of the gowned individuals rolled a cart topped by a complex white box toward the inner set of doors. Roman couldn't resist sliding along the wall until he could see into the clear top of the box as the person paused to step on the door control. Damn. Kidneys, looking startlingly like the textbook pictures. Two of them, bathed in fluid and threaded with a couple of small-diameter tubes. He felt a wash of intense sorrow for the donor, a woman he'd never known but who surely deserved better than to end up dissected into a high-tech cooler.

At that moment, a buzzer went off, high-pitched and shrill. The doctor snapped, "Shit!" He turned for the door, pulling the mask off his face. But before he could take another step the door opened. Two men stood there, weapons out and ready.

"FBI. No one move."

There was a frozen moment, as both sides stared at each other. Then more people in dark clothes began pouring into the room to take charge, patting down the medical folk and slapping on handcuffs. The doctor backed away, protesting, "This is a medical surgery. You can't come in here."

"We just did." The first agent walked toward him. "Hands on your head. You're under arrest for kidnapping. Other charges to follow in due course."

One of the female agents turned toward a tall, grey-haired man coming in the door and said, "Special Agent McGregor? What do you want to do with that?" She pointed at the rolling cooler-box. "It has, um, body parts in it."

The man she called McGregor hesitated for a second, then said, "Take it in and log it as evidence. There'll be a lot of stuff to keep track of. Call for a truck for transport."

"Wait," the surgeon said urgently. "Those are donated organs, prepped for transplant. Don't just *waste* them."

"You can hardly expect us to let you go on with illegal surgery!"

"Why not? It would be humane. Or if not, then take the organs and the gene scan to the National Health Transplant MedGroup, and let them find new recipients. Those are fresh-prepped, good for another forty-eight hours."

"They're evidence."

"Take pictures. Don't let them just rot. And the donor is in Surgery Room Two, still prepped for extractions. She came to me brain dead. Let her death mean something."

McGregor shook his head, and signaled to his subordinate to bring the surgeon's hands down and cuff them behind his back. "If she's dead, she won't care. Dead folks don't get to have a say." He smiled at his own humor.

Bastards were going to put what was left of the woman in a freezer to decay. Roman slammed his fist on the steel table beside him and was startled by a hollow boom.

Everyone in the room jumped, and the agents looked around quickly.

He did it again, for the fun of making them twitch. And then for the pleasure of making noise, of something that every living, breathing person in the room could hear. And again.

One of the agents pointed at the table, shivering a little from the impact of Roman's fist. "It's... that."

Roman slammed it with both hands, managing to move it a fraction of an inch.

McGregor glared at the surgeon. "Whatever you're doing, stop now."

"I'm not doing that." The surgeon glared back. "I'm a yard away from it."

Roman hip-checked it, enough to roll it two whole inches. Everyone in the room glanced at each other. One of the agents drew a Taser and pointed it at the table, then blushed and holstered it again. Roman beat out shave-and-a-haircut. His hands hurt, but it was oddly gratifying to have everyone in the room looking at him. Even if they couldn't see him. He remembered he was naked, so that was probably just as well.

McGregor cleared his throat. "Recording cameras are on, correct?"

"Yessir," a young man said.

"Play that bit back, one cam only."

The man brought over a pad, and tapped it for him. Roman held still, curious. He'd like to have looked at the screen, but didn't want to get that close. Everyone heard the playback, complete with thumps.

McGregor said, "So this is a real, um, phenomenon."

"Apparently, sir."

The senior agent glanced around the room. "Get the suspects out of here. I want this room cleared of everyone but us. Have someone take care of the victim too." He gestured toward Tam on her wheeled table. "Quickly now."

The doctor said, "Remember the patient's been immunosuppressed. Don't take her through the common areas."

"What do you care?"

"I'm still a doctor," he said coldly.

A man in a paramedic uniform stepped forward. "You have a steri-drape?"

One of the nurses gestured. The paramedic shook out the clear cover, and they transferred Tam to a waiting gurney in some dance of covers and monitor leads and gloves and drapes. No one spoke up until she was whisked through the doors and gone.

Roman held still and let it happen. He thought about following Tam as they wheeled her out, but he figured he could trust her to be taken care of now. He was held in place by some odd sense of responsibility to the woman he'd so briefly shared captivity with.

When the room held no one—well, no one visible—other than four dark-suited agents, McGregor said, "So now..."

Roman figured that was his cue to bang the table again. Beethoven's ninth, this time. Bam-bam-bam Boom.

He could hear McGregor swallow. From the way the other three agents carefully didn't look at their superior, he figured they'd heard it too. McGregor's face darkened. "If someone's decided this is the moment to get funny..."

The other three didn't answer. Roman wasn't sure there was a safe answer. Eventually McGregor said, "If there's someone doing that, thump twice."

Roman hesitated. Did he really want to get into a prove-you're-real demo with the feds? Everyone knew that being interesting to government security was a good way to end up in some jail cell, possibly where no one would ever find you again. Still these were the FBI, not one of the secret alphabets. And he was pretending to be the dead woman. He thumped twice.

McGregor said, "Show yourself."

Roman laughed, which got no reaction. He tried saying, "Over here." Still nothing. No wonder ghosts became fucking poltergeists. It was the only way to get attention. He glanced around. There were a series of small metal probes in a rack. He reached out and swiped his hand across them. His fingers passed

through and among them, prickling painfully, but one was shaken loose and dropped to the floor.

He put his finger to his mouth, sucking on the sorest bit, and waited.

McGregor said, "What does the camera show?"

"Here, sir." The young guy hurried over and showed him a replay.

"Huh." McGregor looked back up, his eyes fixed two feet to Roman's left. "One thump for yes, two for no. Are you a person?"

Well, what the hell. Thump.

"A living person?"

Thump, thump, thump.

"What does three mean?" the remaining female agent said.

"Yes and no?" the young man suggested.

McGregor gave them a quelling look. "Are you a ghost? Jesus Murphy, I can't believe I said that."

Thump, thump.

"Dead?"

Thump, thump, thump.

"Not alive or dead," the middle-aged man said. "That doesn't leave much."

"Unconscious?" McGregor asked.

Thump.

"Huh." They all glanced at each other. "Is your body in the next room?"

Roman hesitated. If he was pretending to be the donor, then the answer was yes. But if he was telling the truth... He went for three thumps.

McGregor swore under his breath. "Because this doesn't peg the freaking weird-o-meter already. Anderson, check out that table. Scan the damned thing for prints and then examine every inch of it. Now!"

The older of the two other men approached the table cautiously, pulling on plastic gloves and taking out a small scanner from his pocket. He aimed the device at the tabletop, and Roman stepped away, quick as a cat. With his luck, that was some kind of laser. The man ran first the scanner and then his hands

lightly over all the surfaces, then looked at his boss and shrugged. "Hell if I know."

"Move the table all the way over to the other side of the room. Wait. Fuck. High-res pictures *in situ* first for evidence, all angles. Then move it."

Roman lounged against a wall, thinking about how far he wanted to take this, as the recording was being done. He'd just wanted to shake them, and make them think about the donor differently. But it was shifting to some kind of paranormal investigation. He didn't really want to be investigated.

The prep room door opened briefly. A woman stuck her head in. "Just to let you know, sir. I got a report that the victim is awake. The medic reversed her sedative in the ambulance. She should be able to give a statement at the hospital soon."

"Good. I assume someone went along with her?"

"Yes, sir. Special Agent Cleary."

"Fine. Now get out. Actually," he waved a hand at the door, "set yourself up outside there. No one interrupts us, no one comes in without clearance. If you need me, call my com."

"Yes, sir."

When the door had shut again, Agent Anderson pulled the table across the room to a new location. McGregor pivoted, watching him, and then addressed the air above the table. "You still there?"

Roman thumped the instrument tray on the counter instead. All four agents spun that way. McGregor looked like he might bite something. "Can you move around to where the table is now?"

There was no obvious trap. Roman walked over and banged the table once.

"Huh." The woman frowned. "That's pretty freaky."

"That's not a technology we can match," McGregor said. "Yet."

"You think it's a special effect?" The older man looked relieved.

Roman went for two thumps.

McGregor made a sour face. "If not, I have to believe in the supernatural. I would much rather think it's artificial and can be figured out, wouldn't you? Figured out, maybe used."

"I'd prefer that too, sir," the younger guy said.

Roman slammed into the table, hard enough to bruise his hip, hard enough to make it shake.

McGregor cursed and waved at the older guy. "Check it again. Wait, grab that steel probe and hold it against the surface in case it's magnetic."

Roman let the guy do his thing, then banged his hand down inches from where the probe was being held out.

The guy almost dropped it in surprise, but said, "Not magnetic, unless it's really focused."

"What do you think they want?" the woman muttered.

McGregor pulled at his chin with one hand. "To wreck the case by making half the arresting officers look crazy?"

Roman whacked out a definite no to that. Maybe he should just stop there.

But the younger man said snidely, "Maybe it's the voice of a pair of kidneys."

Their smiles faded when Roman whacked the table hard enough to shift it. Once. Yes.

"Okay, that tears it." McGregor straightened his shoulders. "Look whoever or whatever you are. We'll do everything by the book, including handling the evidence. So you can stop this game. If you explain how you did this, I'll make sure you're well rewarded."

No. Thump-thump.

McGregor signaled to his two younger agents, gestured toward the ceiling and floor. As they moved casually toward the door, he said, "Now, will you tell me a bit more? Are you..."

Roman double thumped before the question was complete. *Nope. No more.* The last thing he wanted was to become FBI exhibit nine. He moved well away from the table and waited silently. The two agents eased out of the room, presumably to check above and below the room for magnets or whatever they thought he was using. He meant to follow, but the doors swung shut on him.

This idea wasn't panning out right anymore. McGregor and the other remaining agent asked a couple more personal questions that he wasn't about to

answer. He tapped out a little jazz rhythm, just for a distraction. McGregor looked more and more like he'd bitten into a lemon.

When the younger agents came back to report no success, McGregor swore loudly. "All right, Special Agent Chu, you're on this. Figure out how that table-thumping is being done. I want a report on my desk tomorrow. The Homeland boys will look at these tapes and want to know why we didn't catch this so-called ghost that can move objects remotely and invisibly. I need some good explanation for them. Do *not* make me have to tell them I believe in fairies, got it?"

The older man looked uncomfortable, but said, "Yessir."

McGregor turned and strode to the door. Roman decided he was failing as the voice of his fellow donor, and really didn't want the FBI to find out anything more about him. Time to leave before he was trapped. He stayed close behind McGregor, through the doors and all the way out to the front lobby.

The front of the clinic was quiet, the nursing stations shut down, all the patients sent home. He had a moment of regret. Hopefully the place would reopen soon for its proper use. Without the illegal surgery in the back.

It wasn't likely that Xavier was still nearby in the car. He'd have been told that Tam had been found, and he would be on his way to her. Driving like a maniac, no doubt. Which was as it should be, of course. There'd have been no sense in Xavier waiting around on the street for Roman to reappear. Still, he decided he would check, before trying to get back through the dark to his body. If he could. Checking for Xavier was a good reason to put off that moment of truth.

He wandered along the sidewalk, and realized to his astonishment that the Excalibra was still parked at the curb in the next block. He hurried over, and paused outside the passenger door. *Now the fuck what?* Although the windows were cleared, Xavier didn't react to him at all, even when he waved wildly. He tried to reach through the window, and was blocked. He tried again, bruised a knuckle. Damn; bulletproof glass was probably standard on a multimillionaire's car. The door, although it didn't seem like metal, was no more willing to let him through. He gritted his teeth in frustration.

Maybe he could manage a thump. His current specialty, like some kind of ape-man. *Ook, ook, beat on something.* He raised his arms, cupped one fist in the other, and brought his hands down hard on the roof. The resilient composite

accepted the blow with the smallest of clicks. He tried again, this time on the hood right in front of where Xavier stared unseeingly out the windshield, drumming his fingers.

The hood rippled slightly, deformed and sprang back under his blow. The thump was very muted. But this time Xavier did turn slightly, and a frown crossed that high smooth forehead.

Yeah, you oblivious mutt, notice me. He slammed the hood again, harder. Xavier straightened, eyes wide, then he reached down and the door of the car swung open. "Roman? Are you there?" Xavier switched on the control of the nook-box laser as Roman dropped into the seat.

The beam hit him in the side and he grunted, welcoming the pain if it would only make him real. Or as real as he got. The seat under him felt mushy. He looked down at his hands, but he could never tell what others could see. He cleared his throat. "Xavier? Can you hear me?" Xavier was looking his way, but not quite meeting his gaze, and he didn't answer.

Roman moved, sliding the beam across his flesh. He hesitated before moving further, aiming it deep in his chest. He didn't think it could actually kill him, and here and now he desperately needed Xavier to see him, and hear him. He imagined the beam penetrating, forming his body, from heart to lungs to shoulders and back, sliding back and forth. It ached, deep in him. He muttered, "Please." As if that was a signal, the beam burned more painfully, until he actually glanced at his shoulder to see if there was smoke.

When he looked back up, Xavier met his eyes, reaching out in an aborted gesture. "There you are. God, Roman, I'm glad to see you."

"Not half as glad as I am to be seen. And heard. Holy crap, that was... annoying."

"Annoying?"

"I'll tell you about it. On the way. Do you know where Tam was taken?"

"Yeah. The local hospital." Xavier shut the door, smoked the windows, and pulled out onto the street. "Seven minutes. Talk fast."

Explaining took five of those minutes.

Xavier said, "I'm glad that Tam knew you were there. So she felt less alone."

"I hope so."

"I can't believe you played table-rapping with the FBI."

He'd had time to think about that, as he described it. "I'm hoping McGregor finds it embarrassing enough to bury the evidence and keep the others from talking."

"Why?"

"Think about it. What if the government finds out they have a citizen who can move around through walls, invisible, listening and seeing everything, and then can come back and report what he saw?"

"Oh." Xavier finally looked as uneasy as Roman felt. "That might seem awfully useful, huh?"

"Right. And what are the odds that their first thought will be to help me get back into my body and walk away as a normal human?"

"That's my priority, you know." Xavier gave him a quick, tight smile. "Other than the *away* part."

"Yeah. I know." He did. It was a deep warmth on a day suddenly turned cold and nerve-wracking. He folded his shaking hands together in his lap. "I should have resisted doing anything. But they were going to just throw her away."

"You don't actually *know* her, do you?"

"Only that she's me; she's who I would have been, if the unknown guy who matches my DNA happened to be the sicker one first."

Xavier said, "At least that's not likely to happen now, right? They'll find your body and the little kid, and whoever is running the show won't be able to use you."

"Right." He was not going to think about all the ways things could still turn out wrong. Not now. "Hospital is coming up; I should go invisible again."

"Can't you just, I don't know, think about clothes? If how you look is just your imagination of you, an image of your mind, is there a reason you have to run around naked? Not that I'm complaining."

"I've tried that." He sighed. There was some appeal to not wandering invisible and naked around another hospital. "I don't know. Maybe you can go see Tam, and I can sit in here and work on it some more?"

Xavier pulled into the visitor parking area. "Don't you want to come in?"

Roman felt tired, an odd reluctance to move hitting him. "Not now. Too many people there I might bump into. Or bump through. Give Tam my best though. I'll try to wait here."

Xavier turned off the engine, and hovered, his hand on the door switch. "You'd better."

Roman just said, "Go find your sister. If you can, suggest that the donor woman would rather not have died in vain. And if she's not as brain dead as the doctor insisted, maybe your money could pay for her to get her own damned kidneys back?"

"I'll do my best," Xavier promised.

Roman watched him walk away from his seclusion behind the one-way glass. "Yeah, you usually do." He leaned his head back. He should think about clothes. If he ever had to do this in front of strangers, it would lower the embarrassment factor by eleven. But he was wrung out, and the dark car was safe and warm. He let his eyes drift closed. Just for a moment.

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Chapter 10

Xavier was pissed. Furious, even. He admitted, somewhere in the back of his mind, that part of it was fear.

The various medical people associated with the case hadn't made time to speak with him yet, other than to assure him that Tam had received only a standard pre-transplant prep, and would recover just fine. He hadn't seen Tam yet either; she was probably still busy giving statements, and maybe looking at mug shots. He knew where her priorities would be, and they would not include mushy sentimental reassurances.

Which meant basically no one was talking to him. He paced the hospital waiting room, letting his search bots roam the interwebs to see if there were any mentions of the case online yet. A man walked past in the rather obvious dark suit of a Feeb. Xavier managed not to grab at him—Tam had broken him of any impulse to unexpectedly manhandle someone with self-defense training. But he did plant himself in the man's path, and blocked him again when he tried to go around.

The man reached for his pocket, and pulled out a badge folder. "FBI, sir. Please get out of the way."

"Not yet. I want to know what's happening. I want to talk to..." *Who had Roman mentioned?* "Special Agent McGregor."

The man's eyes narrowed. "How do you know the SAC?"

"I haven't met him directly but I've been working closely with Special Agent Colridge, who I believe is his superior." It was only a guess, but Colridge worked out of an office in Washington, while McGregor was boots-on-the-ground.

From the wariness of the agent's expression, Colridge's name was worth something. The agent said, "I have an assignment right now, but I'll mention to Special Agent McGregor that you're looking for him."

"I'll be right here," Xavier said, with an arrogance he'd learned to adopt back when he started meeting with investors. "If I don't hear within the hour I'll be calling Colridge directly for an explanation. Special Agent..." He reached out and steadied the man's badge for a closer look, noting the little

twitch that suggested the man was wishing he'd kept it in his pocket. "Brinkowski. Thank you, Special Agent Brinkowski."

Brinkowski inclined his head in a minimal nod and then hurried on down the hall. Xavier sighed. He hated acting like some entitled rich guy, but he hated waiting in ignorance more.

His cell-com told him new search results had popped, but when he asked for a scroll, they were all about a drug raid on the clinic, couched in the vaguest of terms. The FBI clearly wasn't leaking information yet. He didn't ask for report details; no point in getting a fetch just to hear ten minutes of ignorant locals bemoaning the crime in their neighborhood.

He'd begun to wonder if he'd have to call Colridge after all, and whether he'd even get past the man's secretary, when the elevator doors opened and a man who was clearly FBI strode out. He was also clearly irritated and impatient. Xavier resisted the temptation to just let his questions slide. He straightened his shoulders. Roman was counting on him, and time might be critical.

The man stopped in front of him and said, "Special Agent in Charge McGregor. You would be Xavier Faulkner?" He didn't extend a hand.

"Yes." Xavier returned his own best cool look. "I appreciate you coming to tell me how my sister is doing, and whether there's any chance to retrieve my five mil down payment for this sting." That was a really clumsy reminder of his place in the case, but he didn't let his wince show.

McGregor glowered. "This is hardly the place to discuss it. If you'll follow me." He turned and strode off without waiting.

Xavier didn't want to play that little one-upmanship game, but he really wanted information. He paused to tuck his coffee cup into the recycler before following at a more leisurely pace. He caught up with McGregor at the elevator.

"I don't have time for this," McGregor said. "And you haven't given your own statement yet."

"Two birds with one stone," Xavier suggested mildly. "You answer my questions, then send someone in and I'll do the full statement now."

"All right." McGregor waited until the elevator doors closed, then said, "The doctors assure me your sister was not injured during her abduction."

“That’s a relief.”

“You should have requested more coverage for her security if you were going to let her wander around town alone.”

“I don’t *let* Officer Faulkner do anything.”

From McGregor’s involuntary little grunt, Xavier assumed he’d met Tam.

McGregor led the way to a small conference room. Once inside he held up his hand, moved to the table, and hit a switch. The feedback whine in Xavier’s cell-com made him jump. He reached up fast to switch the device off.

“Sorry.” Despite the word, McGregor’s smile held no apology whatsoever. “Standard jamming.”

Xavier ignored that, and just said, “Fill me in on the case.”

“You’re not in the need-to-know. Sorry.”

“How about I ask some questions and you give me what answers you can?”

“I have three minutes.”

“I’ll make it fast.”

“The doctors will be able to tell you far more about your sister’s condition.”

“Then I won’t ask you about Tam.”

McGregor sighed. “You can ask.”

Xavier figured he might get two or three answers before McGregor cut him off. *What was most urgent?* “Any leads on where other donors might be housed?”

“We don’t know there are other donors.”

Yes, we do. But he couldn’t say so. “That woman. Is she in fact brain dead? Tam was really upset about the possibility they were using healthy donors.” He added, truthfully, “So am I.”

McGregor hesitated, then said, “Yes. Flatline neural scan. We even had her transported to the local transplant group here at Unity, to have them do an official confirmation process. The docs say she has no cortical activity. Fully legal donor, medically anyway.”

“Tam will be relieved.” His stomach twisted for what that might mean to Roman though. “Do you think that was, um, a natural condition?” *Was she murdered?*

"I can't comment on active details of the investigation."

"Right." He fumbled for what else he might ask. "Are any of the suspects talking about the bigger picture? There have to be dozens of, um, perpetrators who weren't in the facility when you got there. Down to the ambulance drivers." *Who would know where Roman was?*

"I can't comment on active details of the investigation."

"Fuck!"

He surprised both of them by the force of that curse. McGregor said cautiously, "If it's the money you're concerned with..."

"Hell, no." Xavier couldn't help pacing, two steps down the table, two steps back. "There might be people out there, waiting somewhere to be harvested like fucking beef cows. Or others targeted and about to be grabbed. You can't tell me that it was purely coincidence that they happened to have a brain dead donor who's a perfect match to Tam. There must be others."

"I can't comment on active details of the investigation. But." McGregor stopped, glanced at the floor, then up to meet Xavier's eyes. "The small players know nothing. The bigger ones are lawyered-up and not talking. We confiscated a lot of records. We're beginning to search them."

Xavier figured asking if they'd found anything would just get him another round of *no comment*. "I specialize in security systems, you know. Perhaps I could help."

"We have very good people. Thank you." McGregor turned to the door. "I'll send an agent to take your full statement."

Xavier said urgently, "If you find where other donors might be, you'll rescue them?"

"Of course. And have the docs check them out ASAP. *If* we find any." McGregor waved his hand over the lock panel. "I'll send you Special Agent Ngosi. Ask for identification."

Ngosi turned out to be a silent woman who was impossible to draw into any kind of conversation. Xavier had ten minutes to think, before she appeared, and the story he told her was truthful in every way it could be while not mentioning Roman. He refused to give her any links to his "anonymous informant" and speculated that it was someone distressed by being part of the whole scheme.

He claimed to have never spoken to them in person, which was true enough if you considered Roman's person to be off in a hospital bed somewhere.

"And yet you believed them? Enough to pass the information along to us as highly likely?"

"They knew some details no one could fake," he said. "The placement of the eavesdropping lasers, for instance."

Ngosi nodded. "We'd like you to leave those in place. We'll continue to watch them for a while."

"They're pretty cheap." He'd bought one, and even with modern refinements, they were well below cutting edge prices. "I expect they'll be abandoned."

"Probably. Nonetheless. We will also be doing surveillance of your home and both you and Officer Faulkner for some time."

"You think someone might come after us?"

"Potentially. Officer Faulkner is a witness against several of the people we have in custody. They should have kept her fully sedated, but I imagine they thought she was in favor of the surgery."

"That was the plan."

"Well, she's recorded all her statements and IDs. She should be safe. But just in case, there will be some monitoring devices we recommend you both carry anytime you leave the house. And keep your home security on full alert."

He'd hoped to have workmen coming in this week, but she was right. Precautions might be good for a while. The house was over two hundred years old. It wasn't going anywhere.

"We will also need copies of all the communications from your informant, and any clues you have as to their identity."

"What part of 'No' didn't you understand?"

"This is not optional, sir. If necessary, we'll get a subpoena."

"I promised anonymity. Like when someone talks to a journalist."

"You're not a journalist. We can promise them immunity if they testify. This case will be tough enough. We need all the witnesses we can get."

"I thought you caught them red-handed."

“The medical staff, yes. We waited until they were in contact with the victim. But the case is much bigger than that.”

“How much bigger?”

“I can’t comment on active details of the investigation.”

“But you want me to give up someone I promised to protect?”

“They’ll have protection.”

“Like Tam did?” That wasn’t fair, of course, but he was still raw over how easily she’d been taken.

“Situations change. We will offer protection.”

“When they provide some information? Or only if they agree to testify against the organ-leggers in court? How short of info are you?”

“I can’t comment on active details of the investigation.”

By the time he’d finished up, failed to pump Ngosi for anything useful, and found Tam’s room, it was getting on toward evening. The agent outside her room let him in. There was an antechamber with isolation suits and directions, and he pulled one on. When he reached her bedside, she was sleeping.

He considered letting her rest, but when the door clicked shut, she woke immediately, her expression haunted and her hand scrabbling futilely at her side. A second later, she sat up, straightened her shoulders and managed a grin. “Fucktards won’t let me keep my weapon handy.”

“You have a guy outside your door.”

“You know how I feel about delegating. Especially to a man.”

“Reverse sexism. You’ll have to do sensitivity training again.”

“If I get any more sensitive, I’ll start putting my hair in pigtails.” She eyed him. “How are... things?”

He said in the same tone, “Things are... unchanged.”

“Hmph.” They looked at each other.

“I’m glad you’re okay.”

She held out her arms for him. It was so atypical of her; it hurt to think this had scared her enough to make her get huggy. But when he carefully put a knee

on the bed and wrapped his arms around her, the steri-suit crinkling between them, she breathed close to his ear, "I told my tale Roman-free. You?"

He whispered, "Me too."

She clung another minute before she let go and pushed him away. Maybe the hug hadn't all been for show. She waved him off. "Go home. Have a shower. You stink. They should be letting me out, but apparently not tonight. Some snafu. Come by in the morning. Do good work." She gave him a meaningful nod.

"I'll try." He wished he had any plausible ideas. "See you tomorrow."

When he reached the car, the glass was mirror-dark from the outside, the way he'd left it. Still, something warned him, even before he opened his door, that the passenger seat was empty. The range-finder still shone its little red light on the back of the seat at shoulder height. The battery hadn't died. He carefully explored the interior with his hands, inch by inch. Nowhere did he encounter the odd yielding sensation of Roman's presence. The man was gone.

He sat in the driver's seat for a long time, with the other door open, in case Roman had gone for a stroll, or in search of information. Somewhere, anywhere he might come back from.

But eventually night fell, and he decided that waiting was dumb. If Roman really needed an ally here, Tam was up in her hospital room. He could probably go find her and nudge her again. More likely he'd fallen out of the beam, on purpose or by accident, and been sent back to his bed and body. In which case, the most likely place he'd show up, would be back at Silverlee.

Xavier drove at legal speeds all the way there, keeping his attention on the dark countryside and the road. When the shape of the house came into view, with its gables and turret and the surrounding trees, it resonated through him, easing his tension. It felt like home. Despite all the impersonal reasons he'd picked it, this house had become more than just a convenient project.

He turned in the drive, coded through the alarm system, and pulled into the garage. He left the Excalibra with a pat to her hood, remembering how the glossy surface had shivered and flexed under an invisible hand. So strange to see, and even more strange to have his heart leap at the sight. He let himself out the back door of the garage, away from the house.

In the garden, he detoured to make sure his own eavesdrop-laser was active, and aimed correctly at the kitchen window. He'd placed it safely inside his

security perimeter. Roman had called it his candle in the window. Xavier adjusted the little solar-cell panel to where it would catch the morning sun, and confirmed a nearly full battery for the night. He would never let this candle go out.

The house felt quiet without Tam or Roman there. He did a full tour, just in case, but there was no sound from the shadows, no blue lights, and no sign of Roman's tall, lanky body in any of the rooms. He ended back in the kitchen. He knew he should eat, and sleep. But as the hours of the evening wore on, he sat in his chair, listening to music on his com, and staring at the darkness outside the window.

Transitions were getting easier. Or at least more familiar. Roman knew at once where he was, how solid, how mobile. The answers being *in bed*, *very solid*, and *not moving one fucking inch*.

The room around his unconscious body was deathly quiet. At first, he blamed that on the fact that his roomie was gone, poor woman. Although she'd been quiet, a sleeping person still has a presence. But as he listened, something else felt oddly off-kilter. He realized that in the past there'd always been that subliminal hum, of lights or ventilation or electric devices. He didn't hear anything now.

He was tired. He'd dozed a little in the car, in an odd half-napping state that hadn't really become sleep. More of a fugue, until he'd gotten up the nerve to slide out of the laser's beam. He thought maybe here he would sleep at last, just for a little while. He felt like he'd been awake for weeks, with exhaustion that was bone deep, and yet now it didn't feel safe to drop off. That silence was fucking with his nerves.

He took a breath and clenched his jaw, just to confirm that he could. It wasn't a big success. Maybe a muscle twitched, but maybe not, in the inert lump of his body. He gasped, heart pounding, chest tight, wondering if he was dead and a ghost in his own decaying form. Until through the rush of his pulse, he heard the soft rustle of the pillow under his cheek, as his harsh breathing stirred it. Not dead. *Still not dead*.

He should get up and explore again. Really that should have been his first thought. He wasn't sure why deep fatigue was dragging him down, but he needed to get off his ass and do something. Tam was safe. The donor woman,

well, she couldn't be helped any more. But his body was still here, hidden in this unknown place, and somewhere there was another room with a child. This wasn't over yet.

Getting up was easier said than done. The sense of urgency nagged him, making him try again and again. And then one more time, doing everything he could to find his alpha state, until finally he lifted his hand, and felt the strange dissociation of movement and flesh. He sat up out of his body and looked around.

The first thing that struck him was how dim the room was. He didn't have a lot of trustworthy memories of his time here—maybe this was how they always kept it at night—but the only illumination was the Exit sign above the door, shedding a soft red glow.

He realized that even the monitoring panels above his bed were off, the little screens and indicator lights all dark. Power failure.

He stood up. This might be a chance to learn something. People reacted badly to a loss of power, shouting into cell-coms and bitching to each other about the links they'd lost. They wrote stuff on actual paper, and when systems came back on they might have to reenter user names and passwords.

He walked through the door into the hallway. It was silent here too. No one was checking on the patients, despite the loss of monitors. Lazy bastards. The door across the hall matched the one to his room. He stepped through carefully. The space beyond was just as dim, and stale, but not as quiet. There was a little whirring thump here, of some device that still had power.

The room was the mirror image of the one he'd been in. Four beds, two of them smaller, child-sized. He really hated the implications of that. In one bed, the little girl slept quietly. She had a double fluid line hooked to ports in the crook of her left elbow. The attached pump was making the rhythmic sound, clearly running on battery, pushing clear liquid down one line and cloudy down the other, a drop at a time.

He bent over the child. She was probably around two or three. Children weren't his strong suit. Small enough that her organs would be tiny, suitable for some other child. *Who would do this to a kid, to save their own kid?* Or did they just pretend not to know and accept a "miracle"?

He shouted at her, touched her arm, passed his hand through her wrist. Nothing changed. Not a twitch of her face, not a flicker of eyelids. She slept on.

He brushed a finger over her lips, her throat, hesitated with his hand over her chest. He could try merging himself more deeply with her, in the hope it might wake her or communicate somehow, but he wasn't sure it was worth the risk of being jolted into the dark.

Leaving her in her little cot, he hurried out, down the hall, and leaped up and through the window of the double doors. He had that motion down now, perhaps aided by a flash of fear. He barely brushed the metal lip as he dove through. He hit the floor, ignoring how odd it felt, rolled and picked himself up.

The nurse's station beyond was dark, and deserted. What was worse, every portable was gone. The wall screens were cracked, as if someone had swung a chair through them. The monitoring desk held a faint whiff of fried electronics. No one was coming back to that.

He ran. The unfamiliar doors turned out to be a breakroom kitchen, with silent, powerless appliances, a couple of bathrooms, dark and echoing, and a storeroom. He glanced at the boxes in the glow of the safety light. They seemed to be nursing supplies. Diapers. Canned complete diet. No address labels.

He hurried back through the door to reach the elevators. There was no hum of power, no light on the control. He waved his hand in front of it uselessly, frustrated. It probably wasn't working. Almost certainly it wasn't. But he'd never know, because the motion and heat sensor system couldn't see him, and he had no code for the panel. He slammed his fist on the doors. They shivered under the blow and hurt his hand enough to know they weren't going to let him through. Not that he wanted to fall down an elevator shaft.

Of course, he didn't have to fall. He'd figured out how to rise up into the tree. That could work again here, if he could get inside the shaft and then convince himself to fly.

He realized the doors weren't his only option. Time to use his own unreality as a tool. Walls, ceilings, ventilation shafts, there must be somewhere he could get through. He imagined himself getting lighter. Floating upward. Touching the ceiling... Unfortunately, the ceiling remained an unhelpful three feet above his head.

He was fighting his own stupid brain. Talk about unarmed opponents. He settled himself, and began trying to walk through walls.

It didn't work, or not well. He got into the walls in places, but he couldn't seem to get through. At times, he thought he was in some kind of space, but it

was dark and never went anywhere. His head hurt. His shoulders hurt. His damned stupid chest hurt.

He tried to get into the elevator shaft through the side wall, and made even less headway. Maybe the shaft was metal-lined. Who knew? If he'd realized he was going to be trapped inside some mad scientist's lab he'd have spent his GI dollars studying architecture instead of botany.

His time sense got totally screwed. There was a time and date clock on the kid's fluid pump and he found himself compulsively going there to check it and check her. He named the little girl Lola. He'd had a cat named Lola, for a while.

He'd named an unconscious kid for his cat. He was officially crazy.

When his tour of the facility brought him to his own room, he slid back into his body for a moment to rest and fell asleep. He woke, startled, sure days had passed. Panicked, guilty, he struggled his way back to alpha. But when he ran to Lola's room, sure she would be dead, it had been less than an hour. He began his search over.

Once, he thought he'd spent an hour trying to find a ventilation shaft. There had to be one, surely. The clock said five hours had passed. He sat on the floor, right by Lola's cot, and hyperventilated for a while. Then he wondered if his body was doing the same, and if so, whether he was using up the last fresh air down here. Would they run out of oxygen first, or die of dehydration, or starve?

He went to check on himself. He stood over his body and watched himself breathe. His body was on its side, cheek turned down against the pillow and one arm under him. He wondered if he wasn't rotated whether the circulation to that arm would cut out, and he'd start to rot. He had another little panic attack right there. But forgot to check whether his body was breathing equally fast until he'd calmed down. At which point, he couldn't tell.

He was going crazy.

He *was* crazy.

There was nothing he could find in the whole place to say where he was. No paperwork with a convenient address on it, no packing slips on the supplies in storage, no service stickers on the machinery. No windows. No doors. No doors that worked, anyway.

Lola soiled her diaper, but he had no way to change it. He ignored the odor and sat with her, whenever he could.

Eventually, after hours and hours of futility, he lay back on his bed, closed his eyes, and tried to find the dark.

He drifted, exhausted, and thought he was sleeping. He dreamed he saw Xavier. He ran toward him, and Xavier turned and smiled. Their hands met. Xavier said, "I've been waiting," and his fingers were warm and strong, and his mouth was soft. Then he faded in the dark grey nothingness. And Roman was left to wander.

Time passed. Nothing happened. Until finally, off in the distance, he saw a light. It was blue, focused, with just a hint of green in the edges. Short, fixed, and arrow true. His way home.

He fell gasping on the kitchen floor.

Xavier shot up out of an armchair he'd clearly brought to the kitchen to wait in. "Roman! Are you all right?" He dropped to his knees beside Roman on the floor, reaching toward him.

Roman moved his head just enough for Xavier's hand to brush through his cheek. The odd dragging caress was an anchor, something he could hold onto. He did it again, rubbing like a cat. Xavier very slowly brought his other hand to cradle Roman's head, carefully hovering, the pressure just enough for them to both feel it. Roman knew his cheeks were wet, but he hoped Xavier couldn't tell.

"Hush," Xavier said softly. "Hush. It's all right."

"I can't get out." He met Xavier's eyes, trying to keep it together. "I can't. I can't get out."

Xavier put a finger against, *into*, his lips and jerked it back. "Talk downstairs?"

He shook his head. "Only one Doppler beam now. One light, bringing me home." He was too tired to move.

"You think they're not...?" Xavier cupped a hand behind his ear in pantomime of listening.

"Not like before." It didn't mean they didn't have other methods. Maybe they'd hear him, and send someone back to finish him off. He was crazy enough to prefer that idea to slowly dying, wasting away down there in the dark, wherever there was.

“OK. I already scanned the house for regular bugs when I got home so... Tell me?”

He was going to lay it out, logically, but when he tried, what he said was, “What do you think will happen when my body dies?”

Xavier took a breath. “Soon?”

“I don’t know. Will I go on like this as a ghost, do you think? Or the other way, astral walking, invisible, getting attention by banging on things? Or will it be over?”

“Hush,” Xavier said again, lowering his hands to brush Roman’s bare shoulders. “Explain it to me.”

“I don’t know where my body is, and they’ve all gone. The attendants. The place is shut down.”

“They didn’t... kill you?”

“No. I don’t know why, but they seem to have just done an emergency evacuation. And left us lying there on the beds, alone.”

“Us? That kid?”

“Yeah.”

“Anyone else?”

“No. Just the two of us. But I can’t get out of the facility to look around. Every time I try, I hit some kind of barrier. And there’s nothing inside there to say where it is. Seven rooms, two halls, no windows, no way out.”

“No address? Maybe on a tag or...”

“Don’t you think I looked?” He jerked away from Xavier and stood. “I’ve searched. How long has it been?”

“Twenty-eight hours. And some minutes.”

“So, that long. Looking and searching and trying to get through wallboard and rock and metal and whatever other shit I can share space with and not, not...” He ran out of steam.

Xavier didn’t say anything, just looked worriedly up at him.

“Damn. Sorry. I know you’re trying to help.” He sat on the floor again, but far enough away not to touch. Or merge or whatever it was they did when flesh brushed crudsucking ectoplasm.

“Okay. Let’s think.” Xavier didn’t get up either, just pulled up his legs, wrapped his arms around his knees, and tilted his head, frowning in concentration.

Roman thought Xavier looked like the nerd kids he’d crushed on, back in his teens when he was busy being a bad, bad boy. “You think. I’m thinked out.”

“I wonder how long we have, realistically. Before you, um.”

“Die?”

“Yeah.”

Wasn’t like he hadn’t faced that before. He’d been a soldier, for fuck’s sake. He tried to be objective. “I don’t think oxygen will be the problem. Or CO2 buildup. There are six rooms, a couple of them big, and two hallways. And our bodies are resting. So... I don’t know but a week or so, even if it’s sealed up tight?”

Xavier tapped his earpiece, muttered and calculated. “Depends on the room size but yeah, this says maybe a week. Could be less if there’s really no air circulation though. The carbon dioxide will tend to build up around you, right where you’re lying.”

“Well, isn’t that peachy?”

“Dehydration...” Xavier subvocalized a query to his com. “Well, three to nine days, depending.”

“Nice wide margin. At least there’s no point watching the clock.”

“Is that supposed to be a joke?”

“Can’t take it, rich boy?”

“Don’t. Please don’t.”

“What?”

“Pretend it doesn’t matter.”

Roman laughed. “Didn’t you see me having a breakdown on your floor? Of course, it matters. I just don’t know what to do about it.”

“We’ll figure it out. I swear.”

Roman looked around. “Where’s Tam? Not still in the hospital?”

“Well, yeah, in a way. A news group *somehow* got hold of the human-interest story about the donor, dying for no reason. And Transplant Management got into the act. Anyway, short version is they approved the woman as an official donor of all functioning organs, six lives saved for one lost. And since Tam was prepped for transplant, all that heavy-duty immune suppression was a new risk factor, and moved her up the priority list. Ironical, right? They didn't find good matches ahead of her, she was a perfect match and right there; she got one of the kidneys. She's been out of surgery for... four hours now.”

“Why aren't you with her?”

“She's doing well, just sleeping. I get hourly reports from the private nurse I hired. But there's no one else I trusted with... I needed to be here.”

For me. He had to swallow before saying, “I appreciate it.”

“So Tam will be fine, but she's not going to be much practical help for a while.” Xavier sat up straighter. “We just have to figure this out. We have days, right? We can do this. Tell me about the place, every detail.” He reached across the table for his bigger tablet. “Size, shape, everything you saw or remember. Go.”

Roman tried not to feel that little flash of hope, but it came anyway. He'd never liked depending on anyone else for help, but if he was going to trust in someone, then bookish, quiet, determined Xavier would be at the top of his list.

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Chapter 11

Xavier rubbed his eyes, and glanced at Roman, who still sat cross-legged on the floor. Or slightly into it, which might explain how four hours hadn't made him as stiff as a board. The sheer window curtains Xavier had pulled closed hadn't eliminated the faint blue nimbus of the laser around him, although he'd turned on one range-finder first, pinning Roman's shoulder for safety. The dot on that tanned skin had a purple tone, in the combined light.

The mix of real and unreal made him dizzy. Or maybe it was sitting with Roman that was doing that, diverting blood from his brain. Xavier stood, stretched painfully, and moved back to his armchair, dragging it closer to Roman's spot on the floor.

He tapped his com for more details, and said, "So, most likely it's an underground bomb shelter, with the Greenberg design. Modified a bit, but it's a damned close fit." He reviewed his notes. "Somewhere about half an hour away from Unity Hospital. That gives us a circle radius of no more than fifty miles, even if it was all done at top tollway speeds. With a nod to the northwest, since that's the Unity side of the transplant clinic."

Roman's voice was slow and dragging. "Why do you think they drove through the hospital, before the clinic?"

"Camouflage." The FBI wasn't telling him much, but he'd figured that out. "The FBI can probably do a sat-trace on the ambulance, working back from the clinic, looking at the satellite views. Several identical ambulances pulling in and out of the garage at a major hospital would confuse the issue pretty well, especially if they changed the plates and transponder while they were in there."

"Oh. Right."

Xavier sighed. "You're still sure you don't want to come out to the FBI now?"

Roman hesitated, but when he spoke his voice was steady. "I think I'd rather actually die than wander around half-real for the government for the rest of my life."

"You think that's what would happen? That they'd keep you... like this?"

"CIA? NSA? Even the FBI's first thought was that I might be a useful technology. They aren't going to have my best interests at heart."

“True.”

“Not to mention what might happen to you guys if I’m secret weapon number twenty-six, and you and Tam are the two civilians who know about me. Think about how many people the alphabet agencies have fucked over on a need-to-know basis.”

After the last thirty years, that was undeniable, no matter how many laws were on the books. “Hm. All right.” If Roman was ever passed out, fading, clearly dying, Xavier wasn’t sure he could resist asking for any help he could get, but he would think hard and long about it until then. “What about sending an anonymous tip? Would you trust me to do that? I’ll attach enough detail to make them take notice. They can do the brute-force checking of all the listed Greenberg shelters. If they find your body, they’ll have no reason to suspect what you can do outside of it.”

He saw hope and fear battle in Roman’s expression. “Can you make it really anonymous?”

“Trust me.”

“I do. OK, do that.”

He’d prepped the message already, waiting for some of his searches to run. He sent it winging on its way, routed through enough proxy servers and repeaters to disguise the origin. And then he was stuck, unable to think of anything else to do.

Roman closed his eyes. “So. Now what?”

“Maybe one of the people they arrested will tell them something. Maybe they’ll find the information in the database from the clinic. Maybe...” He ran out of words.

“Or maybe not. Either way, we have at least a couple more days. Or whatever part of them you choose to spend sitting around talking to a ghost.”

“Dammit.” He leaned forward. This not touching thing was *fracked!* If anyone needed to be held, it was Roman. And he needed that too. But not the sinking of his hand into Roman’s skin, that constant reminder that they were passing each other on opposite sides of some mirror reality. He clenched his fingers together. “My sister had surgery, and I’m here. What does that say about where I want to spend the next... whatever time we have?”

“That you’re crazy?” But Roman looked a little less bleak.

“Talk to me.” He tried to ease back in his chair. “My mind works best sometimes when I just let stuff happen subconsciously. I did some of my best security work that way, going off to ride my bike and letting the problem run in the background.”

“Yeah, me too. There was this one time.” Roman paused.

“Yeah?”

“In the desert. Back in '22. I was just a corporal then.” Roman’s voice became rougher, less urbane. “Just a regular grunt. Me and three other guys were pinned down by this group of rebels up on a mountainside. They’d ambushed a DRTH, a dry/rough terrain hover, and unmounted the front gun from it to turn on us. Had us out-gunned, out-ranged for sure. We were hoping for some back-up but they were busy. So we hunkered down for hours. I kind of fell asleep. Woke up with the answer.”

When he stopped there, Xavier said, “What was it?”

“Oh. Nope.” Roman’s face looked shadowed. “Never mind. Just that it worked. I got a commendation, and extra respect for the nasty brilliance of the subconscious mind.”

“Well, I hope mine can be brilliant too.” It took an effort, but he didn’t push for more details, no matter how curious he was. “So, you’ve been a soldier, and a professor. What else have you chosen to do with your time?”

“I was drafted, so soldier wasn’t a choice.” Roman shrugged. “I was a thief.”

“*Seriously?*”

“In my teens. Gasoline, mostly, after the big price hike and the start of distribution controls. All those old cars with the unlocked caps back then. I was a ninja with a siphon and no good choices.”

“So being drafted maybe wasn’t all bad?” He tried to imagine Roman sneaking around stealing gas for the black market. It made even less sense than Roman the soldier.

“Nope. I hated the army, but it got me off the street, like it did a lot of the guys. Got me into college, after, and I found I liked that. Never liked school before, but after nearly dying—repeatedly—it was... restful.”

Xavier wouldn’t have called college restful, but clearly it was a matter of perspective. “Then what?”

"I always liked plants, so I took some botany. Plants were my grandma's thing. She taught me more than either of us realized, I guess. Eventually restful became boring. One of my profs wanted grunt labor for a specimen collecting trip into the Thar desert, and of all the applicants I had the frontline sandbox experience. It got a bit hairy, which was... a change from the books. We found one new thornbush with an interesting water-binding chemical. That was really rewarding. I was hooked."

"Have you traveled a lot?"

"Some, yeah. South America, mostly. You?"

"Not really. Spent a lot of time behind a screen or on VR goggles, working or playing." That was kind of pathetic, wasn't it? He could have afforded to see the real world. "Virtual reality isn't the same as going somewhere."

"Not even close. There are places..." Roman sighed, but it wasn't a sad sound. "There's this little river in Brazil. At least, I hope it's still there, if clear-cutting for palm plantations hasn't hit it yet. It runs underground, then bubbles up, makes these little pools, drops down again. There are frogs there still, quite a few species. The air has a moist, heavy thickness that's *alive*, and as dusk falls all the frogs start croaking, in a hundred different voices. For a minute, it's like being back in some primordial swamp, before we started screwing with the planet. Just you, and all this lushness and noisy, vigorous *life*."

"You can't VR that," Xavier said softly.

"Nope." Roman glanced up at him. "If I get out of this, maybe I can show you. The permits are hard to come by, but between my name and your money, maybe."

"I'd like that."

It hung between them—possibilities, a future, shadowed by fear. They could be something together, he was sure, if they only got the chance. Xavier had never felt this connection with another guy, this desire to spend time together not just in bed but everywhere else, to learn a man's quirks, passions, interests, abilities... and to reveal his own. His heart sped up. The sudden mix of need and terror caught his breath.

Roman's voice was rough too when he said, "This is where, if I was real, I'd kiss the crap out of you."

"Unless I got to you first." Suddenly his body wanted in on the act. "On my knees."

"Ah, hell." Roman held his hands over his groin, which did nothing to disguise his reaction to the words. The faint blue light around him shone on sleek muscles gone tense and aroused. "Fuck. No fair talking like that when I'm naked and can't touch you."

Xavier shifted around in his chair, his own erection making sitting still difficult. He forced a laugh. "Yeah. Major blue balls for both of us." He pressed a hand on his jeans.

Roman's eyes darkened. "You know that's not helping, right?"

"Neither was walking around waving that ass in my face."

"I don't wave my ass. If it's in your face, it's 'cause you're staring."

"Maybe I am." He rubbed himself a bit harder. So stupid, when this couldn't go anywhere.

"Keep doing that," Roman said.

"What?"

"Jerk yourself. I want to see."

"Here? Now?" He glanced around the room, and at the thinly curtained window.

"You're not expecting anyone, right? I like this room. It feels like home. And if I... Whatever happens, yeah, I want to see you lose it one fucking time."

Xavier licked his dry lips, pressing his eager dick hard enough to hurt, to keep control. "I wish..."

"Don't. Let's just take what we can. All right? Just this once, do whatever we can. I want to hear you grunt and cuss and come."

"Fuck." He stared at Roman, at his eyes, burningly focused on him, at the rise of his cock, too big to be hidden by his hands. "You too, then."

"Um."

"You can touch yourself, right? So if I do this, then I want to see you too. Don't tell me you don't want to." He deliberately stared at Roman's dick, where a flicker of reflected shine showed that at least part of his body was definitely onboard.

"Jerking off together." Roman's tone was dismissive, but his hands shifted from hiding to cupping himself. He laughed, and the sound was softer, less

scornful. "That's how I figured out I was gay, you know. Joe Chu, and a couple other buddies, sitting around this hideout we had." Slowly, leisurely, he slid his hand up his naked shaft, and down, and up. Xavier watched, half-hypnotized by the slower rougher tone of Roman's voice, and the rhythmic glide of his hand over that rigid length. Again. Slow slide.

"You're falling behind," Roman said. He shifted up onto his knees, legs spread to brace himself, cock standing up to his hand.

"Hell." Xavier muttered a couple of commands in the com, to set the perimeter alarm up a notch. Then he reached for his jeans button, hesitated only a second, and undid it.

"Mm," Roman murmured, "Finally. The closest to naked I've seen you was under a sheet. It's been damned unfair so far. I want to see all of you for once."

"I'm not as ripped as you." He undressed quickly, dropping his clothes behind the chair.

"Nice and sleek, though. What I like." Roman's voice dropped even lower. "You're exactly what I like."

Xavier stopped when he was naked, and they looked at each other. Roman was right. It was like some last barrier had been breached. Before, Roman being naked had been this constant reminder of how fracked-up everything was, but now they were two naked guys, about to get off together.

He sat in his chair, scooting forward and letting his thighs fall open to expose himself. He loved the way Roman's gaze was fixed right *there*. Just the heat of that look made him harder. He ran the flat of his palm over his stomach and down to frame himself in the V of his fingers. "So. Joe Chu?"

"Huh? Who?" Roman's eyes looked glazed. "Oh, yeah. Thirteen and we thought we were hot shit. Breaking every law. We had booze in there, and one of the guys brought this new projection tablet he'd stolen and linked some porn. Straight porn, and he put it up on the wall life-sized. Pretty soon, everyone had their dicks out, and they're all pulling away, staring at the bigger-than-real bouncing tits, and I'm watching Joe Chu's hand on his dick. Gay. Definitely."

"Was it a problem?" Xavier touched himself, lightly, reluctant to start because he didn't want this to ever end. This moment would linger—Roman's slow voice, the strong muscles of his forearm, the shine on his cockhead as it slid through his fist, the catch of his breath. Whatever came next, he would remember this.

“Nah. Maybe the guys were colder for a bit, but Larry’s brother was gay and the meanest fucking bastard in the place. No one mistook gay for soft down there. At most, a couple of the guys would get up in my face for looking at them *that way*. When I never did anything about it, they settled down.”

He wanted to ask where *down there* was, what happened next. They’d talked a lot already, through the long hours of the last few days. But there was so much of Roman he didn’t yet know. Not the time now though. He wrapped his fingers around himself, and grunted at the jolt of sensation.

“Yeah, Xav, do that.” Roman grinned. “I’m way ahead of you. I want to see it.”

“Fuck.” He began stroking himself in earnest, using the slick that was already leaking as he rubbed across the tip.

Roman’s grin got fierce. “Spit in your palm. Make it wet. I want to hear.”

“Uh.” He’d never really done spit. Maybe he was too much of a planner, because he’d always had condoms available and lube ready and prepared, even for this. Never spontaneous and rough and dry anything. He compromised by licking his palm, sloppy and slow. When Roman grunted, he thought, *to hell with it*, and spat too. His next stroke slurped wetly over his cock, and they both moaned.

“Hell, yeah. Like that.” Roman’s hand matched his for a moment, so each stroke rocked them both. Then he sped up and Roman slowed, and their eyes met.

Xavier slid out of the chair to his knees, as close as he could get without touching Roman. They were a foot apart, hands working, chests heaving with rapid breaths, mouths dropping open to take harsher gasps. He shook with wanting, *needing* to take this farther. There was Roman, hot and sweaty and right there, within reach and yet not. He put his free hand between his legs, sitting back on his heels so he could reach under and touch himself in all the ways he really wanted Roman’s strong hands on him.

“Fuck yeah,” Roman said. “Do that. Balls, taint, rub, fuck, touch yourself. Come all the hell over.”

Xavier had never been good with the words, but he whimpered and grunted and let his increasingly desperate strokes do the talking. He ran his gaze over Roman’s body, the braced thighs, flat stomach, hard shaft and fast forceful

hands. Again and again, he looked back to Roman's face. That expression as their eyes met, boiling with the need to do more, have more, feel more, brought him over at last. He gasped, groaned wordlessly, and came, in shuddering, pulsing jets over his hand and leg and the kitchen floor.

Roman muttered, "Holy fuck." He clamped his hand down on himself as if trying to hold back, until his knuckles visibly whitened, but his jaw clenched and his skin flushed red beneath the tan. A thread of cum spurted through his fingers. He loosened his grip, rubbing frantically, his climax visibly taking him over as he came in thick, white ribbons.

One drop of semen hit Xavier's thigh and faded, unfelt. He ran a finger over the spot, but there was nothing left. He reached for Roman's arm, touching him on the wrist where his tendons still stood out sharply, and could barely sense the incongruously soft, faint, yielding presence beneath his fingertips. It wasn't just the aftershocks of coming that made his voice shake as he said, "God, that was hot. I wish. Oh, hell."

They stared at each other, breathing hard. Xavier wondered if his pupils were as blown, if his face was as flushed as Roman's. Probably worse. His whole body twitched. He gritted his teeth and sucked in long hissing breaths.

Roman opened his fingers and looked down at his messy hand. As they watched, the slick, shiny mess faded from his skin, from the floor, everywhere, dulling, vanishing. Roman said, in a voice carefully devoid of feeling, "Well, that makes cleanup easier."

Xavier suddenly wanted to kiss him, more than he ever had. Without stopping to think, he said, "If I could hold you right now, I'd have my arms around you and my tongue in your mouth. And probably be halfway to hard again."

"Yeah. Well. I guess we have to wait for that." Roman looked down at his hands, opening his palms and fingers wide as if to find some remnant of what they'd done. Then he eased back off his heels and sat against the wall, his hands open and limp on his naked knees.

Xavier was suddenly aware of how naked *he* was, in the daytime in a public part of the house. Well, technically public. Still, you never knew. The FBI might come through any time. If the fates were kind, it would be to say they'd found the other donors. He stood, his knees still shaky. "Well since I don't have magic, self-cleaning cum..."

"Don't," Roman said. "Don't joke. Just for now."

"All right. I do want to clean up and get dressed, though."

"Yeah. I wish I could."

Xavier tipped one of the kitchen chairs sideways, and slid it so the seat was in front of Roman, screening his crotch from view. "Is that okay? Better?"

"Yeah. Just don't block the damned laser."

"Crud!" He grabbed for the range-finder, forgotten on the table, steadying its beam on Roman's chest. "Want the second one for safety back-up? Although, my outside laser is staying on. You still look touched with the blue, so that should be enough, right?"

"I don't know. I guess," Roman said. "I'm tired. Just sick of all of this. Except you. Not sick of you, but this crazy, crazy... craziness."

"Better than being dead."

"Unless I am dead. Maybe I died, down there, and I just don't know it."

He managed a light tone, to say, "For a dead man, you come pretty damn hard."

"There is that."

He went to the sink for his own clean up, mopping off and dressing in silence. When he glanced at Roman, he was sitting apparently dozing with his head tipped back. His dark hair merged into the wall. Xavier winced, and said, "What do you think happens if you fall asleep here?"

"I don't know." Roman didn't open his eyes. "I'm tired, but I don't think I'll sleep. You should though. I bet you haven't lately."

"I'm fine. I'll have some coffee." He bustled around the kitchen, getting out some cookies, taking comfort from asking the pot for his favorite caramel-flavored brew, since Tam wasn't there to razz him for it. It was oddly comforting too, to see Roman out of the corner of his eye. Every time, there was a jolt of recognition, as if something inside him said, "*Yeah, he's supposed to be here.*" Until he caught sight again of the blurs around the edges and his cautious side would add, "*But not like that.*"

His cell-com asked if he wanted to take a call from the hospital. It was his hired nurse, reporting that Tam had woken, drunk a little water, and gone back

to sleep. All was well. "Good," he said. "Tell her I'm fine and have a friend staying over. She'll know who I mean."

When he clicked off, Roman was eyeing him. "So if they do find my, um, physical body, you think they'll let you know about it?"

"Of course! Why not?"

"If I'm not able to tell them you're my friend, there's nothing in real life to connect us. No reason you should be an exception to my MedPrivacy rules."

"Crud." Xavier realized he hadn't thought of that. He should have. That kind of paperwork detail was his job. "Sorry."

"Not your fault."

"No. But I mean, I should have thought of it. I could've fixed that before now. If you give me your passwords, I can hack in, get myself listed."

"You can do that?"

"Hell, yeah. Even without the codes, but easier with. Easiest with a retina scan, but I'm betting the camera won't pick yours up. It didn't before."

"You're a man of many talents. Let's try."

It gave them something concrete to do, and by the time Xavier had hacked a few databases and put himself into Roman's records, he felt his usual optimism rising. They chatted as he worked, about searches and what the FBI might be doing, and how fast they would notify next of kin if they found something. Roman was one hell of a cynic. Xavier had to believe this would work out.

As they talked, something began niggling at him. Something he couldn't quite put his finger on.

Roman said, "You look like you have a stomach ache. You haven't eaten, I bet."

"No. Well, the cookies. But it's not that. Anyway, I feel weird eating in front of you."

"I like watching you do stuff. Passes the time."

"Okay." He went to the freezer for a ready-meal. No way was he going to prep and cook and eat a real meal with Roman sitting there watching. With both of them knowing that somewhere, lost, underground, Roman's body was wasting away from lack of care. From lack of the goddamned nurses who walked away from a little kid and... and... and...

“Crud! That might work!” He dropped the pack of frozen soup and whirled to look at Roman.

“What?”

“That nurse. The one at the facility that you saw. Ginny, you said. Local accent, or near enough. Not too old, so she has to have graduated within the last, what, ten years?”

“Probably,” Roman said slowly. “If she’s an actual nurse.”

“Worth looking, right?” He pulled his tablet toward him, ignoring the soup. “We’ll start with the assumption that’s her real first name. Ginny, Virginia, Gineva, something like that with a G-I-N in it.” He began entering search parameters. “Nursing program or aide program. The last twenty years, to be safe in case she was a prodigy or had a face-lift. Not a visible minority. That’ll narrow it down. Let’s do the whole country, in case she went away for school.”

Roman stood. “She might not have finished her training.”

He ignored that, on a wave of rising hope. “I’ll pull in pictures, selfies, graduation shots for you to look at. Let’s see how many hits.” He scrolled. “Crap, there’s a vintage Ginny nurse doll. Spams the search.” He adjusted the exclusions, and set some of his favorite bots roaming. The number of hits began climbing.

When he hit three hundred, he could feel his optimism seeping away. And yet, it was worth a try. He set the search to background, and brought the tablet to where Roman could see it. “We’ll do ten per page. You can scan them, eliminate the clearly wrong ones.”

He sat on the floor, and after a moment, Roman sank down beside him. He called up the first page, some formal shots, some candid, and hovered his finger over the first one. “Tell me *No* or *Maybe*.” *Or Yes; please at some point tell me yes.*

Roman hesitated, then bent to look closer. “No. No. No. Um, maybe although I don’t think so. If she dyed her hair or something... Maybe. No. No.”

They worked through page after page. On the plus side, the maybes were rare, so Roman really did have some picture in mind. Less than a dozen had been set for a recheck, when he flipped to the next page, and Roman jolted. “Shit!”

“What?”

“Her.” Roman pointed, his finger hovering over a picture of a blond young woman. “I think. Very close, anyway.”

“How close? Do we stop here?”

“I’m not certain. Crap.”

He pulled the tablet back to switch things up. “We’ll keep her. Do a face recognition match—the twenty closest to her. Scramble them up.” He set it up, his fingers *not* trembling as he tapped his custom icons. “Okay, look again. Just scan through them for the best one.”

He held it out—a four by five array of pictures. Roman stared carefully at each one, then pointed, firmly enough that he dipped his fingertip into the electronics, before jerking back. “Sorry. That one. I’m sure.” It was the same woman.

“You’d better not have scrambled anything inside there with your ninja touch,” Xavier joked, already canceling runs and changing to a focused search. “I love this tablet almost as much as...” He broke off, flushing, and bent to his work. “Here she is. Virginia Suzanne Dorton. Thirty years old, graduated nine years ago, list of employment...” He scanned it. “Nothing listed for the last three years.”

“Unemployed?”

“Or working under the table.” He sent a few extra probes out. “Unless she’s in a government black box I should be able to dig up something.”

“What are you looking for?”

“You don’t want to know.” He lined up some more illegal tracers.

“Yeah, I think I do.”

“Okay. Her address. Credit. Cell-com code and tracking, if I can find it.”

“You can do that? I thought...”

“What? That only law enforcement could follow us around by our electronics? Please.” He adjusted a bot. “Unless you pay through the nose or do your own security, the data is all there, just waiting to be ferreted out.” He grinned.

“Why the smile?”

“My favorite ferret is doing its job.” He set the data to copy to his home system and linked his cell-com. “Come to Papa, little bits and bytes.” He turned

the tablet so Roman could see it again. "There she is. Her address, where she shops, her boyfriends, her mother, her two aunts, aaaaand where she is right now." He pointed at the trace he had set on her com signal. "Unless she was smart enough to ditch her com or give it to someone else to carry around to confuse things, she's driving between the local mall and one of her boyfriends' places."

"Still here in the state? Is she nuts?"

"Either dumb or certain she's safe, or taking her time about leaving." He stood, and reached for the range-finder. "Come on."

"Should we call the cops?"

"And tell them what?"

"Anonymous tip again?"

Xavier hesitated. "If they believe me, then they have to prove it legally. Bring her in. Convince her to talk. And if she really left a child down there to die of starvation, well, what are the odds she'll tell them where?"

"So what will you do?" Roman opened and closed his fists. "I'm not going to be any help taking her on."

"You never know." He frowned. "Anyway, what kind of a wimp do you think I am?"

"I hope you have a better plan than beating the information out of her with your fists. Sorry, Xav, but there's no guarantee you're tougher than this woman. I met some nurses in the army who could wipe the floor with both of us."

Xavier curled his lip. "I'm not planning on punching out anyone." No matter how tempting it was. "Wait here." He ran upstairs to Tam's room, foraged, and came back down. "Tam's the one who taught me to always have a back-up plan. And preferably a back-up for your back-up."

"You haven't even told me the front-up plan."

"We find her. We ask her. If she refuses to help at first then,"—he held up his left hand—"I have a carrot,"—Tam's bracelet sparkled with diamonds. "Or a stick." He showed Roman the compact gun in his right hand. "Tam had her personal Taser with her when she was snatched but this was in her room. And the real thing carries a lot more, um, authority."

"And if Ginny won't sell, and doesn't believe you'll shoot?"

He met Roman's eyes. "Then we threaten to haunt her for the rest of her life with the ghost of a gay man who hates her, and will never change his mind or go away."

Roman said carefully, "That sounds pretty bleak to me too."

"Oh, Roman, it's a threat. Like the gun. If the worst happens..." Well, would the worst be Roman dying and vanishing forever? Or not vanishing? He didn't want to think about either one. "If you hang around as a ghost, you had damned well better haunt me and jack off in my bedroom, not waste your time on her."

Roman nodded slowly. "I'd really rather neither. How valuable is the jewelry?"

"Only about thirty thou. But I'll tell her half a mil. If she knows how her bosses' business works, who the customers are, she might believe it's worth that much. I'm probably not close to the richest of their clients, and rich folk love their diamonds."

Roman blew out a breath. "Okay. Hell, let's give it a try."

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Chapter 12

Roman watched the world go by through the smoked windows of Xavier's less valuable but more anonymous sedan. It was morning now, with the sun slanting low on the horizon. Another day dawning. He wondered how his body was doing, back wherever. How the kid was doing. Despite knowing that he would be trapped, and useless, and worse off than ever, there was a strong pull to go back.

He turned to look at Xavier instead. Xavier drove manually, paying attention to both the road and an inaudible commentary from his cell-com. Dressed in slick-jeans and a dress shirt, he didn't look remarkable, certainly not wealthy. If anything, he looked more like a university professor than Roman ever had. Even back when Roman got to actually wear any damn clothes. He shifted uneasily on the seat.

"Ten minutes," Xavier said. "Have you thought any more about going in visible or not?"

"Not." He shuddered at the thought of walking visible and naked up to a building in this increasingly lower-class neighborhood. If he'd ever had any inclination to become a nudist, the last few days of walking around with his junk hanging out had cured him of it. Besides which, an ace in the hole was worth a lot more if it came as a surprise.

Xavier nodded. "You're sure you can reappear if we need you to, though, right? If I turn the laser back on?"

He wasn't sure of anything. He felt more tired and draggy with every passing hour. He didn't know if that was just emotional, or if his real body was weakening. Or it might just be how much time he'd spent out of the flesh. But he didn't want to worry Xavier, so he said, "I did it before."

"Right."

A few minutes later, Xavier slowed, turned a corner, slowed some more. The streets were narrower, parked up with the cheap fiberglass hulks of Detroit's last gasp, most of which probably hadn't moved since gas hit thirty bucks a gallon. The houses were smaller, still single-family with deeply shaded front porches, but marred by sagging rooflines, and debris-cluttered front yards. "Not dating a tycoon, is she?"

“Nope. Four more blocks.”

Roman sat straighter, his muscles tense and his breathing getting faster as they approached their goal. Xavier pulled over between a Chevy Creekside with no tires, and a really antique VW, switched off the engine and turned to him. “So. Here we are.”

Roman had an abrupt rush of anxiety. This really wasn't Xavier's thing; it was a crazy risk. “You're sure you don't want to call some kind of back-up? Maybe a friend of Tam's? Someone?”

Xavier took the gun out of the armrest compartment, checked it, and then leaned forward to fit it into a small holster at the back of his jeans. He tugged his shirt out to cover it, and gave Roman a long look. “No. Tam's friends tend to be law-and-order types, anyway.”

“You're not going make me watch you get beat up or killed, right?”

“I sure as hell hope not.” Xavier blew out a breath, and rubbed his palms dry on his thighs. It was pretty obvious he wasn't as calm as he wanted to seem. But he squared his shoulders and pulled out the polarized lenses. “Ready?”

Hell, no. “Yeah.”

They were both silent, as Xavier attenuated the laser beam down. Roman only recognized the moment when he faded from view by the subtle widening of Xavier's eyes, and the way he hesitated a second before finishing the lens rotation.

Roman waved a hand. “Hey, Xav, can you still hear me?”

Xavier said nothing, just slowly switched open the passenger door. Roman slid out, and moved away. Xavier slowly counted out loud down from ten, closed the passenger door and stepped out into the quiet street. He came around to the sidewalk, looking past and through Roman. “Okay,” he muttered, mostly under his breath. “Time to do this. Just like in the vids.”

Roman followed him up a short front walk to a low house, its dilapidated porch fronted by three worn wooden steps. Xavier stopped, consulted his cell-com, and then went up to the door. Roman climbed the steps too, but stood off to the side where he was less likely to get run over, or run through, if Xavier had to retreat.

Xavier knocked, holding his hand over the peephole lens. The door speaker crackled with an irritable, “What?”

Xavier whined nasally, "Stewart. I'm a friend of Bruce's. I left my pass-card in there. I need it."

"Go away, Stew."

"No chance. I need it."

"You can wait till Bruce gets back."

Xavier aimed a wide-eyed look in Roman's general direction, then said, "Come on, you uptight bitch. Lemme in! Or I'll stand here and make noise until you do."

There was a pause, then the door opened a crack. "Listen, you scumbucket..."

Xavier didn't wait. He slammed himself into the crack, driving the door open and shoving the woman behind it back against the hallway wall. Two fast steps inside, and he slammed the door, forcing Roman to walk through it behind him. To Roman's surprise, Xavier managed to get his gun out of the holster and aimed, before the woman could draw breath to scream.

"Be quiet, or die," Xavier snarled. "Freeze."

The nurse looked up and down, from his face to the gun and back, and swallowed any sound. Xavier reached over fast, unhooked her cell-com from behind her ear, and slid it into his pocket.

"Smart," Xavier said. "I knew you had to be smart."

The nurse recoiled back against the wall, crossing her arms over her body. "What do you want?"

"Answers. And for no one to end up dead."

"My boyfriend is a big, strong guy and he'll be walking in that door any minute."

"Bruce is a hundred and sixty-two pounds, and he's at work at Cuso's Packing till six tonight."

Her eyes widened. "Who *are* you?"

Roman could almost see Xavier channeling Masque, from the early episodes when he was more bad-guy than good. "I could be your worst nightmare, or I might be the person to get you out of this fracking dump."

"I don't want out."

“You worked illegal hidden burn-before-reading medical shit because you *didn't* want to get away from the rats and the brown-outs?”

“How do you know what I did? If I did?”

Xavier took up a sinister sing-song tone. “You’re Virginia Suzanne Dorton. Born August twelve, two thousand nine. Class of 2027 at GWB High. Graduated with an RN from Gausprey Nursing Academy...” Fact after fact, which had to be coming from his cell-com but came out as smooth as if memorized. He got to, “...and agreed to provide nursing services for kidnap victims...”

“I don’t! I didn’t.”

He paused in the litany to eye her with very nice disdain. “Don’t waste my time by telling me you thought that was a legit job?”

Her gaze dropped, and a flush rose on her cheeks.

“Right.”

She whispered, “What do you want?”

“One victim. A small child.”

She looked up fast, going from flushed to pale. “No. There isn’t anyone.”

“Don’t bullshit me. I know there is. I know she’s being housed in the facility. And I know you all packed and ran, and left her to rot.”

The nurse took a short breath. “She’s dead.”

“More bullshit.”

“Brain dead. Really.”

“That’s fine.” Xavier raised the gun from her chest to point at her face. “The recipient isn’t. Yet.”

“What?”

“I don’t care what you did to that kid. I don’t care what was legal or wasn’t. There’s another kid I *do* care about who needs her to live.”

“Another?” The nurse slowly regained her color.

“You can help me find the donor, before she really does rot. If you do, I’ll let you go, with a head start and this.” He dipped his hand into his pocket and

pulled out the bracelet, twisting it in the cheap flickering hallway light. "Half a million in diamonds. Enough to get away clean, if you're smart."

"Bruce will..."

"He's an addict. He'll drag you down. You didn't leave when you should have, when it all went belly-up. Bad for you. Good for me, but you get one more chance now. Show me the place, and I'll turn you loose. Or... don't." Xavier put the bracelet back in his pocket, and gave her Masque's narrow-eyed stare. "And find out just how much my employer *hates* to lose something he wants."

"I can't."

"Sure you can. You went there every day."

She looked crafty. "You need my help. That's worth more than some flashy fake jewelry. And I need some guarantees."

"I could backtrack, get a satellite trace for your car. See where you went last week, or last month. But it'd be slow and tedious and it might happen too late. That would be a pity. It would definitely be too bad for you."

"Too bad for you, too."

"But I would survive my boss's, um, displeasure. You wouldn't."

Roman wondered if Xavier was laying it on too thick, but the nurse appeared to have watched the same vids, because she shivered in recognition of the threat.

"I can't show you. They'll kill me."

"*They* aren't here. I am."

"Crud, crud, fucking crud." She dug her hands into her hair, tugging on it. "I don't know!"

"It's simple. Help me find the kid and walk away with enough money to get lost permanently. Away from them and me. Or force me to find a different way to *persuade* you. But then you might be too damaged to run, afterward."

"Fuck." As if the word gave her a thought, she widened her eyes and licked her lips.

"Forget it." Xavier gestured toward the door. "You're out of time."

"Let me get my bag." She reached for a purse on a wall hook.

“Ah-ah.” Xavier scooped it away from her. “So now we’re going to walk all friendly to my car. My gun will be right here.” He lowered his hand behind the purse. “I would really hate to shoot you and have to drag you there, because it would be *so* inconvenient.”

“Fuck you.”

“Walking. Or bleeding?”

Her glare could have melted steel. Roman was more impressed by Xavier every minute, even knowing where his dialogue was coming from. It still took nerve to follow through, in the face of a hundred and thirty pounds of really pissed off woman. For a moment, everything hung in the balance. Then there was a small, soft pop, and a cloud of dust rose from the wall a few inches from the woman’s shoulder.

“You don’t need two arms to talk,” Xavier said, moving the gun back behind the purse.

“Christ!”

“I’m going to open the door. Keep your hands visible, and don’t touch anything or say a word on your way out. Whatever security Bruce has on this dump wouldn’t be fast enough to save you anyway.”

She glared again, but when he opened the door, she walked out as directed. Xavier shut it, and Roman stepped right through it to follow them down the walk. Xavier popped the passenger door and motioned Ginny to get in. She looked around wildly, clearly hoping for help, but the neighborhood was silent. She lowered herself stiffly into the car. Xavier bent over her, and Roman heard the click of Tam’s spare handcuffs being deployed.

Xavier locked her door and released the back door. He leaned in, dumping half the contents of Ginny’s purse on the floor back there, giving Roman time to brush past him. When he was settled, Roman made brief deliberate contact, passing his hand across Xavier’s wrist to assure him they were good to go. Xavier nodded, and went around to his own seat.

By the time they were on the road, with Roman formless in the back of the car, Ginny had recovered some of her poise. She said, “What if I don’t help you?”

Xavier shook his head sadly. “Ginny, really. You’re in my car, without your com. You have no tracker. Your boyfriend won’t be home for hours, and may

be too stoned by then to even notice you're gone. What choice do you think you have?"

"I can simply keep my mouth shut." She pressed her lips together.

"Yeah. But then I can hardly let you go, can I? I'd be guilty of kidnapping." Roman saw a look of nausea cross Xavier's face, and noticed the way his eyes flicked up to the rearview mirror, glancing past Roman's. Roman saw the pulse beating fast in Xavier's neck, and realized that the full implications of what they were doing had only just now hit Xavier.

And he's doing this for me. It hit Roman too, how far Xavier was willing to go, on nothing more than Roman's crazy, invisible, unsupported word. *We're kidnapping a stranger.* The unreality of the whole situation made him feel light-headed.

Xavier swallowed visibly, but soldiered on. "If you help me, each of us will have something on the other. We can go our separate ways. If not, well, jobless women with crudbucket boyfriends do disappear. It happens all the time."

She sighed. "Fuck. I knew it, right? Knew it was too good to last. Easy money, easy work, keep your mouth shut, and don't declare it. And then they said to clean up and get out. We all did, even if no one wanted to, well, finish things. We just left. And Reynolds, he said to not even go home. He told me to stay with someone else, get out of town fast, but I picked Bruce to stay with and the fucker stole my travel money."

Roman wondered if by snatching Ginny they'd beaten someone else to the punch. Would whoever was behind the whole scheme have cleaned her up as a loose end? They'd had time already to do it, but maybe they hadn't been as good as Xavier at finding her.

Xavier's thoughts must have paralleled his, because he said, "You'd be smart to get very lost, as soon as we're done. My boss isn't the only one who likes things clean and tidy."

"You'll really let me go?"

"Ginny, I want an address. I don't need complications. Yeah, you help me and I'll forget you exist."

"Hm." After a long pause she said, "You need to get onto the tollway, going north, about twenty minutes."

The wave of relief that washed through Roman hit him so hard it made him dizzy. Or maybe something else did, because his vision blurred. Xavier became a fuzzy shape in the seat in front of him. Ginny's voice buzzed in three-part dissonance. The words got lost in the jumble of sound.

He leaned forward, reaching for Xavier. They didn't connect, of course. Couldn't touch. Would never touch. There was a trace of lingering warmth on his fingertips, just a hint that maybe he'd come close. His vision cleared enough to watch his hand trail through Xavier's jaw, down his neck. The sensation quickly faded, cooled, thinned. His vision clouded more. The last thing he heard was Xavier saying, "Roman? Is that you?" Then the world went dark.

He slowly came back to awareness in his hospital bed, still on his side, in the stale-smelling room. Breathing was difficult. His chest felt tight. All around him the weight of silence and emptiness pressed down. He struggled to open his eyes, and failed. Struggled to move a hand, a finger, his tongue, something. His body was a trap, a useless lump of unresponsive flesh.

He felt worse than ever before, disoriented and nauseous. The smell of human waste and sweat surrounded him, and each breath burned thinly in his chest. He remembered what Xavier had said about CO2 pooling around his face. Maybe he didn't have a week before he choked on his own waste. Maybe he had a day, or an hour.

He tried to breathe differently. He held his breath, then forced it out hard. Did it again. He had some small success, slight movements of his mouth and lips and chest. He pushed harder, trying to blow the hovering air. Maybe he could create currents, stir up some oxygen.

Xavier was coming. He clung to that, as he puffed in dizzying futility. If he could hold on, Xavier would find him. But the darkness was coming back, different than ever before. He wasn't moving into it; it was falling on him, thick and heavy and smothering. His last conscious thought was that he didn't want Xavier to find him this way, dead in his own filth. *I'm sorry, Xav.* But it was out of his control, and no matter how he raged and fought against the dark, eventually his breathing became all that mattered, all he knew, and he was lost.

Xavier stared at the little metal barn on the hillside below them. "That?"

"Yeah."

"So the complex is underneath it?"

“Well, yeah.” Ginny twisted her wrists against the cuffs that held her hands down in the seatbelt. “Let me go now.”

“Not so fast.” He pulled his tablet out of the back, got into a surveillance program, and spent a shit-ton of his money for immediate live-feed sat images of the area. There was his car, parked on the hill above the building. No one else seemed to be around. Half a mile away, cars moved on a main road, but this backwater was deserted. He spent more bucks on a couple of look-back spot-checks. There were images available from an hour ago and eighteen hours ago. Neither showed anything but a white metal roof, a deserted gravel road, and acres of scrubby woods.

He turned to Ginny. “So how do you get inside?”

She pursed her lips and was silent, but he waited her out. He wanted to smack her, maybe even stick the gun under her chin and threaten to blow her brains out if she didn't get him down there *now*! Every instinct said that they were running out of time.

Halfway through the drive on the tollway, he'd felt a touch on his face, and somehow known it was Roman saying good-bye. The car seemed suddenly emptier without that silent and invisible presence in the back seat. He shouldn't have noticed, or been able to tell, but he was certain Roman had gone.

At some point, he'd clearly also lost some of his menace in Ginny's eyes. Maybe it happened when he'd tried to talk to apparently thin air, or maybe when he'd stopped trying, and had to clench his teeth to keep his breathing from shaking. She'd cast little sideways glances at him, and started asking awkward questions he didn't bother to answer. And he'd felt her quit shrinking and sit taller. There was a little curl to her lip that wasn't reassuring.

So instead of making wild threats he sat there, like he had all the time in the world, until finally she said, “Fuck it. I can get you in. It takes a bio for the door, and key codes at the top end, and down below.”

“All right.” He got out, went around and unbuckled her. But instead of taking off the cuffs completely, he locked her right wrist to his left.

“What the fuck?” She jerked on their joined wrists.

“If you mess with me, if you set off an alarm code, what happens to me will happen to you.”

“Paranoid crapsucker.”

“Let’s go.”

He let her set the pace, down the hill from where he’d parked. As they got close to the building, he could imagine being watched. Surely there were cameras mounted here, to monitor the approach. Maybe even weapons to cover the door? Only Roman’s story about the place being deserted allowed him to walk boldly forward. And without Roman’s reassuring presence, part of him began frantically wondering what he was doing playing ghosts and robbers at his age. He stuffed his doubts down behind an aura of calm. “So where’s the entrance?”

“Here.” Ginny flipped up a section of the cheap-looking aluminum siding to reveal a high-quality palm-lock. She put her hand on it. Xavier had a moment’s panic that without power it would be stuck shut, but the green light came on, and the garage-sized door rolled silently upward.

“We usually parked inside,” she said.

He had to move fast to follow her in, as the door began rolling back down into place. As it sealed shut, the interior became nearly pitch black.

“Crap,” she said. “No lights. They should be automatic.”

“Is there a power breaker box?”

“I guess.”

This time he was the one to jerk her forward, as his eyes adjusted to the dimness. A faint light came from a back corner, and sure enough it was the safety on the switch box. He opened it, mostly by feel, fumbled around, trying not to think about the voltages he was sticking his hands into, and found a good-sized switch. When he pulled it down, nothing happened. “Frack.” He found another, and repeated the maneuver. This time there was a hum and buzz, and overhead lights came on. Quickly he ran through the switches in the box, turning on everything. Better to trip an alarm than to miss the chance to restart the ventilation below. Various hums and rumbles came to life as he closed the breakers.

The space they were in was an almost-empty garage, insulated and clean, with steel shelving on the walls. There were a few tools, some boxes and bins, and no visible elevator. “Now how do we get down?” he asked.

“Hey, there’s no ‘we’ about this. You can do the rest yourself. I’ll point you the right direction, give you the codes and then I’m out of here.”

“Not yet. We’ll go down together. I’ll make sure all the codes work on both levels, and *then* you can go.”

He was caught by surprise as she swung a clumsy fist at his face. He ducked fast enough that the blow barely brushed his cheek.

“I’m not going down there!”

“What the crap? Ten minutes. A couple of codes. I swear, I won’t stop you after that.”

She glared at him, breathing hard, leaning toward the door. He braced his shoulder against the pull on his wrist, and stared back as hard as he could. After a long standoff, she sighed and slumped. “Okay. But I’m not going into the rooms.”

“Because...?” He saw the look in her eyes—fear and shame. “Because you don’t want to see your victims?”

“Not mine. I took care of them. They came to me like that.”

“Like what?”

“Like donors. What do you care?”

He caught himself back from saying too much. “I don’t, as long as they’re still live donors. Lead on.”

Ginny entered her passcode in a control pad, and a set of fake shelving moved aside quietly, revealing the elevator. They got in and turned to face the doors as they closed silently, cutting off sight of the outside world. The elevator sank smoothly, almost imperceptibly.

“Just one level.” Ginny’s voice sounded thin and fast, details tumbling out. “Two wards, and support areas. Kitchen, bathrooms. Nursing station. Eight beds. We never had more than four people here at once though. Sometimes only one or two.”

“Sounds like a cushy job.” He stared at the doors, willing them to open. How slow could this crud sucking thing be?

“I guess. They needed a fair bit of care though. No higher brain functions, so they had to be hydrated, fed, turned, cleaned.” She fell silent, perhaps remembering she’d left patients down here without that care. He hoped savagely that she was feeling every ounce of the guilt. He almost said so, but reminded himself that he needed her help a little longer, and kept silent.

The doors swooshed open. The air beyond smelled stale, but there was plenty of oxygen, judging by how easy it was to breathe.

"There," Ginny said. "The kid is that way. Last room. Now let's go up." She took a step backward, deeper into the elevator and set her heels. "Let me go!"

"Is there a passcode down here for the elevator?"

"Yeah. Shit." She told him, and he manhandled her out long enough for the doors to close, so he could verify that they reopened.

"See? I told you. Now let me out! Right the fuck now!"

"Scared of ghosts?" Her growing panic was clear enough that he reluctantly let her yank them back into the elevator. Roman was down here, maybe yards away. He could knock this bitch out, take off the cuffs and go find him right now. Or maybe shoot her, if he didn't want to leave her alone down here. No one would care. She'd been part of this vicious mess. He got as far as putting his hand to his holster, but stopped short and let the elevator doors close and carry them up, slowly, *away from Roman*.

At the top, he checked that the code was still valid after being used once, then walked her to the door and undid the cuffs. She rubbed her wrist, as she backed away from him. He waved over the control to open the main door.

"The bracelet is in your purse, on the ground beside the car." He pointed. "Your cell-com stays with me. I'll be bringing in help, as quick as they can get here, so I'd suggest you start walking fast. Maybe running. I won't tell them about you yet, but I can't promise that won't change. Go."

She edged out the door, still staring at him. "You're really letting me go?"

"Really." He tapped his own cell-com, dialing Tam's FBI contact. "You won't like the guys who're coming, though."

"Fuck. No." She whirled and ran up the hill. He thought she might just keep going, but at the car, she paused, scooped up her purse, and looked back at him. He wondered if she might try something— sabotage perhaps—although he'd tried to strip her purse of anything more dangerous than lipstick. But in the end, she raised her hand in an odd, abortive gesture, before slinging her purse over her shoulder and scurrying off over the hill.

His com clicked. A voice said, "Special Agent Ibrahim. You are Xavier Faulkner?"

“Yes.”

“Why are you making contact?”

“Happy birthday, Special Agent,” Xavier said, “I have a present for you.” He jammed the rolling door open with a big box blocking the safety beam, and turned to hurry back to the elevator. He gave the man as much information as he had time for, and made sure they had a lock on his location. Then he entered Ginny’s code, and let the closing elevator doors cut him off. It wasn’t a surprise when the com signal died, unable to make it through. He didn’t need Roman to tell him the place was fortress-built. He’d seen the Greenberg shelter plans.

Roman was down there, somewhere, alive or dead. Another minute, two minutes, however long this elevator took. A hallway. A few doors. He would find Roman, and then he would know... know... He took a breath and waved his hand over the down key.

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Chapter 13

The ride down seemed even slower than before, the elevator more lumbering and silent. Xavier fought a growing panic. *Trapped. I can't get out.* It was stupid. He had all the codes. It had to be an echo of Roman's fear, the way Xavier had seen him arrive back in the kitchen, shaken, crying. *I can't get out.*

We will, though, he vowed. Soon. Really soon.

He had the layout in his head. As soon as he could, he squeezed between the sliding doors, and hurried down the corridor. Through the swing doors, first room, open that one. The smell hit him, stale and rank but not putrid. Piss and shit and sweat, but live smells, dirty-body smells. Not rot, not decay. Only one bed was occupied by an unmoving figure. He ran over, put out his hand, and hesitated an inch from touching skin.

For the barest moment, he froze. If this was a fairy tale his touch might wake the sleeper, or shatter him in a thousand shards, or make him disappear. He'd always loved fantasy, but he'd never believed it before. For an instant, all the possibilities hovered under his hand. Then his fingers closed on dry, living flesh. He tugged on Roman's shoulder, rolling him onto his back, and looked down at the limp figure on the dirty, reeking bed.

It was Roman, but not quite. He looked older, thinner, less tanned. He was stubbled with days of beard his ghost-shadow had never had. His face was white and blank, and he breathed in short shallow pants that made his chest jerk and the tendons on his neck stand out.

Suddenly afraid, Xavier bent over him, tugging and pushing on the bed, fighting the wheel locks. He wrestled it over closer to the door, where the air smelled cleaner. Through all of it, Roman didn't wake, but gradually he became less pale and his breathing slowed and eased. Xavier bent over him, ignoring everything but that still-harsh ebb and flow of breath.

"Come on," he muttered. "I fracking kidnapped a nurse for you. I'm probably going to hell. You have to wake up to make it worth my while."

Roman slept on, the tightness of his neck and face slowly easing. Xavier touched his cheek, gently brushed a loose strand of hair into place, then bent and barely touched his mouth to Roman's, closing his eyes to isolate the

sensation of lips on lips. This was real. Or else he was so far into crazy he was never coming out. He had to believe. This man he was touching for the first time was already the dearest friend he'd ever had. If only they could have the chance to actually meet.

Roman's lips under his were chapped almost to cracking. Xavier eased back quickly and looked him over. Roman's eyes were sunken, the lids dark and bruised, little crusts mattering at the inner corners. His pulse beat fast in his throat; his veins were a faint blue tracery under dry skin. Xavier wished he'd taken that advanced first aid course Tam had suggested. He'd done the basics, and then convinced her that emergencies were hard to come by behind a computer desk. If he'd been less lazy, maybe he could do something helpful here. Roman was surely dehydrated, starving, short of breath, and an IV would be a hell of a lot more use to him than a kiss. But Xavier had nothing to give him.

There was a sink in the corner of the room. He couldn't find any towels, and didn't want to leave Roman to search, so he soaked the hem of his shirt and came back, wiping Roman's lips with the dampness. Roman didn't open his eyes or speak, but after a long pause his lips moved slightly, and his tongue touched the cloth. Xavier got more water and did it again. And again.

He was jerked out of his focus by the sound of doors and footsteps. He had time for a second of panic about the bad guys coming back for them before the room filled with dark suits. And yes, thank all the powers, a paramedic team and their stretcher. He turned to them gladly. "He's alive. But he won't wake up."

He was moved aside, gently but firmly. "We'll take over now."

"There's the kid, too." He flushed in sudden shame. Roman had worried about her, and he hadn't even gone to look. "So I was told. A second room and a little girl."

"You told us. We brought a second med team. We're on it."

He watched as they did a fast assessment exam, attaching half a dozen monitors to Roman's still body. Then Roman was lifted off the soiled bed, bundled onto a padded gurney, and hooked up to a drip. He followed as they rolled the stretcher out into the hall, dodging an attempt from one of the suits to grab his arm. "Where will you take him?"

"Regional Healthcare is closest," one of the paramedics said.

"I want to ride along."

"Oh, no, you don't." The older Feeb got hold of him and pulled him back. "You have one hell of a lot of questions to answer first."

They both paused as a second stretcher was hurried past, one of the paramedics guiding it while the other bent over a tiny, inert form.

Xavier's throat closed up, and he couldn't ask if she was all right. Paramedics and stretchers disappeared through the double doors toward the elevator. It took a second agent locking his fingers on Xavier's other elbow to keep him from following along. "I need..."

"The only thing you're going to do is come with us." The older man glared at him. "Do I have to arrest you?"

"For what?"

"I'll think of something."

Xavier glanced back and forth, from the double doors to the implacable man with a steel grip on his arm. He didn't doubt the agent would do exactly that. He *needed* to follow Roman, but being arrested would slow him down even more. He tried to relax and put a friendly look on his face. "What do you need from me?"

What they needed turned out to be hours spent sitting in a small room in their regional headquarters, going over and over his story. He stuck to the truth as much as possible, except for telling them that Ginny had contacted *him*. He suggested she might have been the anonymous tipster all along. He couldn't keep her out of it. Between her fingerprints and DNA all over the facility and his car, they would have her as soon as the first lab reports came back. But this way she was closer to the right side of the law, if they caught up with her.

In this awkward mix of truth and fiction, Roman became an old friend, someone whom he'd known back when. Someone he'd known well enough to still be Roman's emergency contact. When they rattled his cage about the coincidence of both his sister and his old friend being involved, he simply shrugged. He didn't know. He couldn't guess why. The world was a strange place. *Now that was a statement he could put a whole ton of conviction into.*

He was pretty sure they hadn't caught up with Ginny yet, but they were confident they would soon. He really hoped that just this once a criminal would be good enough to evade the FBI. Not that she didn't deserve to get caught, no

matter what help she'd given him when he had a gun to her head, but their stories weren't going to match. Maybe he could hire a lawyer for her in advance, and have them standing ready to tell her to keep her mouth shut.

In the end, they let him go. He had no idea where his car was, but that's what cab services were for. It was late afternoon by the time he made it to Regional Healthcare Hospital. He had to show ID twice to get to the Critical Care floor, and then he was stopped anyway by an FBI agent stationed in the hallway.

"Look," he said, with exaggerated patience he was far from feeling. "I just want to see him for a minute. I'm listed as his next of kin."

The agent handed back his ID with a shrug. "I have my orders. No visitors, no way, no how. Not until my boss okays it."

Xavier gritted through clenched teeth, "Then call your boss and get the okay."

"Hah. She's off duty and I'm not going to call her for something minor."

"What would you consider major? Because I'm sure it could be arranged."

The agent drew himself up taller. "Is that a threat, sir?"

Xavier wanted to channel Masque once more, to purr, "*It's a promise, little man.*" Unfortunately, he couldn't carry off either the words or the tone. Besides, he was getting past the point of being cool, clever and urbane, and well into wanting to punch someone. He'd spent hours with the FBI, and the flow of information went only one way. They hadn't told him *squat*, not even if Roman was still alive. At least now he had that much, but it was driving him crazy to be this close, and yet know nothing.

The agent's hand slid under his dark jacket toward the small of his back, and Xavier realized he'd clenched his own fists. Not smart. He opened his hands carefully and tried for one more friendly smile. "Can you at least tell me how he's doing?"

"He's alive." The agent sighed. "Look, if you're really next of kin, then the doctors should be willing to talk to you. Doctor Sanchez seems to be in charge. You could ask her."

Xavier stared over the agent's shoulder at the door. He was getting woozy with fatigue. It was good that Roman was being protected, and he should just

accept that and go find a doctor or someone and talk to them, and then visit Tam at her hospital, and find his car...

No, find the car first. Unless they'd impounded it for forensics, which was likely, and he wondered if a spirit walker could leave DNA behind... He only realized he'd begun listing sideways when the agent grabbed his arm.

"You should go sit down somewhere." The agent's voice was reserved, but a bit less cold.

"Yes. Right. Thanks." Xavier rubbed his face. "Someone will let me know if anything changes, right?"

"I'm sure they will, sir. And when I do hear from my superior I'll ask about visiting."

He turned away, went down to the lobby, and managed to get directions on where to find Dr. Sanchez. The doctor wasn't in her office—of course—but there was a little lobby on the office floor. He sat down, pulled out his minitabket to link her picture, so he would recognize her, and then tipped his head back to relax while waiting.

He woke to someone's hand on his shoulder. For a moment, it merged with a dream of Tam being dragged off down a corridor, and he surged to his feet, swinging blindly. Luckily, as his eyes cleared, he found he hadn't assaulted a doctor, and he was pinned, very efficiently, by Special Agent McGregor.

"Easy there," McGregor said. "Are you awake now?"

Xavier eased out of that hard grip and tugged his shirt straight. "Yes. Sorry."

"I shouldn't have shaken you, but you didn't answer when I said your name. Long day?"

"Long week." He quickly added, "With Tam and all."

"Yes." McGregor eyed him dubiously. "And now I'm told you're related to one of our donor victims as well."

"Not related. A good friend."

"And designated next of kin."

"Well, yeah." He held that skeptical gaze and didn't flinch. *Coincidence happened, or there wouldn't be a word for it.*

“You did provide proof of that?”

He knew McGregor had to have seen his faked-up documents, and believed them, or he wouldn't be just standing there. “Sure. We've known each other a long time.” It felt like the most truthful lie he'd ever told. *Minutes on the clock aren't the only measure of time.*

After a studied pause, McGregor sighed. “Well, as far as I can tell we're on the same side, when it comes to Mr. Janz. So you might as well come on along. I'm going to talk to his doc, and I assume that's why you're here too.”

“I can wait my turn.” He'd see the doctor later, rather than talk now but in front of McGregor, with his penetrating skepticism and law-and-order focus.

But McGregor shook his head. “Come on. She's a busy lady and she wants to go home. Let's not waste her time.”

He followed along down the hall to Sanchez's office. She was in, and pushed aside a tablet as they entered, waving them to a pair of seats in front of her desk. They got ID confirmations out of the way, plus some FBI warrants, and then McGregor said, “I need to know whether either of the new victims will survive to testify.”

Xavier felt the blood drain from his face. His vision sparkled. A moment later, McGregor's hard hand pushed his head down on his knees. “Sorry, Faulkner. Breathe, okay?”

“I'm fine.” He shoved McGregor's hand off and sat up. “Just short of sleep.”

Dr. Sanchez said, “That was unnecessarily blunt, Special Agent.”

“Sorry. Thoughtless of me.”

Xavier realized that McGregor was watching him intently, and thought the harshness might have been intentional, despite the apology. *Yes, I really do know the man. Yes, I really do care, you scumfucker.*

Dr. Sanchez said, “In any case, I can only talk about Mr. Janz in front of Mr. Faulkner. The other patient will have to wait until we have privacy.”

“Of course. Janz, then. How is he?”

Dr. Sanchez turned to Xavier instead, her tone gentle. “So far, Mr. Janz is still unconscious. We're administering the antidote, but it's a wait-and-see situation.”

“Antidote?” he managed.

“Yes.” She raised an eyebrow at McGregor, who nodded. “Mr. Janz was, um, poisoned is perhaps the best term. With a drug that makes victims unconscious and cognitively suppressed, able to pass a brain-death scan for legal donorship.”

“What drug?”

“Diethyltri... Well, the street name is cognoburn.”

He subvocalized a search into his cell-com, and got an immediate flood of tags back. Not good ones. His bots whispered, “...*permanent coma, legal murder, experimental, kidnap becomes murder, vivisection...*” He winced. “That sounds... bad.”

“It’s not good.” She spoke clearly, softly. “The drug was designed to make vivisection more humane. Animal experiments could be carried out on drugged animals without the subject being aware of anything. But it got loose from the labs, of course, and was illegally used on people, with disastrous results.”

“Define disastrous.” He could search, but why bother when he had an expert right here.

After a moment she said, “It can be irreversible.”

“Damn.” He had no words for this. He took a deep breath. “Can be? How does that happen?”

“The drug blocks some brain receptors. Like putting a fake key in a lock, it keeps real neurotransmitters, the real keys, from getting into the keyholes. Without transmitters, the patient is unconscious, like being in a coma.”

His mouth was dry. He swallowed twice before asking, “But you can treat it? You said *antidote*.”

“Sometimes we can. If a patient got just a little of the drug, the antidote can float those false keys out and bind them up, so the neuron keyholes are open again. The brain wakes up.”

“And at a high dose?”

Her expression was bleak. “If there’s enough extra drug floating around in the CSF, the brain fluid, it starts fusing into clumps, complexes, like arc-welding the handles of the keys together. The antidote can’t get them loose from that locked-up structure. The effect is... um... permanent.”

“What about Roman? Can you tell?” *Please, can you tell? He talked to me. He was brave and smart and sexy and thinking, talking, functioning. Surely it must be all right!*

“He has a chance. Sometimes a patient’s spinal fluid is full of the locked-up complexes, and we already know that the dose was irreversibly high.”

She hesitated and gave McGregor a meaningful glance, and Xavier had a sudden flash of worry for the little kid. But that concern couldn’t last, against his overwhelming panic for Roman. “Roman didn’t, though? Have those?”

“No. None. That doesn’t mean he doesn’t have complexing, but he clearly got a lower dose of cognoburn than... Anyway, we’re pouring the antidote into him, as fast as is safe. His fMRI had more activity too, not just baseline. He had some frontal lobe activation. And a little more at the three-hour recheck. So there’s hope.”

“Hope.”

“Yes. It can take from twelve to forty-eight hours for the antidote to do its job. There may be a little improvement even longer than that, but the first two days are what count. If the cognoburn wasn’t complexed, it will gradually be displaced. We’ll do fMRIs every three hours. That lets us see how his brain is recovering.”

“And he’ll wake up?”

“If the dose wasn’t too high, yes. At some point, he should wake up.”

“Normal? I mean, he won’t have, like, brain damage?”

The doctor pressed her lips together. “I can’t make promises. It all depends on how much of the drug we’re able to clear from his system.”

“Can I be there? With him?” Xavier locked his hands on the edge of the desk. “I need to be there.”

“There’s nothing you can do to speed the process.”

“I don’t care.”

Dr. Sanchez glanced at McGregor. “I understand you’ve got Mr. Janz in protective isolation?”

McGregor said, “If he does wake up, he’ll be a critical witness. We’re not taking any chances with his safety. But... I think we can put Xavier here on the short list.”

Xavier bristled at the patronizing tone. *What, did almost passing out convince you I'm not going to assassinate him?* But keeping Roman safe was good, and he could hardly complain. "I want to visit my sister, and then come back and sit with Roman."

Dr. Sanchez said, "I think sleep might be a better idea for you right now. You look like crap. And that's a professional opinion."

"I need to see Tam. She had surgery. I haven't visited her." Some swirling confusion of responsibilities made him close his eyes, then open them wide before sleep could claim him right there in that uncomfortable chair. "Wait. The drug. The one they used on the donors. It wasn't in the kidney she got?" He had a sudden rush of panic.

"Kidney?" Dr. Sanchez frowned.

"My sister. Um, got a transplant from another poisoned donor." He wasn't making much sense.

But apparently enough for Dr. Sanchez to understand. "I'd think not, not with cognoburn, anyway. Any organ prep includes a blood-replacer flush. It would clear that drug from anything that wasn't brain tissue. Kidneys should be fine."

He took a breath, nodded his gratitude, made a subvocal note on his com to check with Tam's doctor to be sure. "Okay. Okay. Tam, and then back here, and Roman..." He rubbed his eyes wider open. "Got it."

The doctor sighed. "I'll tell them to put a recliner in Janz's room."

McGregor said, "I'll have an agent drive you to Unity Hospital and back here."

He blinked. "That's surprisingly nice of you."

"Better than having you wreck when the auto drive switches off."

"Still."

"Go sit in the waiting area. I need to talk to the doc about some other things. I'll have someone fetch you."

He wanted to argue, but he couldn't come up with anything. "Okay. Thank you."

The agent showed up blessedly quickly. Xavier slept through most of the drive to Unity, and only really blinked back the fatigue enough to function when he pulled on the isolation suit and finally sat down at Tam's bedside.

She stared at him. "Did you get the code of the truck that hit you?"

"Hah. I still look better than you."

"I had major surgery. What's your excuse?"

"That you had major surgery?" *And kidnapping?*

"Wuss." She reached over and took his gloved hand. "How are you really? How's... *he?*"

"I'm okay. And... we did it. We found the donors. We're waiting to see what the, um, damage is."

"Oh. Well done!"

"He's not awake. At all. Yet." It had to be a matter of '*yet*'.

She squeezed his fingers harder. "That's tough."

"I hate waiting."

"I know. I think you got into computers as a kid so you wouldn't have to wait for other people to answer your questions."

"Maybe. Doesn't help me now." He'd done a little searching on cognoburn, but had fallen asleep in the middle of hearing the answers. It all seemed to come down to waiting, anyway. "I *suck* at waiting."

"You look like you also suck at sleeping."

"Says the woman whose eyes look like she stopped a couple of punches."

"Hah. No one ever lays a glove on me."

"Then I'd say you need sleep worse than I do."

She licked a finger and ticked the air to give him the point. "So. Will they let you see him?"

"Sure. I *am* his emergency contact, after all." He raised an eyebrow at her.

"Of course you are." Her eyebrow mimicked his.

He sighed and let go of her hand. "What do your doctors say?"

Tam's expression brightened. "They're pretty optimistic. Apparently, the scumbags actually could read a gene chart. I might not even need any more anti-rejection drugs, and if that's the case, I might even get my job back."

"Wow." His tone was unintentionally flat, and she chuckled.

"Ouch. God, don't make me laugh. You sound so pleased."

"No, really I am. If you are. I know you loved your job."

"I did. And do. But there's some recovery time yet before we cross that bridge."

He tried to smile. "I *am* pleased it went well. I'm thrilled. Just... don't go off and be a cop again until I get over this round of freaking out like a scared kid about you, all right?"

"Deal."

"So. Was it bad, being kidnapped?" He snorted. "What am I saying? Of course it was."

"Not really." She lifted one shoulder in a tiny shrug. "I feel like an idiot, but they darted me, right in public. Pretty ballsy, and damned hard to prevent. After that, I was drugged most of the time. So I might have the occasional freak out about it, but it's not like I feel traumatized. I made it through safely."

Xavier sat quietly for a while, but there was one more thing he wanted to put out on the table, right now. Since Tam wasn't doped up much, and seemed at least as alert as he was. "The kidnappers were going to do both kidneys. If we hadn't stopped them. You could have been almost back to normal, with no more cancer risk, if we hadn't called the Feebs in so fast. That was my doing. And a part of me is kind of sorry."

"I'm not!" Her tone was strong and sure. "Don't even think it, Xavier. If it had happened unavoidably, I'd have lived with it. But only if I knew we'd done everything we could to stop them. Everything. If you'd deliberately held back, and let an unknown woman die for me, it would have seriously wrecked me. No matter what we found out down the road about the donor being brain dead."

"Okay."

"Tell me you believe that."

"I do. Yeah. Okay, then I don't have to second-guess myself."

"Not ever. No matter what happens." She forced a grin. "Listen to us being all serious. Not my thing. Why don't you go find your guy and hover over him for a while?"

"I don't know if he's my guy." He stopped. Anyone could be listening. "You know how long I've known him," and it's not what his records now say.

“But still, we haven’t spent that much actual time together. Maybe we’re just supposed to be friends.”

“Maybe you won’t know unless you get the hell out of here and talk to him.”

“He’s not talking yet.”

Her expression softened. “Then go hold *his* damned hand until he does. And get some sleep in there somewhere too. Come back when you look less like the walking dead. And give him my best, when he wakes up.”

When. Yes. “I will. Thanks, big sister.”

“Go away now and let me rest, annoying little brother.”

He went. The ride back to Regional Healthcare was even more of a blur. The agent escorted him up and past the guard on duty, into Roman’s room.

And there Roman was, asleep, pale but peaceful, his hair dark against the pristine white pillow. Someone had put a plastic-upholstered chair at the bedside, and Xavier sank down into it. He didn’t hear the door close behind the agent, but when he looked up they were alone.

“Hey there,” he said softly. “Roman?”

There was no response, not a hitch of breath or a flutter of the black eyelashes that lay above his sharp cheekbones. He looked better, his skin less like parchment, his lips less chapped and coated with moisturizer. But he was still thin and unmoving and empty-looking. That pose, perfectly symmetrical, arms by his sides and palms up, was unnatural. The silence of the room, with nothing but a tiny whir of a fluid pump, was unnerving rather than soothing.

He reached out and took one of Roman’s hands, turning it in his own. That disturbed the symmetry. *Better.* Roman’s hands were wider than his but not longer. His skin was one shade more tan, but smooth and mostly hairless. Xavier found a couple of odd calluses, and he wondered what they were a legacy from. He knew Roman biked, and paddled a canoe. But he’d barely scratched the surface of who this man was.

Maybe he really had no right to be here, doing this. He set Roman’s hand down again, but at least now it was bent naturally at the elbow with his palm turned down. At least that.

What if Roman woke, and didn't remember anything? Infinitely better than not waking, but what if he didn't know Xavier at all? Would they have anything in common then?

He reached out, almost involuntarily, to run a finger down Roman's cheek. The days of stubble had been shaved, and his skin was silky smooth. The starvation hollows in his cheeks only served to emphasize the very determined shape of his jaw. What if Roman just wanted to go back to his job and his plant-collecting trips and not see Xavier again? What if he didn't believe anything else had happened?

Xavier's hand shook, and he pulled it back and wiped his damp palm on the sheet. Stupid to speculate. Stupid to worry over something that might never happen. And he had all of Roman's passcodes. He had hours and hours of conversation, of stories, of silences. *There's something lurking inside you, about when you served in the desert, something about a sniper, that still makes you go quiet and cold.* He could probably prove it. Or he could let Roman go.

He'd planned to tilt the chair back, to recline and nap, but instead he leaned forward onto the bed and laid his head down near Roman's flaccid hand.

Wake up and remember me. Please. But most of all, wake up.

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Chapter 14

Someone was snoring.

It was damned annoying.

Roman wanted to tell them to quit, but moving his lips would take more energy than he could muster. He felt muzzy and dizzy, disoriented to the point where even gravity didn't seem to apply. He must be lying on something, but couldn't feel it. Nothing touched him, and his eyes were lead-weighted.

That snoring truly sucked though.

He gathered a breath, and hissed some kind of "Shhh" through closed teeth.

Instantly, the snoring stopped. There was a rustle, and a voice he didn't recognize said, "Hey? Roman?"

Then blessed silence. He could rest. Sleep was good. He slept.

The next time he surfaced, the room was quiet. He felt far more aware. He lay on his left side, with a surface under him, resilient but yielding. The bed linens near his face had that bland paperclean smell of recyclables. He wasn't sure why he was braced for a reek of odors, but the cleanness reassured him.

He lay quiet, counting breaths. One in, one out. Two in, two out. Three. It was grounding, feeling his chest move, knowing the numbers came in sequence, one after the other, none missed, none lost. He took a bigger breath, and heard the sheet move with a faint rustle; held his breath for a count of three, then let it out. Control was important. Count of five.

He moved a finger. Just a fraction, a small enough gesture that if it failed, he could pretend he hadn't tried. He thought it moved. It was a small enough gesture he couldn't be sure of that either. When had he become a coward? He opened his eyes.

Blank, yellow walls. Hospital yellow, cold yellow, caged yellow. Again! He tried to get up, couldn't move, couldn't turn. He'd never get through those walls. There was rock behind them, miles and miles of rock and it would hold him until he turned to dust and blew away!

He breathed harder, faster, trying to find alpha state. Alpha led to dark. Dark led to light. If he could get out of himself, maybe he'd survive. Something. Somewhere. Faster!

An alarm went off, a thin buzzing. Medical alarm. Hospital bed. Why had that seemed like a good thing? He would never get out! He fought his own paralysis, panting as sparkling blackness narrowed his vision. Trapped!

A voice said, "What? What's wrong? Is he having a seizure?"

He gasped, managed to force out words. "Yellow. Never get through! Trapped! No, no, no, no." The sparkling dark closed in and he remembered the dark was his friend. The dark would lead him home. He let the darkness have him.

The next time he woke, there was space, and movement and sounds of life all around him. He froze, listening to the familiar noises of the Brazilian rainforest. It had been a while since he'd heard the leaves rustling, the hum of a hundred insects, the croak of an occasional frog. Somewhere water trickled thinly, the liquid sound varying as it made its way over rocks. It soothed him.

A light breeze stirred across his skin, explaining the lack of dripping heat. One of the rainforest's nicer days, then. In the distance a macaw screamed, and was answered by another even further away. A guttural growl that might have been a howler monkey sounded, and he opened his eyes.

Ahead, and above him, he saw tall trees climbing to a bright sky. Down here among the trunks, screened by thick undergrowth, everything was shadowy and dim. The leafy canopy swayed in a faint breeze, making what light there was flicker and waver. He tracked his gaze upward through the leaves, looking for the telltale movements of the monkey. Although, given how far howler calls carried, it might be well out of sight. A flash of color was clearly a bird, not a mammal, but he followed its path with his eyes.

This had to be a dream, however real it seemed. He hadn't been south in almost a year, and somehow knew, without wanting to understand why, that he wasn't there now. It was a nice dream though. He could stay here for a while. He put out a hand, slowly and carefully, to prop himself up. Instead of the rough fabric of his bedroll, or the crumbly loam of the forest floor, he felt smooth, soft cushioning under his palm.

He froze, squinching his eyes shut. Panic hovered, just outside this living, breathing space. He took a gasp of air, and smelled both the damp moss and mud he hoped for, and an underlying dry chemical scent that he hated. He lay there, waiting for the insect sounds to fade and his cage to come back. But it didn't happen.

Instead, a very soft touch rubbed up his arm to his shoulder and down. And again. Real touch. The macaws called more loudly, a distinctive sound. He reopened his eyes. The Amazon valley still rose around him, although when he lowered his gaze to the darkness of the forest floor, he could make out a few square feet of dark tile, leading to where the roots and stems and ferns began.

Without turning or moving, he said, very, very softly, "What the everlasting fuck?"

"You like it? It's not your special place, of course, but as close as I could come."

That voice was familiar, even if the slow, steady touch wasn't. He didn't want to look yet, though. "Am I dreaming?"

"Nope. Those are very high-res vid screens. Five sides of the room, if you count the ceiling. Better?"

"Than what?" He felt hidden panic battle to be recognized and added quickly, "No, don't answer that. It's nice. Very nice."

It was. Just the sight of those trees, the way they rose to the sky, pulled his eyes up to wide open space. Or at least the illusion of it. "Where am I?"

"We're in a vid room. A new one. If you want a different view you can say so. I have access to a few hundred live cams and thousands of recordings." The voice became teasing. "There's a stage camera setup from the last Thunderclap live concert, if you like."

"Hell, no! Hate them." He turned then, slowly and carefully, getting his elbow under him. "Xavier."

"Hi." Xavier's teeth flashed briefly in the dim light. "I wondered if you'd remember me."

"Some. Not all. Not yet." He didn't want to remember all of it yet. But this man, yes, that he did want. "You're my best friend."

"Oh." Xavier sounded stunned. "Yeah. I hope so."

“Hope so?” Confusing visions filled his head and he pushed them back to concentrate on easy stuff—lounging beside Xavier watching movies, talking easily. Sitting together looking something up on the Net, their heads side by side, almost close enough to kiss. Beating off together, and the way Xavier looked, all flushed and flustered and ready to come. “I don’t think I’m crazy.” Not that he was taking bets, yet.

“No, you’re not!” Xavier said quickly. “It’s been a crazy couple of weeks though.”

He still didn’t want to go there. He looked around. “So, did you set this up?”

“Yeah. A VR room. Like virtual reality goggles, but more complete, and less awkward. Although the scent part of it is screwed up, don’t you think? Moss with *eau de* chlorine.”

“To be fair, that might be the room. Are we still...” He schooled his voice to steadiness. “In a hospital?”

“They wanted to keep you safe until the docs release you, so yeah, I brought the jungle to you instead of you to the jungle.”

“Rainforest,” he corrected, because it kept him from getting emotional. “It’s impressive technology.”

“Only the best for the people I’m, um, friends with.”

“Good to know. Thank you.”

They sat a while looking at each other, as clouds passed overhead. Xavier said, “Kaleidoscope-city. Lighting up ten percent.” The clouds thinned and the room brightened.

“Kaleidoscope-what?”

Xavier raised a hand, waited, then said, “City. Command word combo. You have ten seconds after it to give VR commands. I put it together to be pretty responsive, but you really don’t want some guy with PTSD to accidentally program the crap he *doesn’t* want to see.”

“So it’s for PTSD therapy?”

“When we’re done with it, yeah. A donation to the, um, place.”

“Hospital.”

“Yes.” Xavier tilted his head. “You seem better.”

“Than what? No, don’t tell me. This is nice. Can we just hang out for a while?”

“Sure. Do you want to sit up more?”

He pushed with his arm, but didn’t get much effect. “Not sure I can. I feel like an overcooked noodle.”

“Kaleidoscope-city. Bed head up forty degrees.”

The flat mattress under his shoulders rose, lifting him more comfortably. The artificial breeze cooled his skin. He could see Xavier, sitting cross-legged on a floor cushion beside him. He shifted his weight, carefully at first and then more easily when he didn’t collapse, until his back felt securely supported. “This is nifty. A floor bed?”

“Used for folks who might fall out of a high one. I thought it might feel less, um, institutional.”

“Good thought.” He took a deeper breath. “I’m surprised I’m not being mobbed by official type people.” *Doctors. FBI.* He controlled a shudder. *Not yet.*

“You will be.” Xavier rubbed his shoulder harder. “You scared them off.”

“How?”

“Passing out. Hyperventilating. Screaming.”

“How butch of me.”

“They thought it was pain. From the treatment. But then we figured out it was the yellow walls and hospital stuff, and, um, stuff.”

Roman breathed through his nose, leaning harder against Xavier’s hand on his shoulder. “I used to like that color.”

“Sorry. Hush.” Xavier knelt up, digging massaging fingers into both of his shoulders now. “Forget I said anything. You’re fine. You’re safe now. You’re out.”

“In the rainforest.” He stared up at the sky for a while, then let his gaze drift down to Xavier’s worried face. “I’m okay.”

“You will be. You seemed calmer when I was nearby, even when you were drugged out of your skull. But they didn’t want you out of medical supervision, so I did this.”

“It’s quite a gift.”

“Not just for you. The hospital deserves something. They’ve been amazing. You were a tough case.” Xavier’s voice shook. “The regular treatment didn’t seem to be enough, so they gave you more, directly through a spinal port.”

That connected with a dull pain in his lower back. He slid a hand behind himself, but Xavier grabbed his wrist. “No touching. Not till the bandage comes off. Anyway, then they did some kind of pheresis thing to clear you out. And then when you started to wake up, you started screaming. Crud.” He stopped.

Roman turned his hand over, so his fingertips touched Xavier’s wrist and then fell away. “Sorry.”

“None of it’s your fault.”

“Not easy on you.”

“Well, this is good, anyway.”

“I do have questions,” Roman said carefully. “Are we being recorded?” *Is someone listening to us?*

Xavier’s grin was sharp. “Nope. We can be. I set it up with all kinds of surveillance. But I also set it up so I control that crap. As soon as you started stirring, I fritzed it.”

“I remember all kinds of weird stuff. Or maybe imagined it?”

“If you imagined it, I did too.”

“Like, blue lights and walking through doors and, well, um, that can’t be right.”

“And sitting an inch *into* the floor, telling me about jerking off with Joe Chu, when we couldn’t touch each other?”

His breath caught. “I never told anyone about that.”

“You remember some of it, though?”

“Yeah. I do.”

“My car.”

“You have a fucking Excalibra. With gasoline boost.”

Roman thought he’d never get tired of that smile on Xavier’s face. “Yep. Favorite toy. Other than my comp-array.”

“It all happened?”

“We’ll compare notes, but yeah. It did.”

He tried to reach for Xavier, but his arm felt heavy as lead. “Crap, I’m useless right now.”

“You lost some mass, for sure.” Xavier gave him a wicked look. “That spirit body of yours was kind of false advertising, wasn’t it? If you don’t get a little muscle back I might have to consider one of the other fifty bodybuilders constantly knocking on my door.”

He managed to say, “Sorry.”

Xavier leaned in closer. “It was a joke. Tam’s fault. She taught me to always insult the ones I love.”

“Um.” He wasn’t sure if that was better.

“My turn to say sorry. Too much, too soon. You’re supposed to be resting. I should let you sleep and go tell the docs you’re making sense.”

“No. Don’t.” He fumbled for Xavier’s wrist, found it, hung on. “Tam. How is she? Talk to me.”

“You need to take it easy, get better.”

He closed his eyes but didn’t open his hand. “You talk. I’ll rest.”

“Well, Tam.” Xavier’s soft laugh echoed in the darkness behind his eyes. “You know her. She’s tough...”

Xavier let his voice get slower and quieter. Roman’s thin face was relaxed and quiet, but more alive than he’d seen it in a long time. Well, ever. Relief was making Xavier dizzy, like he was floating a foot off the floor. His wrist ached from the strength of Roman’s grip and he treasured it. After days of fear, unable to sleep, choking down food to keep up his strength when it all tasted like sawdust, now suddenly he’d stepped out into the sunlight.

It was enough for now, just to know Roman was himself again. Anything more complicated could wait. Even the fact that the top criminal behind all this hadn’t yet been found, that Ginny had turned up murdered, that only half the guilty parties might come to justice, couldn’t dim his happiness. They’d struck a blow for the victims of this scheme, made it that much harder to repeat it the

next time, and out of it all they'd saved Roman. *They'd saved Roman.* He could almost drift in the sweetness of that...

He pinched his leg hard, to keep himself from joining Roman in sleep, and muttered, "Are you okay now? I should head out."

Instead of letting go, Roman pulled him closer. It was a feeble tug. He could have resisted. But he bent over Roman instead. "Yeah?"

Roman's eyes opened. "We never really *touched*, did we?"

"No. Almost. Near misses."

"And words."

"Yeah."

Roman's voice was a low whisper. "You wanted to, though?"

"Still do." He leaned closer, and said, "Now we'll have the chance to work things out."

Roman stared into his eyes, pupils dark and mysterious in the flickering light, and licked his lips. Parted them. "Make it real. Please?"

Xavier bent more, tilted his head, and brought their mouths together. It didn't feel electric, or stunning. Just the press of one set of lips on another, both a little stale, a little dry. Both tired and slow. But it was a moment of grace, to do this with Roman awake and aware, sharing it.

He finally eased back, not looking away. Roman's eyelids drooped again, but his mouth curved in a tiny smile. "Nice. Yeah."

"We'll get better."

"I'm looking forward to that."

He eased Roman's slacking grip off his wrist, and set his lax hand down on the covers at his side. "Kaleidoscope-city. Bed head down twenty degrees." The bed silently eased him down lower.

"You're leaving?"

"Not if you want me here."

"I alw's want you." Roman's voice was so slurred Xavier almost doubted what he was hearing. "But if you leave the trees and the birds, I'll try not to freak all over any'ne."

"I'll keep it running. Can the doctor come in for a bit?"

"Sure. 'F she doesn't mind 'm sleep'n."

"Should be fine."

"Tell Tam t' stop tsng you."

"Whatever. Sleep. I'll be back soon."

His only answer was a slow soft sigh. He smiled. "Kaleidoscope-city. Stop surveillance loop. Restart live feed." He gave it a moment to switch over, then stood, wincing at the ache in his knees.

He waited, standing, until he was sure Roman was fully asleep, then whispered, "Kaleidoscope-city. Door." The panel appeared in the left corner, carving a chunk out of a moss-covered tree. He stepped out, and restored the image.

An agent sat at the desk outside the room. She glanced up. "Anything?"

"He woke a little. I think it won't be long. I'll have the doc check on him."

The agent nodded. "Poor bastard."

"He'll be fine." He laughed suddenly, unable to hold it back. "It's all going to be fine now. We have time."

The agent gave him a dubious look, but didn't argue. Xavier didn't bother to explain. A hundred words, and one kiss, and he felt like he could walk on air. Concentrating, placing one foot firmly on the floor ahead of the other, he went to find the doctor. And a real bed.

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Chapter 15

Xavier knocked on Roman's door the next morning with a bit of anxiety. Okay, a whole boatload of nerves.

Until now, he'd been running on necessity, or at least very-usefulness. He didn't think Roman could object to his efforts to get him the best possible care. And yesterday, seeing Roman awake and calm in the VR room had made the mad, spare-no-expense scramble to get it set up seem justified. He'd been Roman's go-to person, however surreptitiously he'd managed to arrange that.

But now Roman was awake. He'd talked to his doctors, and had eaten a little, according to his nurse. He was neither the helpless patient, nor the insubstantial spirit with no other options. He was a real, solid, live guy who might look at the real Xavier and not want him as more than just a friend.

Nothing wrong with friendships. If that's what Roman wanted, he'd take it. But Xavier really was hoping for more.

He realized that if Roman had answered his knock, he'd missed it, in the frantic scrabbling of his thoughts. He knocked again.

"Come in." The door slid open under his hand.

When he stepped inside the jungle scene was gone. *Rainforest* scene, sorry. But now the vids showed a country night, an open meadow with a dark hint of trees and fences, and an arch of stars. The room was near black, lit only by the simulated moon overhead.

Roman said, "Kaleidoscope-city. Dawn light, fifty percent, slowly two minutes."

They were both silent, as dawn gradually broke over the rolling fields. A pale gold and rose-colored radiance washed over the sky, starting from one corner, gradually fading out the stars to a few pale hints in the navy rim of the opposite sky. Shadowy trees became silhouettes, and then as the light grew, the green of leaves and pale pink of blossoms developed color and form.

A little breeze picked up, cooling Xavier's damp forehead. Off somewhere to his left, a bird called sweetly. Then a flock of crows lifted from one of the trees, their raucous cries muted by distance, as they spiraled in a ragged black cloud up into the sky.

"I love that," Roman said. "I've made the sun rise six times already this morning. Only seen the crows twice though. It's a good program."

"There are a lot of recordings. Plus it uses live cam links, when they fit the request." Xavier was impressed by the steadiness of his own voice.

The light was bright enough for him to see Roman turn toward him. "Thank you."

Xavier waved that away. "It'll get used for patients a lot more,"—he managed not to say *messed up*—"distressed than you, over time. I wanted it to be good."

"It is."

The lighting had stabilized, bright enough to see easily, but with the sun just below the simulated horizon. Xavier was glad not to have his face in full view. He walked to Roman's bed, and sat on the flat cushion beside it without looking at him. The birdsong swelled for a while, then died down to desultory chirping.

Roman said, "This is weird. Between us."

"Yeah. It is."

"You saved my life."

"*We* saved your life, and you saved Tam, sort of. It was both of us together." He pulled up his knees and wrapped his arms around them.

"And now we have to figure out what to do with that." Roman's voice was deep, quiet.

Different somehow from his spirit-form's voice? Deeper? Xavier distracted himself for a moment, wondering about that. Then realized he'd been quiet too long when Roman said thinly, "Unless you don't want to do anything with it. I'd understand if you wanted to get away from all this. From me."

"No!" He turned, reached out instinctively. This time his hand closed on a solid wrist, Roman's skin dry and smooth under his fingers, the tendons strong ridges against his thumb.

Before he could let go, Roman put his other hand over the top. "Keep it there. Just for a minute. God, you have no idea how good it is to be touched."

Before he could think better of it, Xavier said, "I have all kinds of touching I hope you'll like."

Roman huffed a laugh. "I bet I will. Although I might need a little more time and calories before I'm up to anything athletic."

"Don't need athletic." This was the moment for taking a kiss, but something held Xavier back. That one time, with Roman dizzy and desperate for touch, didn't count. The next one would be their real first kiss.

Roman eased his grip, running his fingers over the back of Xavier's hand, tracing the shapes of the knuckles where they curved around. "We short-circuited some stuff. I know more truth about you than I've ever known about anyone. And you know a lot about me. Things I never told a living soul."

"Nothing really wrong with that," Xavier said resolutely.

"No. But it's odd. I've fucked a lot of guys, but I haven't really talked to very many."

"It's like a long-distance relationship. A lot of people meet online or wherever. In a VR game, or via phone-cam play. They don't get to touch until later, after they know each other and have spent time talking or gaming. And sometimes it clicks, when they finally get together physically, sometimes it doesn't. That's pretty much what we're doing, right?"

"With a bit more drama. Yeah. I guess. Good thought."

"So." Xavier had never been the bold one in a relationship, but he lifted Roman's hand, turned it over, and pressed his lips to the pulse-point in his wrist.

Roman said, "Click."

Xavier looked up to meet his eyes. Roman said, "I have other parts that are more fun to kiss."

"I like this." He returned his gaze to Roman's hand and arm, trailed his mouth up the strong ridges, licked, nibbled, and then sucked the tip of Roman's thumb between his lips.

Roman sighed, and shifted in his bed. "Hello, there."

Xavier had to let go and laugh. "Pretty cheesy, huh?"

"I liked it." Roman's smile was warm. "So I'm gathering that you want to have a... whatever we have."

"The R-word. Yeah. Friends with lots more. I want to see where we can go."

“Out of here. Hopefully soon.”

“You don’t like the room?” Xavier put a hand to his heart. “I’m hurt.”

“I love the damned room. I can’t believe you put it in like this for me, or even mostly for me. But as good as it is, it’s a room. I want to get out and go somewhere real.”

“As soon as the doctors clear you, I’ll give you a ride home.” Xavier hesitated. “Or, you know, anywhere you want. Your call.”

Roman said slowly, “I don’t know yet. I’m still a bit confused, and I don’t even know if it’s still the cognoburn, or the anxiety med, or the dehydration, or what.”

“The doctors told me they managed to get your system pretty much cleared of the drug by now.”

“Pretty much. That’s what they told me too. There might be some lurking. Not enough to be a big problem, but maybe some lasting effects. They don’t really know.”

“You sound pretty lucid to me.”

Roman shrugged. “How do I know whether or not something is missing, if I can’t remember what was there before? Not that I should complain because, yeah, I feel okay. Considering.” He leaned toward Xavier. “They won’t tell me about Lola though.”

“Lola?”

Roman dropped his gaze, looking uncomfortable. “I know that’s not her name. The girl. The little kid who was there with me. Is she going to be okay? No one will tell me anything.”

Xavier didn’t want to either. He could claim it was privileged information, and that no one but family knew, but it would be a lie. Her fate was a big news item.

His hesitation was enough to make Roman tense up, his eyes narrowing. “Don’t *you* tell me it’s none of my business. I was the one there, watching her, waiting with her.”

“No. I wasn’t going to say that.” He sighed and just said it. “They cleared her as a donor. Yesterday. The cognoburn the bastards used did a complete number on her. Her parents were located, and they signed the consent.”

“Shit!” Roman pounded his own thigh hard with his fist. “Shit! No. Fuck, no! Not her.”

Xavier hesitated, then grabbed his wrist, stopping him. “Don’t. Please? Don’t hurt yourself.”

“I want to feel it.” Roman twisted his hand free, but didn’t hit himself again. “I want... fuck. Why her? And that woman? Why are they brain dead and I’m still here?”

“I don’t know.” Xavier wanted to pull him close, to hold more than one sinewy wrist, but didn’t know if he had that right. “The doctors say it’s all about the dose. You got a lower dose. Whether someone screwed up the calculation, or the injection didn’t work or what, I don’t know. But yours was low enough to be reversible.”

Roman stared at his fists, clenched on his thighs. “I think... I fought them. I remember kicking. No, I’m not sure.”

“Maybe you fought them off enough you didn’t get the full dose. Maybe you saved yourself. And the others didn’t.”

“Well, what chance would they have had?” Roman met his gaze, eyes dark and wet. “She was a baby, so little. How could she have fought them?”

“She couldn’t.” Xavier’s throat was tight. He thought about offering that platitude about other lives saved, but it was ashes in his mouth. “I’m sorry.”

“Yeah. Me too.”

“We couldn’t have saved her. From the minute they gave her the fucking drug, she was dead. Figuring it out faster, getting there sooner, wouldn’t have saved her.”

“Don’t.”

“What?”

“Just, don’t.” Roman sighed, like all the air was going out of him. “Can you at least tell me we did something good? Did they catch the guy behind this?”

Xavier said carefully, “They arrested several people. They used the DNA traces in the bomb-shelter facility to locate other people who were involved, and at least one of them is talking. They won’t give me details.”

“But we don’t have the big number-one sick bastard who’s responsible?”

"I don't think so. Not yet. But the investigation is complicated. They may get him yet." Xavier groped for scraps of hope. "The story is out on the airwaves too, in bits and pieces. They're making a big stink about rich people cannibalizing the poor. There's talk about DNA-typing every missing person and matching them up to rich folk who might be in need of a donor. Like, preemptively."

"Yeah? Would that work?"

Xavier shrugged. "The problem is massive amounts of data, and compatibility isn't as simple as a pure match. You'd need some major computing resources. The scumsucker who runs this probably has a massive computing array set up for it, to do his searches. But just saying that they plan to do it might be a deterrent, if recipients think they might get spotted that way."

"I guess." Roman frowned. "Did you ever figure out who I was, um, supposed to be dissected for?"

"Not yet. Do you still want me to try?"

Roman hesitated, then shook his head. "It doesn't matter. They might not even have been in on the plan yet."

Xavier made a mental note to see if he could put some more comp power to work on it anyway. If he did find a candidate for Roman's recipient, he might keep an eye on their health. Just in case. "So what comes next?" He wanted to get them away from this, to ease that bleak look in Roman's eyes. "If you wanted to, you could come stay with us for a while. With me and Tam. No strings. Just, we have room and we'd be happy to, um, see you."

"How is Tam?"

"Doing fine. Recovering. About to rip her doctors a new one if they don't let her go home soon. She asked me to say hi and tell you she'd be willing to share house space, if you want to."

"Tell her hi from me too." Roman reached out and touched Xavier, fingertips on the back of his hand. "What about you?"

"I want you around," Xavier said, as clearly as he could. "I want to get to know you better. If we're just going to be friends, okay. But I want the chance for more. I'll understand if you don't like the idea of being back in our old house, though."

“Hm.” Roman hesitated, eyes blank as if looking inward. “It doesn’t feel like a problem right now. I liked that house. It was my escape.”

“We could program the VR room to duplicate it, and see how you feel. I could put cameras...”

Roman curved a hand behind Xavier’s head and pulled him forward. “Don’t overthink it.” He leaned toward Xavier, hesitated a moment, then kissed him.

It started slow and soft, but pretty soon Xavier opened his mouth and made pathetic little sounds of want. *So long. He’d wanted this for so long.*

He embarrassed himself, but Roman just chuckled and kissed him harder and wetter, taking the invitation. Roman was strong and practiced, controlling his head with that easy grip, taking possession of his mouth, not roughly but with certainty. When they separated, Xavier leaned over without thinking, to press his forehead into the curve of Roman’s neck. “Oh, yeah.”

After a second, he realized he had half his weight on the sick guy, and tried to pull back. Roman just hugged him closer, wrapping an arm across his shoulders. “Don’t go. I like this.”

“Me leaning on you?”

“Yeah. Absolutely. In fact, c’mere.” He tugged at Xavier, who let himself be maneuvered over onto the mattress, leaning against Roman’s chest.

“I’m not squishing you?” Roman felt wonderfully solid at his back.

“Not even close. Let me be the strong guy for a bit. You got to do the heroic stuff with the...”—he made the shape of a gun with his hand against Xavier’s thigh, but didn’t say the word—“so now let me hold you up for a bit.”

Xavier huffed a laugh. “I have *never* done anything like that. It was whacked. I was practically shaking. If you hadn’t been there...” He shook his head. “Believe me, I’m not the hero. You make me rise to the occasion.”

Roman tightened his grip. “And I plan to make you rise even more. Although not until we get out of, um, here.” He rubbed his cheek against Xavier’s hair, then his hug softened. “So, this VR thing of yours is great. Can we play with it?”

“Sure.” Xavier relaxed as the talk turned to his tech toys. Much easier. “What would you like? Seashore?”

“Hell, why not. Haven’t been to the ocean in decades.”

He said, "Kaleidoscope-city, scene fade-out two minutes; fade in Pacific Ocean, Puget sound, Stanley Park beach, realtime."

As they watched, the country scene faded out into a misty view of wide water. A low, rolling surf surged and ebbed against a foreground of sandy beach and boulders. The backdrop behind them was a lush mossy green forest. A few long cargo ships could be seen on the horizon, out well beyond the breakers. There was a big driftwood log on the sand, draped with seaweed, and a gull pecked at it. The senso-box gave them an increased, although dry, breeze, and the tang of saltwater and vegetation. Overhead, in a grey overcast sky, more gulls wheeled and circled, their cries like sick cats or lost children.

Roman said, "Gorgeous, but too gloomy. Maybe indoors? Somewhere, um, large and bright, indoors."

"A stadium?"

"Not very restful, that."

Xavier tuned out the bird cries, thought, and then asked for the Sistine Chapel, center view, recorded.

Roman laughed as it came into view. "Oh yeah, that's large and indoors."

"Problem?"

"No, it's perfect." They both looked up at that marvelous ceiling, restored again to its full glory. Painted long ago when the church would have burned them at the stake for what they were to each other, and yet glorious in its expression of hope.

After a few minutes, feeling Roman's chest rise and fall evenly under him, Xavier said, "Not bothering you?"

"You'd have to be pretty damned claustrophobic for this to feel too small." Roman sniffed the air audibly. "Not that the smell of air pollution and unwashed tourists is appealing, but it's startlingly realistic. You have great tech."

"I did security work for VirtuPlay. They let me have one of their newest sensoround systems. Not available in stores."

"Hm. *Nice* toys."

Xavier said, "Are you doing better? I mean, the doctor wanted you to have some IVs, more fluids and plasma proteins and stuff. But last time you yanked the line out."

Roman stiffened, but didn't push him away. "I guess I'm still kind of fucked up. But yeah, I think it'd be okay."

"I could set up a holo-projector. Disguise the IV pole as a tree."

Roman's chuckle sounded almost real. "I think I can handle the real thing. If you stay. Let me feel like a friend, not just a patient. If you have time, that is."

Xavier sighed and relaxed, letting out all the tension of the past weeks, letting his weight really fall back onto Roman. "Having you hold me up sounds pretty damned good right now. I have all the time we need."

Roman said, "Kaleidoscope-city, com channel to the nursing desk?"

The clear female voice Xavier had programmed in, (and he had no delusions about why he'd swapped out the tone-perfect male voice) said, "Hailing frequencies open, Captain."

Roman's laugh near his ear and the hug of his arm across Xavier's chest was more than enough reward.

Roman braced himself as Xavier turned the rented bubble-cab up the driveway. He was still so damned unsteady in his own skin. He hated not knowing what might bother him, or set him off. Not that he should complain. That little kid hadn't made it. He needed not to think of her as Lola. The kid. The one who'd been kidnapped. She was gone, and six lives for one wasn't much comfort.

But he'd gotten out. Even with the whole messy case still unfolding, and lots of court testimony in his future, he had his life back. He had no right to act like a victim over a little PTSD. Especially since he was getting better every day.

The Excalibra had turned out to be a problem, though. Not a heart-pounding vision-going-black problem, but he couldn't get comfortable in it. Couldn't take a real breath, no matter how much he reminded himself it was a great car and he was riding in it with Xavier, who loved it. No matter how he tried to be over all his stupid stressed-out shit.

Ten minutes out from the hospital, Xavier had pulled into a car rental, parked the sports car, and rented this sightseeing hulk. No amount of arguing from Roman had stopped him, and when he said Roman's silent freakout was

too distracting for him to drive safely for another half hour, Roman had given in. There was no denying this big, unfamiliar, open cab was more comfortable.

Xavier stopped on the drive outside the front door. "So, the house. Problems?"

Roman looked at it. For a place he'd never seen in the flesh, it felt so familiar. Not in a bad way, though. "So far, so good."

"I told you, we could go to a hotel, or rent a place. Or even drive you all the way back to your place in Ohio."

He felt a flash of irritation. "I'm not that fragile. Anyway this feels like a good thing." He tapped the door open and got out.

Xavier followed him up the front walk. The closer they got to the house, the more comfortable it felt. The front door swung wide before he got up the steps, and Tam stood in the doorway. "Hey. Nice to see you solid, Roman." She quirked a smile. "And dressed."

"Tam." He knew she'd only been home a couple of days herself. "You look good."

"I got the transplant plus face-lift package deal," she said.

Behind him, Xavier said, "I hope they did better work with the transplant part."

"Don't sass your elders."

"Much, much elders."

"Brat." But she was grinning. "Roman, are you sure you want to hang around this guy?"

"I think so," he said.

He meant exactly that, but she said, "Good choice of words. Make him work for it."

He glanced at Xavier. "I should have just said yes, shouldn't I?"

"Nah." Xavier looked calm and unworried. "Make me work for it."

Tam stepped back. "Come on in, guys. I put coffee on."

Xavier said, "Thanks. I take back half of what I said about your surgery."

"Don't tell me which half." When Roman stepped past her into the hall she said, "Can I get a hug? Just for verification purposes?"

“Verifying what?” Xavier asked.

“Solidity in three dimensions?” She opened her arms.

Roman moved into the hug, which turned out to be gentler than he expected. Maybe they each could tell the other was a little fragile. Tam murmured in his ear, “Xav was going a bit crazy when you were unconscious. Cut him a little slack, if you can.” She stepped back. “Okay. Solidity verified. Intelligence still in doubt.”

Xavier said, “Lead us to the coffee, bitch.”

“That’s the thanks I get for having it ready.” She headed down the hallway toward the kitchen.

Roman turned to follow her, but Xavier grabbed his arm. “She’s right, you know. You always have choices. I don’t want you to feel grateful or like you owe me.”

He’d thought he’d put all that to rest, but Xavier was surprisingly unsure of himself sometimes. Roman set firm hands on Xavier’s shoulders, pulled him in, and kissed him. When they eased apart, Xavier was quiet, and smiling. Roman said, “One day at a time, regardless of money and sisters and craziness. That’s what we agreed on, right?”

“Yeah.”

“We’ll talk. I get to use the spare room. For now. And I’ll pay rent.”

Xavier wrinkled his nose, but said, “Yes.”

“I get to kiss you. And vice versa.”

“Definitely yes.”

Roman took advantage of that rule again. Xavier’s mouth was warm and welcoming, and Roman had to take a breath and a step back, to stop at only a kiss.

“It’s still weird,” Xavier said. “Knowing so much about each other in some ways, and nothing in others.”

“We’re just doing it backward, from my point of view,” Roman pointed out. “Usually I meet ’em, fuck ’em, then decide if I want to get to know them.”

“Is that how you like to operate?” Xavier’s tone was serious, but his eyes danced with amusement.

"In theory," Roman said with dignity. "In practice, it's mostly been meet, fuck, decide I *didn't* want to get to know them."

"So maybe backward is a good thing."

"I think it could be." Good enough that it was overwhelming to think about sometimes. So instead he grinned, ran his gaze down Xavier, and back up. "You and me and backward could be excellent."

"You make me crazy." Xavier gestured down the hall. "Coffee?"

Roman glanced around. The hallway's cream-colored walls, the smooth floor, all resonated to his sense of *déjà vu*. "I'm the crazy one, you know. You might want to take back your invitation."

"You're doing a ton better. You walked out of the hospital without a problem."

"Without falling over and passing out in the yellow hallways, you mean. Yeah, I'm a lot better." His particular, idiosyncratic claustrophobia was fading, although he knew there was still therapy in his future.

"I want you here. However you choose to be." Xavier turned away. "Come on."

Roman followed him until they reached the kitchen. There he was suddenly overcome with a wash of memories—Xavier, Tam, secrets and fear and relief and belonging, enemies and friends. He swayed and put a hand on the wall.

"Are you okay?" Xavier asked.

"It's not blue." It was a dumb thing to say.

But Xavier nodded. "Yeah, not any more. You stepped in here out of the blue, and changed all of our lives. This feels strangely ordinary, doesn't it?"

"I like it." He looked around the kitchen. Without the glow of the refracted laser, it was warm and homey.

"I still have that Doppler out there, pointed at the window," Xavier said. "I may never take it down."

"I don't see it."

"You're not supposed to be able to. Something about you spirit-walking turned it to visible light."

"Right." He knew that. "You left it there?"

Xavier flushed. "Just in case. If you ever got lost."

"That's nice, I think." Not a vote of confidence, perhaps, but an open invitation. He wandered over to the window. There was a dark glass box set on the counter in front of it. He only paid attention when a light inside it came on, shining through the mosaic panels, casting a multicolored glow on the windowsill. "What's this?"

"Just something I bought," Xavier said quickly. "Tam, it's broad daylight. Turn that off."

"Wait." Roman reached for it, and turned it in his hands. Four sides of stained glass enclosed a little LED bulb, set to flicker. On each side, the colored glass formed a stylized candle, its flame shading from gold at the tip to a deep clear blue with a hint of green at the base. That color made his heart catch. "My candle."

"It's just a thing."

Tam said, "He commissioned them. A dozen. There's one in a window of every room, upstairs and down."

"I like supporting local artists. We can put them away now." Xavier reached for it, but Roman moved the lamp out of reach.

"It's great. But why a dozen? Isn't that kind of overkill?"

Xavier flushed and turned to stare off out the window. "Maybe you don't have a monopoly on crazy."

Roman set the light down, stepped closer, and laid the palm of his hand on Xavier's neck. Xav's skin was warm, his stubble just a hint of roughness. "Tell me?"

Xavier met his eyes. "That week, when you were lying there unconscious and I didn't know whether I'd see you again, or how, I, um, dreamed."

That shadow in his eyes was familiar. "Nightmares?"

"Yeah. I kept dreaming you were lost, wandering, hunting for me, for this house. And you couldn't find us. I kept waking thinking I hadn't left the light on. Over and over."

That cut a little close to home, but Roman managed to keep his voice steady. "Sounds familiar."

"I bet." Xavier reached up and laid his hand over Roman's, pressing him in more firmly against his face. He rubbed his cheek against Roman's palm.

Tam said, "I told him to do something to get some sleep. I meant EZ-doze, but he bought art instead."

"I happened to spot this local craftsman online who made stained glass to order. I was going to use real candles inside. But they blow out, or burn down. LEDs last for decades. So I had him make these."

"For every window. For me?"

"Yeah." Xavier pulled Roman's hand away from his face, and captured it between his own. "In case. No matter where you went; no matter which way you turned. Spirit walking or solid flesh, I wanted to have a candle in the window for you, so you could always find your way home." He let go, color rising in his cheeks again. "Dumb, right? Presumptuous. It helped me sleep, but they could be sold or..."

"Don't you dare." Roman bent and kissed him, fast and light. "Yeah, it's a bit much. But I had those nightmares too. We'll keep them. Make them yours and mine. And whatever happens, wherever we both go, we'll leave a light burning in the window for each other." He kissed him again, longer, slower, learning the taste of his mouth, the feel of his tongue. Xavier's body was hard and lean against his. He savored the unfamiliar solidity of it.

"Aw, how sweet," Tam drawled. When they pulled apart, Xavier looking as dazed as Roman felt, she held out two mugs. "Coffee, and coffee. Take them. Get a room. Leave me to my lonely slavery, catering to the household needs of a pair of..."

Xavier silenced her with a hand over her mouth, which he yanked back just in time to avoid getting bitten. "There are more of these candles upstairs," he said. "What do you say, Roman? Want to come up and see my stained glass etchings?"

Roman wrapped his hands around the mug. The coffee was hot, the smell fragrant, Tam's grin was friendly, Xavier's eyes promised so much more. He looked down. He was wearing soft slacks and a T-shirt. His sneakers didn't sink into the floor. Around him, the old house was a refuge, not a prison, and for the first time since that dart hit his neck, he felt real and present in his life. He looked back up, and saw the smile slowly fading from Xavier's face.

He leaned in quickly for one more kiss. "Absolutely," he said.

They climbed the stairs. The wood creaked under his weight, just as much as under Xavier's. In the master bedroom, he sipped the coffee, then set his mug on the stand beside the bed. Xavier stepped closer, and set his down too, eyeing him, clearly strung tight but patient, waiting for Roman to make the next move.

Roman looked over at the mirror. There were their clear reflections side by side. *Real. Together.* He met Xavier's eyes in the glass, and their gazes locked. God, it felt like he'd been waiting forever for this. He shifted his stance, turning slowly in front of the mirror, watching Xavier's reactions. From the tenting of Xavier's jeans and the way he swallowed hard, Roman wasn't the only one wanting more. Needing more. He moved closer, took the hem of his own T-shirt in his fist, and eased it upward, giving Xavier his best smile. "You know, I wasn't sure I'd ever say this again, but I have *way* too many clothes on."

Xavier took a short, fast breath and closed his fists until his fingernails bit into his palms. He was determined not to move too fast. Roman was clearly ready to get physical. That gorgeous heat in his eyes, and the naked chest appearing as he pulled off his T-shirt said so.

And Xavier really, really wanted to jump him and maul the crap out of him. But Roman was still getting over his ordeal, just a few days out from waking, traumatized and nervous and confused. Xavier was in this relationship for the long haul, and he wasn't about to let his little head overrule the big one. He would let Roman set the pace. He waited.

Roman dropped his T-shirt on the floor and opened his waistband, then looked at Xavier sideways. "I'm not getting naked alone again, am I?"

"Oh. God, no!" He hadn't intended Roman to feel like that. Xavier whipped off his own shirt and jeans, tugged his briefs down and kicked them aside. He looked back up, and then colored. Apparently, there was more than one way to get this wrong.

Roman still stood in slacks and sneakers, eyeing him quizzically. "Fast change artist in a past life?"

He choked. "I... no. I just wanted, well, for you to be the one with more clothes on. This time."

“Ah.” Roman kicked off his sneakers and took a step closer. “That’s a nice thought. Come here?”

Xavier moved in, slowly, until the bobbing head of his overeager cock brushed Roman’s pants. Roman reached for him, gripped his upper arms, and tugged him closer. They were almost the same height. Xavier tilted his head just a fraction, and opened his lips. Roman kissed him.

They’d done all kinds of kissing in the last few days. Desperate hellos and proof-of-life kisses, slow exploration and hot can’t-wait. But this one was different, and not just because he was plastered against Roman’s naked chest, with Roman’s hands sliding down toward his bare ass.

This kiss was somehow recognition. Sweetly familiar. *Oh, yes, there you are, where you’re supposed to be.* It wasn’t as hungry as he’d have expected. Their lips met, rubbed, parted. Teeth nipped, gently tugged. Roman’s tongue slowly slid in against his, retreated, glided over his lip. Breath mingled with breath. It felt like they finally had time for everything.

When they stopped, he stayed wrapped in Roman’s arms, his hands locked around Roman’s bare back. He tipped his head enough to meet those surprisingly blue eyes, and saw his own flushed face reflected in the shine, fun-mirror-close and curved. What did Roman see?

Roman kissed him again quickly, and then echoed his thoughts. “God, the little things. I love that I can see myself in your eyes. And I really like the way you look at me.”

“Um.” He had a hard time being eloquent, when Roman’s hands were real and warm, cupping his ass, kneading it. “So. I’m pretty versatile. What do you want?”

Roman’s fingers tightened, then eased away. “I wish, um, that I could feel you inside me, be filled with you. That’s what I want most but, well, I’ve been eating crap lately and...” He looked down and shifted his weight uneasily.

“You’re not up for it.” Xavier slid a hand up behind Roman’s head to steady him for another kiss. “We have lots of time to get there, eventually. No rush.”

“I do want to see and taste you, and feel you. I want everything real that I can have.”

Xavier wanted that too. “Come to bed, then.”

It took just one step to come up against the big bed. He tossed back the covers quickly, because he didn't want to get lube and cum on some two-centuries-old lady's handiwork quilt. The exposed sheets were thousand-count bamboo, satin-soft and smooth. "Come, lie down."

Roman stepped out of his trousers and underwear, baring that ass that Xavier had memorized. Or perhaps not quite. He was thinner, not as curved and perfect, but real now, and still totally desirable. Xavier patted the mattress, watching Roman move with quiet appreciation. They eased onto the bed on their sides, facing each other. Xavier ran his hand over Roman's shoulder, across his ribs, up to pinch one nipple lightly, then down to the groove of his hip.

Roman groaned softly. "Yeah. Touch me. Harder." He raised his knee, laying it on Xavier's thigh.

They moved closer, the space between them closing down to nothing. They kissed, nuzzled, pressed together at chest and groin and thighs. Xavier cupped Roman's head in one hand, and reached around to that amazing ass with the other. Roman smashed their mouths together, almost too hard, kissing and biting. Xavier tasted a hint of blood from Roman's lip, and pulled back. "Sorry, easy."

"No. Hard." Roman nipped his jaw, licked his neck, rutting against him until the iron length of his cock ground against Xavier's stomach. "I want to taste, feel. I want all of it."

"Not blood, though." Xavier gripped his head in both hands, gentling the kiss. "Plenty to taste without hurting yourself."

"Sorry!"

Xavier had to tighten that grip now to keep Roman from pulling back completely. "Hey, it's your blood. But just go easy. Let me..." He licked Roman's lips, then opened his own mouth, inviting Roman's tongue.

Gradually they found a rhythm, lips and tongues, hips and thighs moving together, rubbing, sticky-skin friction. Roman's cock bumped his, slid away, rasped past again, maddeningly elusive. "Wait," Xavier said, fumbling to the side toward his nightstand drawer.

Roman eased his arms from behind Xavier's back. "What?"

"Lube. Let me try this." He pulled out the bottle, his favorite self-warming kind, and poured out a handful. The slippery heat of it on his palm as he

grasped Roman's shaft made them both moan. He moved over just enough to capture both their dicks together, his fingers too short to wrap all the way around both. "Your hand," he said. "Please."

Roman's fingers covered his. He jerked his hips in reflex, thrusting into the heated, ridged, tight tunnel they made. Roman gasped and mimicked him, sliding them together. They grunted in response, thrust in unison, did it again. Again.

Roman took a short, sharp breath. "This? Okay?"

"You're driving." Although really, they were both doing this, pressed close, rubbing, pumping against each other into their joined, hot, slick-greased hands.

"This is good. Perfect." Roman took a fast breath. "I want to come on you. You on me. I want spunk, slick, cum, all over. Ngh." Roman kissed him, licking into his mouth, capturing him, hips moving faster.

When Roman's teeth moved to his neck, Xavier said, "Sounds messy," and laughed, breathlessly, because he was in no mood to change anything. "Sounds great."

"Yeah." Roman's face flushed; his fingers tightened around them, jacking them together as they thrust, hard and demanding and almost too much. Perfect.

Xavier tried to match him. He wanted nothing more than the slip and squish, sound, pressure, warmth, two hard cocks between two men's hands in counterpoint now, finding just space, just heat, just touch enough, sliding, rubbing, building need and demand until he felt dizzy with it. He'd had other plans, and didn't care because this was enough, and more than enough, and he was going to come, just from this. "Roman!"

"Yeah. Come on!" Roman arched his neck, his mouth dropping open, breath coming in harsh gasps. Then he groaned, a drawn-out, deep sound. The smell and sticky slide of cum mixed with lube between their hands. Xavier felt Roman jerk and shudder, and then he came too, in a white-out rush, over their fingers and Roman's stomach, and his own.

They let go of each other as one, too. Xavier panted, reaching blindly for the sheet with his gloppy hand. Roman scooped a stray corner toward him, wrapped it round his fingers and wiped them both, then pulled Xavier in against him, tight to his front.

Xavier sighed. "Whew. Mmm." He nuzzled in blindly against Roman's neck. "We're still a mess, you know. We're going to glue together."

"I want that." Roman's whisper was soft and satisfied. "I want it to stick, and pull. Not disappear. This is so damned good."

"Because this is real?" Xavier tried to keep his voice sounding academic, curious.

Roman found his mouth with soft lips, and kissed him. "Because it's you. Real, yeah. Not a fantasy. But mainly, not a dream of you with only wishes behind it. Not you and me with a sheet of glass between us. You and me with spunk and sweat and breath... and time."

"Oh. Okay." He liked the sound of that.

"I'm still not really back to who I was, before. I have stuff to figure out. But when I'm touching you, I don't have any regrets."

Xavier kissed him softly. "We'll have to do a lot of touching, then."

Roman tugged him onto his other side, rolling them into a tight spoon and draping himself over Xavier's back. He nuzzled in against Xavier's neck. Xavier savored just how good it felt to be held like that. He was hugged in tight against Roman's chest, his thighs pinned under Roman's leg, movement pretty much impossible. He lay there, pulled back against that solid bulk, and gently rubbed Roman's locked arms, as they breathed slower, and softer, and the cum dried on them.

Eventually he murmured, "Pretty soon, I'm gonna vote for a shower over feeling real, and sticky."

Roman said against his hair, "I'm not there yet."

"Okay." He wriggled in more comfortably. "So, we could plan to just store stuff in that spare room."

Roman snorted a laugh. "We'll talk about that."

"It's closer to Tam's room than mine, and she snores."

"So do you."

He bumped backward with his ass. "Do not."

"Do too."

"How would you know?" They both took a sharp breath. Xavier thought about when Roman might have discovered that. He had a sudden vision of Roman's insubstantial naked back, disappearing into the blue light. He

tightened his fingers on the solid arm across his chest, but didn't say anything. Time would tell. Time would show them what this could be.

Roman kissed the angle of his jaw, with a soft mumble of lips. Xavier closed his eyes against the pale daylight filtering in past the blinds, and tried to sleep.

Roman pulled Xavier closer and breathed against his hair. He was sated and wrung out, and happier than he could remember feeling in a long, long time. He'd expected to fall asleep right away, but somehow he couldn't find that last inch of relaxation. Apparently, Xavier was in the same boat, because he squirmed, sighed, moved his arm higher, then lower. Roman eased his upper leg back to make more room.

"Sorry," Xavier murmured. "I should just get up and let you drop off."

"You should lie there and let me hold onto you." Roman rubbed his chin over Xavier's hair, feeling the little tug of his stubble against the fine strands. "Or tell me what's bothering you."

"Nothing. Well, nothing special." Xavier sighed. "Borrowing trouble. I should be just reveling in the moment, right? The win? You, me, together, bad guys vanquished?"

"Masque and Silverman win again," Roman agreed. "No?"

"Those guys don't get to rest on their laurels very long either. But yeah. Ending credits for this episode coming up, the swell of cheesy triumphal music."

"But?"

"What if?" Xavier wriggled out of his hold and rolled over so they could see each other, although he tangled their legs back together, and laid a hand on Roman's hip, keeping contact. "What if the top bad guy doesn't get caught? What if he's mad at you, or Tam, and comes after you?"

"Or you?" Roman didn't like that idea, but said it as evenly as he could.

"Sure. Or me? What if that crime boss who turned out to be your match goes into complete heart failure after all, and decides to send his own goons to harvest your heart?"

Roman shook his head against the satin smoothness of Xavier's pillowcase. "You made that impossible, as soon as you figured out the gene match. He's on notice that we know about him now."

"Yeah, like he cares that some obscure computer programmer will crash all his systems if he touches you."

Roman had to snort, because that did sound a bit silly. It was hardly their main deterrent though. "I think the fact that he knows you also gave his name to the FBI is threat enough." Xavier had found a list of ten people for whom Roman was a highly compatible donor. But by far the winning candidate was Joseph Domo, a known crime figure whose recent illness had damaged his heart, possibly beyond repair. Domo was in treatment, but if it failed, he might need a transplant at any time.

They'd guessed that Roman's plans to get lost in the Brazilian rainforest for months had probably triggered his kidnapping. Domo's health was rocky, and he wasn't one to leave his own best interests up to chance. Whether it had been his direct order, or the organ-legger's, they had no way of knowing, but someone had swept Roman up and put him in storage before he could leave the country.

"You think Domo's worried about the FBI?"

"I think if I disappear and he suddenly shows up healthy, with appropriate surgical scars, a simple catheter biopsy could convict him of murder. Even Domo couldn't buy his way out of that. I'm pretty sure I'm safe."

"Oh. Yeah." Xavier leaned closer and kissed up his neck, licking under his jaw.

He wiggled away. "That tickles."

Xavier nipped him harder. "So, am I useful enough to keep?"

Roman deliberately slid his leg up Xavier's, rubbing their thighs together. "You're useful in many excellent ways." From Xavier's little frown that seemed to be the wrong answer. "What?"

Xavier sighed. "I don't know. Don't mind me. I keep swearing I'll be patient, but I want..."

Roman waited.

"I want it all. I want us safe. Want the bad guys locked away forever. Want you to stay with me, to be with me. Now tell me I'm greedy."

"I can't give you most of those, but I'm with you. What do you think I'm doing here, otherwise?" He glided his hand over Xavier's bare hip.

"Could be a lot of things. Co-hab with benefits. Gratitude. Mutual getting off. Sex doesn't imply anything more."

Roman hadn't expected someone with all of Xavier's advantages to be so insecure, especially now. He'd expected to be the one wondering, and doubting, but the little unhappy twist to Xavier's mouth and the droop of his eyelids said otherwise. Roman wondered if there was a history to it, that he might want to hear someday. He put a hand under Xavier's chin and raised it, running his thumb along his soft lower lip. "Sex doesn't always imply more, no. But this? Lying in a bed together? Talking, planning, worrying and debunking the worrying? I think this does. If you want it to."

Xavier kissed Roman's thumb. "I want."

"Okay then." Roman tried to gather him in close. Xavier went along with it, but he still didn't feel soft and relaxed and sated. Roman tried a few slow, languid kisses. He savored them, enjoying the excellent buzzing satisfaction that was all his orgasmed-out nerves could manage, but when they both came up for air, Xavier still fidgeted. Roman gave his neck a nip, maybe a bit harder than he'd meant to. Xavier yelped. Roman asked, "What else?"

"I'm sorry. I worry. I think maybe it goes with the security consulting background. Always dreaming up problem scenarios, you know. I'll try to stop. I will."

Roman chuckled. "I'm guessing you can't just turn off that busy brain. All you can do is stop sharing it with me, and I don't want that. So tell me."

"The spirit-walking."

"Ah." It was his turn to stiffen and look away.

"Do you think you could only do that because your physical body was trapped and drugged? Or do you think someday...?" Xavier's voice trailed off.

"I don't know. I don't want to explore it. I don't want to try." *He never wanted to feel that again, stepping out of himself, leaving his body empty and uninhabited on a bed.*

"Sorry. Of course not." Xavier sighed. "Just, if it ever happened again..."

"What?" He felt a momentary flash of anger. "Did you think it was fascinating? Exciting? Did you figure you'd like to learn how?"

“No!” Xavier shoved at his shoulder. “Well, yeah, maybe I thought that once or twice, but not at the expense of you going crazy over it.”

“You think I’m crazy?”

“Hush.” Suddenly Xavier was against him, over him, kissing, gentling him with voice and hands and weight. “No. You’re not. You know that. That’s not what I meant.”

Roman would have preferred to stay mad, because it was easy and safe and he could let the subject drop. But it was hard to resist a snugly, penitent Xavier. He grumbled, “Then what did you mean?”

“Just that we don’t know if it might ever happen again, that’s all. Just that the possibility is always going to be there.”

“Like smoke in the air,” Roman said, thinking of Grandfather, and dry, desert winds, and the traces of a campfire, rising. “Yeah. I don’t want it, though.”

“Okay.” Xavier turned them. This time Roman was the small spoon, hugged in against Xavier’s chest. Xavier’s arm curved around his shoulders, Xavier’s thigh lay over his legs, Xavier’s mouth brushed his hair. “No more worries. Not right now. Just this. We’ll savor this.”

Roman sighed and pressed back. He reached for Xavier’s hand and tugged it up to his mouth, until he could press his lips to the tip of one finger, feel the shape, taste skin and a hint of salt. There was the bulk of muscle at his back, a man’s soft cock against his ass, puffs of breath in his hair, the smells of sex in his nose. “This is real,” he said. “It’s what I want. But you know what?” Certainty rose up, comfort deep as the mattress that cradled them. “If anything happens, if anything changes, there’s one thing I know, for certain sure.”

“Hm? What’s that?”

“I know that if I’m ever gone again, you’ll always keep a light on, to bring me home.” That knowledge, and Xavier’s solid presence at his back, eased him down into sweet sleep at last.

The End

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Author Bio

Kaje Harper grew up in Montreal, and spent her teen years writing, filling binders with stories. But as life got busy, the stories began to just live in her head. The characters grew up, met, endured, and loved, in any quiet moment she had, but the stories rarely made it to paper. Her time was taken up by work in psychology, teaching, and a biomedical career, and the fun of raising children.

Eventually the kids became more independent and her husband gave her a computer she didn't have to share. She started putting words down in print again, just for fun. Hours of fun. Lots of hours of fun. The stories began piling up, and her husband suggested if she was going to spend that much time on the keyboard she ought to try to publish one. MLR Press accepted her first submission, Life Lessons, which was released in May 2011. Kaje now has several novels and short stories published, including Amazon bestseller The Rebuilding Year, and a selection of free short stories and novels available on Smashwords and elsewhere. She currently lives in Minnesota with a creative teenager, a crazy little omnivorous white dog, and a remarkably patient spouse.

Contact & Media Info

[Website](#) | [Goodreads Author page](#)

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SEE YOU SMILE

By Dawn Sister

Photo Description

A young man with slightly disheveled, light blond hair sits, balanced precariously on a balcony rail in dappled sunlight. He is wearing only a towel and is looking at and reaching down to something behind him. His chest and stomach are smooth and well-toned. He is slim and not overly muscular. His hair is covering his face hiding his expression, adding an air of mystery. There is a hint of a smile on his lips.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

I've watched him for weeks. I feel like a creep, I hide behind the plants on my balcony. This young man could be my son. He is always so earnest, careful and alone. Does he not have friends? Why does he seem so introvert? I want to see him smile, I want to see him laugh.

Something isn't right and I want to know it.

Yours, the mature man from the apartment next door

I'd love this to be a May/October romance with a HEA; the young man is deaf. A bit of pain is okay in the beginning but I really want a lot of humor, perhaps also based on the age gap.

Sincerely,

Sunne

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: age gap, disabilities, humorous, over age 40, hurt/comfort, writer, family drama, switch/versatile, widower

Word Count: 73,015

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Thank you, I love you all.

SEE YOU SMILE

By Dawn Sister

Chapter One

Stalking is Addictive (and Creepy)

I'm Jake and I'm a creep.

I have to admit it, because that is halfway to recovery right? Like Alcoholics Anonymous: Hi I'm Jake and I'm an alcoholic?

Well okay, not quite what I'm trying to say. I'm not an alcoholic, but I am kind of a new-neighbor-aholic.

Urgh! I think I might be turning into a dirty old man.

I have a new neighbor. He moved in three weeks ago, and I haven't spoken to him yet, but I've seen him. I've watched him. God he's beautiful, can you describe a man as beautiful? This one is. There are just no other words that fit.

He's also a kid, compared to me, that is. He must be at the most, twenty, twenty-one maybe? I'm forty-five and having a midlife crisis.

Since he moved in, I've had three weeks of torture and torment because it's almost painful to watch him, he's so damn perfect. From his light blond, sun-bleached hair to his perfectly tanned toes. He doesn't wear shoes most of the time. His eyes are the color of the sky. Better than that, because when I have caught a glimpse of them, the sky pales in comparison. The sun shines less when he isn't in my direct line of sight, and I am pretty certain he takes all the oxygen from the air because when I see him I can't breathe.

I am a creep of the highest order though, because I am old enough to be his father, and I can't even pluck up the courage to go over there and speak to him. I'd rather watch from my deck, hiding behind my overgrown ivy and ducking every time I get a hint he might look my way.

It's not that I'm shy, or unsociable or anything, it's just that I'm afraid I'll make a fool of myself if I walk up to him and suddenly lose the ability to speak. He takes my breath away, and that hasn't happened in a long time, a very long time.

I need to know more about him. The more I find out the less awkward it will be when I finally pluck up the courage to go over there and speak to him.

“Did you speak to your new neighbor yet?” my sister asks me as she arrives with three bags full of groceries and a new microwave oven.

“Sarah, why do you have a microwave oven with you?” I ask as she struggles up my front steps and dumps it on the porch.

“Jake, why don’t you save the questions for later and give me a hand with this stuff?” she snaps irritably.

She started it by asking me about my new neighbor!

I lean over the railing and glance around the back trying to see if my target has moved from his spot on the beach, on a towel, wearing only shorts and shades, oh my! I bite my lip. I have a choice now: continue stalking him or help my sister.

My sister wins this time. I need a distraction anyway because he’s rolled over onto his stomach and is reading a book with his feet up in the air, crossed at the ankles.

He’s so goddamn cute!

“Jacob!” Sarah calls, and snapping out of my reverie, I pick up the still boxed microwave oven and carry it inside.

Why has she brought a microwave? I have one already. It’s a new one, or at least it was last year, when I blew the last one up because I was distracted as I set the timer to heat up some soup and set it too high. Come to think of it, that one was only about a year old because I blew the one up before it in much the same way the year before.

I am seeing a pattern emerging here.

“You can keep this one in your garage ready as a spare for when you blow up the one you’re using,” Sarah tells me casually, as if you buy microwaves for your brother all the time, because they repeatedly blow them up.

“You automatically assume I’m going to blow the existing one up, Sarah,” I say archly. “You have such faith in my abilities.”

She stretches up to kiss my cheek, no mean feat, since I am six foot four, and she is tiny and I mean, pixie sized.

“Your ability as a writer, sweetie, yes, I have every faith in you because you are brilliant, but in your ability to not burn your house down or blow up an

appliance while meeting a deadline? Absolutely not.” She regards me critically. “You are in deadline crisis now aren’t you?” she asks.

Taking in my appearance, she nods. She has her answer just by looking at what I’m wearing: sweats that have not been off my body for three days; at least two week’s growth of beard; no shoes and only one sock; a shirt with several days’ worth of food stains and a nondescript, crusty bit on the bottom edge, which I try to cover up but only succeed in drawing her attention to it.

“Urgh!” She screws up her nose. “You are such a slob. Go take a shower, Jake, oh my god. When did you last eat? I’ll make you a sandwich.” She turns me and pushes me towards my bedroom without waiting for me to answer. I could tell her that I’d eaten five minutes before she arrived, but she would make me food anyway.

I take her advice. I need a shower anyway, because neighborhood watch can get you hot under the collar. Who knew?

Three weeks, though, and I know nothing about him. I don’t even know his name. In the past, when a new neighbor moved in, mail usually got delivered here by mistake, so I would use that as an excuse to go round and introduce myself, but no such luck this time. The mailman has either learned how to read or the guy doesn’t get any mail.

Now that’s a sad thought. No mail? I’d die if I didn’t get mail. Sometimes it’s my only contact with the outside world when I’m writing. Mine are mostly emails, but I get snail mail too. I prefer snail mail actually, because computers don’t like me. I can handle word processing and saving and backing up files but once I get beyond the confines of my own hard drive and venture into cyber space things can go horribly wrong. Emails are about as much as I can cope with, and then things can go pear shaped very quickly.

So no mail huh? Or mail, but not much. Come to think of it I haven’t even seen the mailman drop anything off at the guy’s mail box. Not that I’m watching every minute of the day, even if it seems that I am.

I run my hand through my greasy hair as I turn on the shower. I have to stop calling him “The Guy”. He has a name, I’m sure. Most people do. I just need to learn it and not seem too creepy while I’m trying to find out.

Yeah, because watching “The Guy’s” every move from behind my curtains, behind my shrubbery on my balcony, or behind the railings of my porch isn’t creepy at all. Stepping boldly up to his door, knocking and introducing myself

would be so much easier and less likely to get me arrested... except... I've tried that.

Contrary to the picture I paint of myself, I am not a terrible neighbor. The first day the guy arrived I tried to introduce myself. I hadn't seen him at this point. I just noticed there was movement in the usually empty beach house. I walked up to his front porch and knocked on the door but there was no answer. I know he was in.

When I got back home I saw him, large as life, in his kitchen, which I can see from my kitchen window. The light was on, and he was unpacking boxes or something. I guess he ignored the knock because he just wasn't up to receiving visitors, at least not weirdly behaved, much older guys from next door.

I stood for a while, in my dark kitchen so he couldn't see I was watching him. There was a fluid grace to his movements that fascinated me. He had such a serious look on his lovely face, and his eyes were so sad, so lonely. There were tears, I could almost feel them. Watching this sad, desperate figure move about his kitchen, I wanted to cry for him. No one has ever affected me that way before.

I stand under the stream of hot water in my shower and sigh. Cleaning away the mess of my last few days of frantic writing feels almost cathartic. My stomach growls, and I don't actually remember when I ate last, or even what it was. Maybe if I examined my shirt I could probably figure it out.

My hair needs more than one dose of shampoo, it is so greasy. God I must have looked like shit and smelled worse. Probably just as well new neighbors are being elusive and mysterious because who would have even wanted to stand down wind of me, let alone have a conversation with me in this state?

I hate not meeting my deadline, but I always manage to procrastinate until I have no choice but to pull all-nighters or ask for an extension. I have never asked for an extension yet, but I have never had the arrival of a new neighbor coincide with a deadline before.

The house shares a drive with mine and is owned by a family out of state. I think I may have met the owner once in the distant past, but they have an agency take care of the tenants for them. The place usually stands empty out of season and gets rented short term in the summer months.

It is unusual for it to be occupied before May, but it is early April, and I have a new neighbor and the excitement is increased by the fact that last year the house didn't get rented at all.

So far, I know that this neighbor does not get any mail; doesn't answer his door; doesn't sit out on his deck; or on the beach: today is the first time I've seen him out there unless he is going for a run; and as far as I can deduce, he doesn't have any friends.

Oh, and he surfs. Did I mention he surfs? He. Surfs. He's really good too; so graceful. Could this guy get any hotter?

Okay, I admit I'm attracted to his looks before I even know what his personality is like. Is that shallow? I don't even know if he's gay. I don't even know if he's into older guys. Even if I do get to know him, he probably isn't staying longer than one season. They never do in that particular beach house. The most I can possibly hope for is a fleeting friendship. Summer neighbors come and go. It's the price I pay for living in a beach house all year round rather than finding somewhere where the population is a little more stable.

A fleeting friendship would be better than nothing at all though. The potential is there. Whether it's wise or foolish to even think about pursuing it is up for debate.

I study my newly washed self in the mirror, turning my head from side to side. For forty-five, I don't look too bad. I have laughter lines, I refuse to call them crow's feet, but I don't have any grey hair, well not where it is obvious anyway. My hair is actually light brown when it's clean. I have really dark, brown eyes that are kind of striking, not as striking as certain blue eyes though.

I'm wondering whether I should shave or cultivate the beard that is slowly taking shape. Does having a beard make me look older? Maybe I could shave off the beard and just have a moustache. I hold my hand over my chin and try to imagine what a moustache will look like. I shake my head and dismiss the idea immediately. I don't want this guy next door to think I'm a creep, and having a Tom Selleck moustache, that makes me look like a seventies porn star, is going to give the completely wrong impression.

I decide to keep the entire beard and just give it a little shape. People tend to trust men with beards, they look more approachable. I hope it will make me appear more approachable to a certain new neighbor.

Oh god, I need to stop thinking about him like that. Friendship is all that can happen here, right? He's too young for me. I'm far too old for him.

He's intriguing though, and I am naturally curious. I guess that comes with the territory. Curiosity certainly helps when you are a writer. I like to people

watch at the best of times, so watching a neighbor and trying to figure out his story is no different, right?

So, okay, it is a little different, since watching him seems to have taken over my life for the last three weeks. I am developing an unhealthy obsession with his schedule. I even started writing it all down in a notebook, telling myself I was doing research for a new character when in reality I'm just a dirty old man leering after a kid.

I think I'm going crazy.

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Chapter Two

A Sister's Advice (And Extreme Mothering)

I enter my kitchen to find that Sarah has not only made me sandwiches but has prepared a salad; taken out one of her delicious frozen meals from my freezer for my dinner; cleared the kitchen counters and cleaned the sink (it was in a bit of a state). I have a sneaking suspicion she may have alphabetized my food cupboard as well.

I eye the plate of sandwiches and salad she has somehow had time to prepare at the same time as everything else. I was only in the shower twenty minutes.

"Are these sandwiches for me?" I call to her since she is somewhere in my house tidying as she goes. She calls back an affirmative. "Sarah, you made enough for three here," I tell her.

"So wrap some up and save them for tomorrow," She calls. "At least you'll eat properly two days in a row."

My sister has this uncontrollable urge to mother me. Mom and Dad retired to Florida two years ago so she feels responsible for me, I guess, now that Mom isn't close enough to come and make sure I eat. And shower.

She re-enters the kitchen and greets me with another kiss and a hum of approval at my much cleaner smelling self.

"Oh that's much better," she exclaims, then gets back to cleaning and tidying and alphabetizing, as I start to eat the sandwiches. "Have you called Mom and Dad lately?" she asks, and I groan as I lean back against a counter. I can't remember when I last spoke to our parents. She groans too. "Jake, you know how much I get it in the neck if you don't call them."

"Why do you get the blame?" I ask her, my mouth full of sandwich. "It's not as if you have any control over what I do."

"Yeah, but the last thing Mom said before they moved was 'look after Jake'. So, when you don't let them know you haven't died in your sleep or wrapped your car around a lamppost Mom calls me. I'm the oldest, therefore, in their head your behavior somehow has something to do with me." Sarah moves through from the kitchen into the living room with another trash bag, adding to it as she goes.

I watch her but don't interfere. It's not as if she does this very often. She's not here every day, just once or twice a month, and I really don't mind that she storms through my house like a human vacuum. She's a compulsively tidy person, which is more than I can say for myself.

She returns with a much fuller trash bag as I am examining the casserole dish she has taken out of the freezer for me.

"I had to take that out to make room for the one I brought you," she tells me. "There are six dinners in the freezer for you, use them please because I am running out of casserole dishes."

I chuckle.

"I will, but contrary to popular belief, I can manage to feed myself," I tell her.

"You eat take out, Jake." She sniffs, holding up the trash bag full, I think, of empty noodle cartons and pizza boxes. "That is not feeding yourself properly and would it hurt you once in a while to actually throw the empties in the trash? Would it?"

"Okay, I admit I'm a slob, sis, but I would have done it eventually." She eyes me dubiously. "When I couldn't see the carpet maybe?" She rolls her eyes and wanders back into the living room with a duster and some furniture spray.

I eat my fill of sandwiches and wrap the rest to put in the refrigerator for later. My sister fusses over me and my family worries about me, but I am forty-five, and I have lived alone for thirteen years now. I can look after myself.

I do feel guilty about not calling Mom and Dad, but they know I have a deadline coming up. They agonized over moving to Florida though. They always planned to retire there. They bought a house there a few years ago, but they delayed and I know one of the reasons for that was me. Thirteen years ago, I lost my partner to cancer, which is why everyone fusses over me so much, but, although it still hurts like hell and I miss Josh like crazy I am kind of moving on.

I was a wreck when it first happened, and all of my family and friends kind of smothered me. I don't take their over protectiveness for granted though. I am grateful for everything they've done to help me get through it. Sarah's mothering is the last remnant of that horrible time, and I guess she just got into a routine she can't bear to break.

I follow her into the living room, but she is now in my study that overlooks the deck and the beach.

There is no way I will let her disturb anything in there though.

“Sarah, don’t move anything on my desk, please?” I call in a slight panic.

She is flicking through the pages of a notebook when I get there and not just any notebook: *The notebook!*

“What’s this then?” she asks lightly, as I have a minor coronary. “Someone’s schedule it looks like, but not yours.” She grins. “There’s no way I could imagine you even being awake at seven in the morning let alone jogging along the beach.”

I snatch the book from her and close it with a snap.

“Sarah, you know better than to go snooping around in my study,” I tell her and she raises her eyebrows.

“Afraid I’ll see something I shouldn’t?” she asks, placing her hands on her hips. “You do know I have read all your books don’t you? Some of them can be a bit gory and graphic.” I roll my eyes and place the telltale notebook back on my desk, hiding it underneath other research notes. “I hardly think an imaginary schedule is anything that would cause me trauma, not like some of the things you’ve written, Jake.” She flicks her eyebrows at me then changes the subject as she looks out across the beach. “Have you met your new neighbor then, you never told me when I asked before?” I push the notebook further beneath the piles of scribbled notes and newspaper cuttings trying desperately not to blush but failing miserably. “Oh!” she giggles, turning to face me. “Can I assume from that blush that you have, and that he is a he and is very nice?”

“He is a he, and I haven’t met him yet, so I have no idea if he is nice or not.” I steal a glance at the beach where he is still actually lying reading in the sun.

He’s tanned, but his skin looks fair. He might burn if he stays out too long. I wonder if he needs someone to rub lotion on his back. I can actually feel my hands itching to do just that, and I am certain he will make my fingers tingle as I touch his skin...

Stop it, Jake, just stop it.

“What are you looking at, Mr. Daydream?” Sarah asks as she joins me at the French doors.

Her eyes fall on the figure lying alone on the beach quietly reading, then her eyes move back to my desk and to the notebook now hidden from view. They widen in realization and I groan inwardly.

"That schedule isn't an imagined one is it?" she asks, a hint of amusement in her tone but also caution. She sees my embarrassed grimace. "Oh my god, Jake, are you stalking the guy?"

"No!" I tell her indignantly, but I know what it must look like.

"You have his every move written down in your notebook, Jake, what are you doing if you're not stalking him?" I grimace.

"I was just making notes, Sarah," I try to explain. "I was hoping to find out a bit about him so I could get to know him before I speak to him." My sister shakes her head in helpless frustration.

"Jake, most normal people would just go over there and introduce themselves." I gasp.

"Are you insinuating that I am normal?" I ask her in mock horror. "I have never been so insulted." She giggles. "Besides I went over there on his first day and he didn't answer his door." I manage to look a little dejected. She sighs.

"You are hopeless," She tells me then turns and leaves my study. "I have to go because Sam has a tournament tonight." I roll my eyes, my nephew is a black belt in Taekwondo and I've been to several of his "tournaments". As far as I can see they're an excuse for kids to beat the crap out of each other and parents to compare their kids' accomplishments in beating the crap out of each other.

As Sarah gathers her stuff ready to leave, she gives me her usual instructions for the coming week, or until she comes by again.

"Call Mom and Dad," she tells me, and I nod. "Eat the casseroles and stuff I put in your freezer." I nod again, licking my lips. "And go over and introduce yourself to your neighbor before he gets a restraining order out on you."

"There's no guarantee he won't anyway," I say, thinking about how young he looks and considering how old I am. Sarah gives me a soft, affectionate look.

"Jacob Reuben, you are a lovely, kind, and generous man. Anyone would be lucky to have you as a friend. I know I am proud to have you as my brother." She stretches up to kiss my cheek and strokes my beard appreciatively. "Mmm! Nice beard, it suits you."

She leaves me feeling flushed and happy. She always does. I know she worries about me quite a bit. She thinks I've been on my own too long now and should start looking for someone else. It's not that I don't want to. Josh and I had something special though and that would be hard to replicate. I know every time it is different, but I really don't think there is anyone out there who would even consider taking on a writer who doesn't shower for days on end when he's on a writing streak, or who sits around in sweat pants he's worn until they can walk to the laundry by themselves.

The thought of sharing my life with someone now seems kind of ridiculous. I'm too set in my ways and that part of my life has passed. So why on earth would I suddenly be thinking that way about someone I have only watched from behind my curtains and is probably young enough to be my son?

I have no idea, except for the reasons I quoted: he's beautiful, he's enigmatic and mysterious. There's an air of tragedy about him. He looks so serious and sad all the time. In three weeks, I don't think I've seen him smile. Could I be the one that puts a smile on his face? I think I'd like to be, even if it's just as a friend. He doesn't appear to have any friends, at least he hasn't had any friends over, and he doesn't go anywhere. He has his main groceries delivered, so he answers the door to them but not to casual callers. He spends his time reading in his living room or surfing and running. He's fit, oh boy, is he fit.

So, maybe I should just go over there and introduce myself, or at least put a plan in place to actually meet him.

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Chapter Three

Operation: Meet The Neighbor

My plan is quite simple really. This guy next door seems to be a creature of habit. I get up and consult the notes I've made of his schedule over the last three weeks.

It is seven a.m. on Monday morning, and according to my notes so far, he usually goes for a run along the beach about now.

Yep, there he is, in his running shorts and a rather tight running top. He has the biggest set of headphones I've ever seen. What happened to those really discreet earphones you could get? The fashion for massive ones really doesn't make sense, and I am sure they must cause some sort of wind resistance when he's running. He jogs down the decking stairs onto the beach and turns right. Off he goes.

I watch him disappear along the sand. He'll be back in about forty minutes.

I have just enough time for breakfast then. There is no way I'm going to be able to join him in a morning jog. I'm just not that sporty. So meeting him that way is not an option.

Forty minutes later: yep, there he is, leaning against his gatepost and drinking from his bottle of water. He's all hot and sweaty and when he wipes his mouth with the back of his hand the action makes me catch my breath. He disappears up the steps into his house while I spend a few moments recovering. Going out and talking to him now seems a little inconsiderate really, since he probably wants to go have a shower as soon as possible.

I consult my notes again. He will be out again in twenty minutes, showered and changed and still wearing those damn headphones. I don't think I've seen him without them, except he doesn't appear to wear them in the house. It's Monday, so he always goes into town to do some grocery shopping. I've pretty much decided the best way to meet him is to "accidentally" bump into him there, either on the street or in a store.

Twenty minutes later, he is out on his front porch, showered and changed and ready to go. He always catches the bus into town. He doesn't have a car. He always checks he has his key before he shuts his front door. He always

checks he has his wallet and checks inside it before he sets off for the bus. He always seems to be so careful with things like this, like he's not had to do it before: as if he is used to having someone else to remind him.

Why is he here on his own, eh? He looks so young to be anywhere on his own. And if the thought of getting the bus anywhere gives me the heebie jeebies how does it make him feel? If he'll let me, I'll gladly give him a lift into town, since I've decided that Monday just happens to be my day for shopping too. That's a very happy coincidence.

I won't ask if he wants a ride today though because a strange man slowing his car down to ask a guy if he wants a lift? Yeah, he will definitely think I am curb crawling. Best get to know him first before I do that. Ask him for a lift I mean, not curb crawl.

I watch him disappear along the road to the bus stop and then I dive out of the house and into my car.

I park in my usual spot outside the best coffee shop in town and go inside to wait for the bus to arrive. The bus stop is just across the street. That's convenient. I know I've beaten the bus here because I over took it.

I order a coffee and wait.

There he is, getting off the bus and looking around to get his bearings. He always does that, as if checking out where everything is. His movements are always so deliberate and careful.

He squints across at the coffee shop and I duck behind my cup, pretending I'm reading a newspaper I have spread across the counter. Is he coming over? I can't see without lifting my head and making it obvious I am looking at him. He'd be diverting from his routine though, if he stopped for a coffee, because he doesn't usually.

I give it a few minutes then look up. Oh shit, he's gone. I check my notes: nine fifteen, he is usually in the market across the street getting fresh fruit and vegetables. I duck out of the coffee shop thinking I might return with him if I get the opportunity to ask him for a coffee or whatever young people drink these days. Fingers crossed.

In the market, I watch him from behind some stacked crates. He is always a long time in here, checking out the best fruit. He takes so much time choosing a melon I consider asking him which one came second.

While he is sniffing a satsuma with his perfect, slightly freckled nose he frowns, cocks his head to one side and turns to look in my direction.

Shit. I think I ducked out of the way in time. Did I?

Did he sense me watching him or something? What the fuck am I doing?

When I'm brave enough to search for him again he is at the checkout paying for his stuff. The guy at the checkout speaks to him and he smiles in reply, like he always does, but the smile doesn't touch his eyes, it's just a polite response rather than a natural one.

He seems unnerved though, because he turns to look in my direction again, and I actually squeak as I duck behind another stack of crates then grimace as I upset one and have to gather all the apples up in my t shirt as the crate crashes to the floor. Holy crap, he must have heard that.

By the time I've scooped up all the apples and peeked over the top of the crates, he is leaving; rather quickly. Did I spook him? Oh god I hope I didn't. I need to stop this now and rethink my strategy.

Then the guy at the counter calls him back, waving something about in his hand, just as the door begins to close.

"Hey dude, your wallet."

I shoot to a standing position with apples still held in my shirt and watch, suddenly alert, as the guy calls again, but my neighbor just keeps on going, oblivious. He must have his music turned up so loud he hasn't heard.

The checkout guy has a dilemma now, because he is alone in the store. I make a snap decision.

"I'll take it to him," I offer, almost tripping over a crate of bananas in my haste to reach the counter. I dump the rest of the apples I've picked up back into a crate and stretch out my hand for the wallet. Checkout guy recognizes me and smiles.

"Oh, hey Mr. Reuben, that guy left his wallet," he explains, even though he saw me watch the entire thing. He must think I'm crazy, but everyone here thinks I'm a little eccentric anyway. I nod and indicate that he should give the wallet to me.

"He's my new neighbor," I explain. "He moved into the Steele place."

Checkout guy, his name badge reads "Steve", nods in understanding and releases the wallet to my care. I thank him and rush out of the store in hot

pursuit and with a sure fire strategy to get talking to this guy without creeping him out.

Outside on the sidewalk I look up and down the street to try to locate him. Where does he normally go now?

I consult my notebook then look left. There he is at the newspaper stand across the street, and he's feeling for his wallet. It's not there! I shout as I cross the street.

"Hey, I have your wallet," I call.

He has his back to me, and those damn headphones are a barrier to normal interaction. I can't see the attraction really, walking about totally cut off from the world around you. I mean, I like listening to music, just not all the time, and definitely not in situations where I might be expected to converse politely with real people.

Kids though, they all seem to feel the need to fill perceived silence with music blasting in their ears. And what is the point of having the damn headphones plugged into your iPod or mp3 player or whatever, when the volume is so high everyone can hear every word being sung anyway?

Do I sound like a grumpy old man? Oh my god, I'm a grumpy old man.

As I cross the street, he has realized his wallet is missing and he looks positively frantic. I don't think I have seen a look of such absolute panic on anyone's face before. His entire body is about to lift off the sidewalk he's in such a state. I wave to gain his attention and call, but he gives me one look and turns away to run in the direction of the Market by crossing the street to avoid me.

Is he serious? What's he doing?

"Hey, I have your wallet here." I call but he doesn't hear me because he still has those damn headphones on.

I'm not fit by any stretch of the imagination, but I manage a burst of energy and catch up with him. The only course of action I have left to gain his attention is to reach out and grab his shoulder before he can move away. He turns with a cry and immediately takes up a defensive position, you know: narrowing his target, having his hands ready to push away or deflect a blow. His reaction shocks me and I hold up my hands in a kind of corny surrender type gesture.

“Hey!” I give a weak laugh. I hold up his wallet in plain sight for him to see. “You left your wallet in the Market.” I hold it out to him.

Damn he looks terrified though, his eyes are darting everywhere, checking me out, checking out escape routes, checking out other pedestrians for potential threats. He’s so jumpy and defensive it’s unbelievable. He reaches out and takes his wallet from me like a timid animal taking an offered treat. Then, just like that timid animal, he takes off before I can even get another word in. He doesn’t even thank me.

“You’re welcome.” I call sarcastically after him, but he doesn’t turn because of course he doesn’t hear me: head phones! They are probably blasting rap music and vibrating his brain out through his ears, at least the part that controls good manners.

For a few minutes, I stand and wonder what to do next. My first opportunity to talk to him has ended in disaster, since he was so fucking scared of me he looked like he was about to pass out. But come on, I’m not that scary am I? I glance at my reflection in a shop window. I have clean clothes on: jeans not sweats. I showered and trimmed my beard, and I even brushed my hair. It isn’t a strange color, which can sometimes be the case. So why did he run away from me?

Something is not right. He is a mystery I need to solve.

I take out my notebook again and see where he might conceivably have run off to. He usually goes to the drugstore right about now, so I try there next.

The town’s one and only drugstore is quite large. We have a growing population of retirees here in Oakwood Bay, so the drugstore does a roaring trade in old people drugs and stuff. Things I have not personally felt the need to examine too closely as yet. It recently expanded so it has several aisles of mostly vitamins and other food supplements that oldies seem to take by the bucket load, as well as the regular stuff that drugstores sell.

The first aisle is empty but the second one has my target, standing examining something on a shelf and giving it the same careful consideration he gave the choice of a melon in the Market.

I don’t bother calling out to him this time, since the head phones are still firmly in place. I grab a basket to make my presence in the store look legitimate, tip a couple of items into the basket to make it look even more authentic and approach him.

I reach out and touch his shoulder then step back with a cry as he whirls around in much the same way he did on the sidewalk. This time he presses himself back against the shelves, tipping some things onto the floor in the process.

“What?” he asks, in a pained, scared half to death way that has me spluttering and lost for words.

For a moment, I simply stare at him and his eyes search my face in a way that makes me feel just a little uncomfortable. Apart from the fact that they are perhaps the bluest eyes I have ever seen in my entire life, they are wide and intense and unblinking and I feel like he is staring directly into my soul. No one has ever looked at me so intensely before. I feel naked and exposed.

His eyes move slowly and warily down to my basket and then dart back up to my face. He has a look of abject horror on his face now and with what seems like an involuntary squeak he turns and rushes away from me, leaving his basket and its contents on the floor at my feet.

I stand in the middle of the aisle at a loss as to what to do now. He has run away from me twice in the space of five minutes. Am I really that scary? It's not as if I'm even that much taller than him. Is he just naturally afraid of talking to strangers? I'm really not that strange.

I glance down at my basket and groan, facepalming as I realize what he has seen there and what was the possible source of his fright this second time. I do wish I'd checked what I was casually throwing in my basket as I approached him; it's full of several different varieties of colored and flavored condoms and a bottle of self-warming lube. God he must think I'm a pervert or a sex addict or something. No wonder he ran. At twenty-one, I would have run too if some forty plus guy had approached me in a drugstore with a basket full of condoms and lube.

Fucking hell, I've become the guy my parents warned me about when I first came out to them.

Operation “Meet the Neighbor” has been an unmitigated disaster from beginning to end. Now this guy thinks I am a pervert of the highest order, and I still don't even know his name.

I had his wallet in my hand as well. I could have looked inside to find his name. What's the matter with me? I'm losing my touch.

I glance down at his abandoned basket and begin to form another plan. I pick it up and, after replacing the condoms and lube on their correct shelves, I get what I actually need and pay for my stuff and the stuff he left behind. I'll deliver it to him when I get back. I'll put it on his door step with a note apologizing for being a creepy neighbor.

Feeling much brighter, and with a much better plan in my head I abandon my stalking in favor of getting the rest of my own shopping done and then make my way home to put "plan B" into action.

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Chapter Four

Plan B

This seems to be going well so far. I placed all of the stuff he left behind at the drugstore in a basket, along with a bunch of flowers and a note explaining that I am not as scary as I appear and that I am in the house all the rest of the day if he wants to come over for coffee, or something to drink anyway. I added that if he isn't free today that I'm free most days.

Is that too much? Are the flowers too much? Everyone likes flowers right? He's not going to read too much into it is he? I don't want him getting more spooked.

Oh, god, he's opening his door. He's looking down at the basket. He's frowning at it and now he's reading my note.

Shit, he just looked over. I duck behind one of the pillars supporting my front porch. I hope he didn't see me.

Next time I peek, he has gone back inside with the basket of stuff and the flowers.

Mission accomplished. Now I just have to wait for him to come over. The ball's in his court so to speak.

So I wait, and I wait, and I watch from various different locations in my house. He's placed the flowers in a vase, and put them on his kitchen counter, near the window, I can see that much.

Is he actually going to come over then? The suspense is killing me.

From my kitchen window, I can see into his kitchen, but because of the angle and slight height difference in our houses he can't see into mine, and he can't see me watching unless I am standing right at the window, so I don't. I stand a little way back from the sill so I can still see him but he can't see me.

Every time he passes those flowers, he touches them, frowns, bites his lip and glances over at my house. I can see his eyes, troubled and indecisive, and so expressive. I can see the blue from here. He's so damn gorgeous.

I am now on my third cup of coffee and sitting on my deck because the sun is shining and the weather is still unseasonably warm. It's almost evening and

my neighbor still has not made an appearance. My cat has made an appearance though and she has something in her mouth as she jumps up onto my lap.

“Holy shit, Jezebel.” I screech as I realize it is a mouse. I jump up, dumping her off my lap in the process. Oh god the mouse is still moving! “Jezzie, while I accept that you love me enough to bring me your prize catch of the day you have got to understand that humans just don’t eat mice; or bats; or birds; or salamanders,” I inform her as she watches me indignantly. “I’m not taking it off you, Jezzie, go take it somewhere and eat it or whatever you’re going to do with it.” I wave my hands at her. “Just do it out of my sight.”

She gives me a disdainful look, slinks past me and pushes through the railings of my decking. I watch as she casually walks across the garden, over the drive and jumps up onto the decking of my next-door neighbor.

Oh no, she is not going to try to present that mouse to him. He’ll freak out. A strange man handing him his lost wallet caused him to almost have a coronary: a strange cat depositing a half-dead mouse at his feet is going to kill the poor guy for sure.

I watch helplessly though, as my neighbor chooses this very moment to make a rare appearance on his deck. I lean over my railings to try to gain his attention, knowing it is useless shouting because he has his headphones firmly in place and I am now convinced they are actually surgically attached to his ears. I lean further over as I see him sit on his railing and lean down to caress the ears of my disgustingly traitorous cat.

I am slightly distracted by the fact that neighbor guy is wearing only a towel that is sitting precariously on his hips, and the fact that his hair is wet announces that he has just stepped out of the shower. That’s two showers he’s had today, not that I’m counting, but he’s actually had more showers in one day than I’ve had in a week.

So, okay, maybe that’s not a very good reflection on my personal hygiene. I am usually a little cleaner than that.

Back to the problem at hand though, since he is about to discover the prize my cat is trying to show him. I lean further over, trying desperately to catch his eye; further; just a little further, hoping he’ll see me as I wave frantically.

He looks up, and I gasp as his startled eyes meet mine. I give one last frantic wave and the next thing I know I’m flat on my back in the flower bed beneath my deck.

What the fuck just happened?

I lie, slightly stunned and winded, staring up at the sky and at the railing I just fell from then close my eyes again feeling a little queasy. It's a damn good job it isn't that high, plus the fact that my flowerbed is so overgrown with ivy it broke my fall. Things could have been so much worse.

"Are you okay?"

Things are so much worse.

I open my eyes again to look up into the sky blue orbs that belong to the object of over three weeks of fruitless stalking. My neighbor is looking down at me with such concern in those blue eyes I think my heart just melted.

Hell, if I'd known I only had to fall from my balcony to get him to come over I would have saved myself the trouble and just done this sooner. He's even taken off his head phones, although they are still there, just hanging around his neck. He's pulled on some shorts, which was probably wise. He hasn't pulled on a T-shirt though. His chest is exposed, tanned and oh my, there's a six pack and a treasure trail.

Eyes front, Jake. Keep your hands where I can see them. He's too young for you, too young.

He holds out a hand to help me up and I take it, groaning that old man groan that is compulsory when you get past a certain age. It's not as if I find it difficult to get up, it's just one of those things that starts happening after the age of forty: you discover hair in your ears and you groan when you stand.

Once on my feet, a little unsteadily, I brush the dirt, leaves, and sand from my clothes. I do a quick check of everything and think I have escaped injury. I stretch out my hand to my neighbor in a proper greeting.

"I'm Jake, and I'm sorry about my disgusting cat." The guy's eyes widen and he tips his head to one side. He is watching me intently though, and I get the same slightly uncomfortable feeling that his scrutiny caused in the drugstore earlier today.

"The cat is yours?" he asks and I nod, frowning, because there's something about the tone of his voice that isn't quite right. "He was trying to give me a mouse," he informs me in a matter-of-fact tone that sounds a little hollow to be honest. I grimace at what he's said.

“Yeah, sorry about that. She tried to give the mouse to me but I sent her packing. She must have decided you were her next victim.” He smiles, then bends down to stroke said cat who is shamelessly rubbing and weaving between his legs.

He looks back up and directly at me before speaking again.

“My name’s Cal, by the way,” he says simply, waits for a reply, which he doesn’t get, then turns his attention back to my cat.

I don’t reply because I am processing the way his voice sounds and the way his name is ringing in my ears like a bell.

Cal. His name is Cal. I fell from my decking, and could have broken my neck, but it was worth it to find out his name and to finally be talking to this enigmatic and mysterious young man.

“So, Cal,” I say, as I kneel down to join him in the caress of my now ecstatic cat. She hasn’t had so much attention in a long time. He looks up at me, in that very disconcertingly direct way. “Are you gonna take me up on the offer of coffee? The least I can offer after you were subjected to my cat’s misplaced generosity.” He smiles and nods. “I also have Mountain Dew or Coke if you prefer,” I tell him grimacing inwardly because I’ve suddenly started sounding like my dad. He screws up his perfect nose.

“Ugh! No thanks, coffee is fine.” Well thank god for that because there’s hope for someone who likes coffee. I indicate he should precede me as we walk around to my steps and up onto my deck.

So, I now know his name and his drink preference but nothing else and he is currently sitting out on my deck while I make some fresh coffee. I had enough for two cups in the pot but meeting a new neighbor calls for freshly brewed really.

“So Cal, how are you liking Oakwood Bay so far?” I call through from the kitchen: no answer. I can see him, he’s not so far away he wouldn’t hear that. He is occupied with my cat, but still, he isn’t wearing his headphones so why doesn’t he answer?

He looks up and sees me staring.

“Sorry, what?” he asks, his gaze as intent as ever. I repeat the question as I pour out two coffees and bring them out onto the deck.

“How are you liking Oakwood Bay so far?”

“Oh, it’s good,” he tells me, taking the coffee. “It’s nice, and not too busy.”

“Yeah, it’s quiet mostly,” I agree with him. “The most exciting thing to happen is neighbors falling out of balconies.” He smiles, and gives a silent chuckle.

“Are you okay after that?” he asks. “You never said.” I grimace.

“I think the only thing that is bruised is my pride,” I tell him. “I hope you didn’t get too freaked out by Jezzies’ welcome gift.” Cal laughs again, that silent laugh.

“It’s supposed to be a sign that they accept you as head of their pride,” Cal tells me and I nod.

“Yeah, but I’d prefer it if she brought me a donut or a muffin, you know.” He laughs again in silence.

I am only half-paying attention to this conversation, since the rest of my attention is distracted by the way he watches me so carefully when I speak. He moves his head when I move mine, as if to get a better view and his eyes, oh my god, those eyes. They should be registered as deadly weapons. Does he even know how amazing they are? Does he know the effect they have on others? On me?

“So, I’m really sorry about this morning,” he’s telling me, as I try to pay more attention to his words and not to trying to solve what is driving me crazy about his voice. He runs his fingers awkwardly through his hair, which is also quite distracting. “I kind of got freaked out,” he continues. “You were running at me and I just didn’t expect it, and I’m sorry I never thanked you for returning my wallet.”

I shrug.

“That’s okay, I’m sorry if I scared you. Twice.” I raise my eyebrows and he looks away from me for the first time since this conversation started. I think he’s blushing.

Oh, he is. Oh! I feel all weak inside.

“Meeting you like that was just unexpected that’s all.” Yeah, that and the fact I had a basket full of condoms. “And thanks for bringing my stuff,” he says as he turns back and resumes his close scrutiny of my face, and lips. “Oh, and the flowers, they’re really nice.” I smile.

“That was the least I could do, after freaking you out so badly.” I tip my head to one side now. “Still think I’m scary?” I ask him and he smiles, and it does touch his eyes, and I think it might have just touched my heart, too.

“No, not anymore.” He answers with a slight smirk that shows the hint of some dimples in his cheeks. Oh boy!

What is going on with his voice though?

He sips his coffee and looks out to sea as I ponder the mystery. Come on, Jake, solve it with the clues at hand. This is what you do. You’re a crime writer, a master of mystery and sinister plot twists. Gather all the information and make the connections.

It’s his voice, the way he speaks, that’s the main clue. It’s as if his voice isn’t sure if it’s speaking properly or not, and his lips form every word so carefully as if this is the only way he can be sure he’s said the right thing.

Oh my god, of course, it’s because he’s deaf. Everything fits. And he wears the head phones to hide the fact that he doesn’t hear what’s being said.

So now, I’ve solved the mystery I have to ask if I’m right. I reach out and gain his attention by gently touching his arm. He turns and regards me with a slightly startled but also pleasantly surprised expression.

“Cal, can I ask you something?” He nods, intently watching my lips: because he’s lip reading, of course.

“I think you just did,” He says with a smirk.

Okay, so being deaf doesn’t stop you from being cocky. I smirk back.

“Okay, you know what I mean though.” He nods.

“Ask away!” he tells me.

“Are you deaf by any chance?” His face pales, his breathing quickens, and his eyes flicker past me to the quickest escape route.

“Er, yeah!” he replies breathlessly. “Is that a problem?” I am slightly taken aback by his sudden defensiveness, since why would it ever be a problem?

“No!” I frown, then realize he is still looking past me to his exit. I reach out and touch his arm again and meet his gaze. “No problem at all, Cal, honestly, truly, no problem.”

He looks as if he's about to burst into tears he's so relieved, although part of him doesn't believe me, I can see. Why would he react like this? Why would he want to hide it?

Because he does hide it, that's why he wears the headphones so he can pretend he didn't hear someone because he was listening to music.

"Cal, why do you think it would be a problem me knowing you're deaf?" I ask, and he relaxes a little as he shrugs, looking away, possibly to hide the fact that his eyes have actually filled with tears.

"Some people have a problem with it," he tells me. "They think because I can't hear I can't look after myself. People treat me differently when they know." He turns back to me, with a fierce, determined look on his face. "But I don't need special treatment," he snaps. "I can look after myself. I can live on my own. I don't need any help. I don't need anybody." He stands and stretches out his shoulders looking quite embarrassed by his sudden outburst. "I'm sorry!" he apologizes, but before I can accept the apology and tell him not to worry about it he has turned away. "Surf's up," he muses, in a sudden change of subject. "I just got a new board and I want to try it out before the tide turns." He turns back to face me. "Thanks for the coffee, and everything else, Jake." He gives me a soft smile, then he's gone, down the steps and across the drive to his own house before I can even call after him. Not that calling after him will do any good, because he won't hear it. I do anyway.

"You're welcome, Cal!" I call, "Come back anytime." Because I'll take whatever time I can get.

I sit back in my lounge with a heavy, contented sigh. Well, I met him. I now know his name, and have solved some of the mystery that is Cal. There are still things to discover about this guy though. With every question answered a million more take their place. I have no idea how old he is, or why he's here alone, or why he is so defensive about it. He seemed friendly enough, but I have no idea if he wants to be friends or just friendly neighbors. From what I've seen so far, I would take anything he has to give, because he's just lovely.

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Chapter Five

A Ride Into Town

It's been almost a week since I finally managed to introduce myself to Cal, however embarrassing the circumstances. He seems to have settled back into his routine with the exception that, if he sees me out on my deck or at my kitchen window, or anywhere, he waves, and smiles a shy little half smile which is completely adorable but leaves me wanting more.

I mean I want more of a smile, not more of him, although I would settle for more of his company, which would give me the opportunity to try to broaden that smile into something that actually looks genuine and not strained.

He's too young to not be smiling and laughing and having fun, but he doesn't appear to do any of those things.

He surfs every day if the waves are good. He runs every morning. The rest of the day, as far as I can see he sits inside and reads, although I have seen him out on his deck more since we met properly. He interacts with Jizzie who seems to be our go between at the minute.

I asked him for coffee a few more times but he refused stating he had other things to do, although I know he doesn't do anything else. We never get past "hello, nice day!" and then he disappears again.

By the time Sunday comes around again, though, I feel that we have enough of a passing acquaintance for the offer of a ride into town for his weekly shopping trip to not seem too creepy.

"Can I give you a ride into town tomorrow?" I ask him when I see him that evening as he runs back up the beach with his surfboard under his arm. "I mean I'm going too, so it's no trouble, and it's quicker than taking the bus."

"I don't mind taking the bus," Cal tells me, his defiant, defensive expression firmly in place.

"I'm sure you don't, but I do," I tell him and he frowns. I lean closer. "I hate taking the bus, Cal, it's full of sweaty bodies with smoker's breath and people spreading flu germs, and I'm driving into town to get groceries for myself, I would feel bad if I didn't offer you a ride." He regards me with narrowed eyes.

“So you’re offering me a ride to save yourself from feeling bad?” he asks, and I nod, smiling, because I think he is just about to accept. “So if I accept then I’ll be doing you a favor?” I nod again, a little more enthusiastically this time. I feel like a puppy about to get a treat. I close my mouth to prevent my tongue lolling out.

“So what do you say?” I ask, “Should I pick you up at nine?” He purses his perfect lips and I fight the urge to groan.

“Okay!” he answers with a little half smile. “I’ll see you then.” And he disappears before I can say anything else.

It’s like that every time. I try to strike up a conversation with him and he just cuts it short; not in a rude way, he just makes it clear the conversation is over by turning away so I can’t carry on speaking to him.

Maybe there’ll be more opportunity to talk tomorrow.

Of course, I never really thought about how difficult it would be to have a conversation with someone who is deaf while I’m driving. We exchange greetings but then the rest of the journey we do in silence. I feel awkward, but is it just me that feels that way? He is used to silence so probably doesn’t feel the need to fill it with words.

Filling a silence with words just means you’re kind of saying something for the sake of saying something. I guess on a car journey it’s just not necessary to make small talk. Except I do want to speak to him. I want to know more about him. I can’t ask him in the car though.

“Come for a coffee before we start shopping?” I suggest. Cal regards me with wide eyes that search my face as if he’s looking for signs that my offer isn’t genuine. Why wouldn’t it be genuine? “This is a really great coffee shop.” I lean closer to him. “I actually have to say that because it’s owned by a friend,” I add as an aside. He chuckles silently.

“Okay!” It’s the first word he’s spoken since he got in the car.

At least, he isn’t wearing those damn headphones, but, wait, no such luck, because as soon as we cross the threshold of the coffee shop he takes them out of his messenger bag and places them over his ears. Now, I know for a fact they are not attached to anything, because, without wanting to sound too politically incorrect about this, what would be the point?

He indicates that he will sit by the window and I nod, then pull him back as I don’t know what he wants to drink.

“What do you want?” I ask him and his eyes flicker up to the menu board above the counter. He shrugs.

“Just a coffee will be fine, thanks.” He reaches into his wallet. I stop him.

“I’ll get these.” I turn before he can refuse.

I feel him still standing there staring at me for a few seconds before he huffs slightly and goes to find a seat.

I can’t help smirking, because it feels like I’ve just won an argument. The quietest fucking argument I’ve ever had in my life, but it was still there, the defiance in his eyes, as if he was afraid by accepting a drink from me it would seem he couldn’t do it himself. I never thought for one minute he couldn’t, but someone, somewhere down the line obviously has.

At the counter, I meet Lawrence, the owner of the shop and an old friend.

“Hey, Jake, long time no see.” He greets me. I chuckle.

“Yeah, I haven’t seen you since, ooh, at least last Monday.” He chuckles back as I make my order.

“A lot can happen in a week,” he muses and I am thinking the same as I glance over at Cal who is obliviously staring out of the window, his headphones firmly in place over his ears. “You here with that kid?” Lawrence asks, shaking me out of my reverie. I nod. Lawrence continues, “Yeah, bit of a strange one that one. Seen him around town a few times, always wearing those headphones. Kids these days, always listening to music and staring at their phone screens.”

Cal doesn’t appear to have a phone though. I wonder about that as Lawrence continues his semi rant. He isn’t a grumpy old man, he just has a lot to say about everything.

“So, who is he anyway?” Lawrence asks me.

“His name is Cal, and he’s my next door neighbor,” I tell him and Lawrence’s eyebrows rise into his hair line.

“The Steele place?” he asks. “I heard that was standing empty.”

“It did last year, but I guess he’s renting it now.” Lawrence shakes his head and beckons me closer as he places two coffee cups on the counter.

“He ain’t renting it,” he tells me conspiratorially. I frown.

“What do you mean?”

"I mean, it ain't rented." Lawrence begins to pour the steamed milk expertly into one cup as he continues, "My Lou, she knows someone who works for the Rental Agency that took care of the Steele place, she says it was taken off the rental market earlier this year." I raise my eyebrows and purse my lips.

"Interesting!" I frown. "So maybe he's renting it long term?" Lawrence shakes his head.

"Nope, Lou-Anne's friend said the agency took care of a ton of properties that belonged to the Steele family and a ton of them have been sold recently." My eyes widen more. "He's either bought the place or had it bought for him." Lawrence speculates.

I turn my head to regard Cal who is still staring out of the window. He doesn't have the air of someone who has just had a property this expensive bought for him. If he has parents who are so generous, why haven't they been round every five minutes checking he was settling in?

When Josh and I got our first place, we never had a moment to ourselves, both sets of parents checking we were eating, cleaning, sleeping. My mom even walked in on us having sex once. I don't know who was more embarrassed. Cal has had no visitors in the entire month he's been here.

"He can't have bought the place though, he's just a kid," I say out loud. Lawrence huffs as he puts the finishing touches to the second coffee. They are a work of art; as usual he's drawn two beautiful feathered patterns with the steamed milk. "Larry, they look too good to drink." I take out my phone and take a photo of them. "Perfect!"

He smirks. "You've been saying that every time you come in here since you first started coming in here," he tells me. "You weren't much older than that kid there when you got your house."

"Yeah, but we were mortgaged up to our eyes and both working every hour god sent, plus, Josh had a really good job. Cal, as far as I can see, just surfs. Besides, our parents helped us with a deposit when we decided to live together."

"Oh yeah," Lawrence says. "I forgot you were a queer." I give him a narrow-eyed look and we both laugh.

"And I forgot you were an asshole. Give me my coffees." I take them from the counter and turn away.

"Lou wants to know when you're coming back over for dinner because we never see you," he calls, because we are good friends and the queer/asshole thing is a long running joke between us. I shrug.

"I have a deadline," I inform him regretfully and he purses his lips.

"Get you!" he exclaims. "Big famous writer, too busy to spend time with his friends." I make a face at him, because he knows none of that is true. "You have time for coffee with a new neighbor but no time for socializing?" I shrug again and give him a sheepish look.

"I'm building bridges, Larry," I explain. He shakes his head as if he thinks I am a hopeless case.

Maybe I am. Am I making a fool of myself taking the time to get to know this kid? Are people going to see me spending time with him and automatically think I am chasing after him in some sort of midlife crisis? I don't even know if the guy is gay. Am I interested? I know I've been watching him with my tongue hanging out for the last month, and I do still think he's beautiful, but there's no way the interest would ever be returned.

"We're having a party on Saturday, Jake," Lawrence tells me. "It's Lou-Anne's birthday. Come over and bring your new neighbor." I give Lawrence a look that could probably curdle milk.

"Lawrence, I'm not going to ask him to a party like some kind of date. I didn't mean those kind of bridges." Lawrence shrugs.

"Whatever, bring him anyway. George is home for Spring break, he can hang out with the cool kids while us oldies sit on the deck and grouch about old folk stuff." I laugh at this.

"Speak for yourself," I say as I walk back to Cal with our coffees. "I'll think about it." I call back over my shoulder.

"You'll think about what?" Cal asks me as I sit and I wonder how much of that conversation he actually saw.

I place the coffees on the counter in front of us and hitch up onto the high stool beside his, as he pulls off his headphones just as if he'd been using them properly rather than hiding behind them. I ignore the action, since I think asking him about it this early on in a developing friendship might put a dampener on things, especially when he gets so defensive when I just offer him a lift or a coffee.

“Lawrence, who owns the coffee shop...” I point over to the guy who is now serving someone else. “He and I are good friends. It’s his wife’s birthday on Saturday and he invited us to the party.”

“Us?” Cal splutters, almost choking on his drink. “What do you mean us?” I see a hint of panic in Cal’s eyes, and I groan inwardly. Could he be thinking the same thing that I am? That asking him to a party sounds like I’m asking him on a date?

“I mean, that he’s invited me, and he knows you’re new and his son is home from college so there’ll be some people your age, he just thought...” I hope I’ve backtracked my way out of that.

Cal sighs and looks away.

“I don’t like parties,” he says, and not in a rude, dismissive way, it’s almost wistful. “Too many people, too much noise.” I cock my head to one side and regard him dubiously.

“You know that doesn’t actually make any sense.” I smile as I try to meet his eye and he smirks, not because he saw my words but because he reads my quizzical, confused expression.

“I don’t mean noise, as in hearing noise, I mean too much everything,” he tries to explain. “There’s always just too much going on for me to be able to focus on anything. I can’t follow all the conversations. When my parents threw parties, I usually just hid away in my room or stayed over at a friend’s.”

So, he has parents and he has friends. Where are they now though? He just seems so sad and lonely.

I shrug and try to look nonchalant. I can’t force him to go to a party where he won’t know anyone but me and me only fleetingly. I also don’t think Lawrence and Lou’s party will be a raucous drinking binge with disco balls and loud music either. It will be a couple of friends and Lawrence’s son, who I think is twenty now, will be there with a few of his friends: perfect for Cal to meet some of the people that live here.

“I guess, if you’re not staying here long though.” I watch his reaction carefully. “If you’re just here for a couple of months for the surfing, there’s no point in getting too friendly with the natives.” I make it a passing comment, as if I’m throwing away the words as I sip my coffee.

Cal regards me with narrow eyes as if he knows that I’m fishing for more information. He drains his coffee and stands.

“Thanks for the coffee, Jake and for the ride.” He turns to go and I have to pull him back again because he’s about to leave without arranging the time for going back.

“Do you want to meet for lunch?” I try not to sound too eager or desperate but I don’t want him to just walk away again. He shakes his head. “What about a ride home? I’ll be leaving about four-ish.” He shakes his head again.

“That’s okay, thanks, I’ll just get the bus,” he tells me then really does leave so I can’t call him back to change his mind and I can’t chase after him because what would that look like?

Damn it. What did I do? Was it something I said? Was asking him to a party too much? Did that scare him off? He certainly couldn’t get away from me quick enough.

He doesn’t want a ride home though, and the thought of him on that bus all on his own just eats me up inside. He’s so young, and so vulnerable. Anything could happen to him and there’s no one to look after him. He says he has parents and friends but in a month there’s been no sign of either.

What is his story? And does he really own the Steele place? That place must be worth at least three-quarters of a million, if not more.

The more I learn about him the deeper the mystery gets.

I watch him leave the coffee shop, replacing his headphones as he does. He crosses the street and disappears into the market. Then he’ll get a newspaper at the stand, and then he’ll go to the drugstore.

I rub my face and groan. Why do I know all of this? Because I’ve stalked the poor guy for a month, and now, when I thought I was making progress in getting to know him he closes off again with that fierce determination to be independent, like he needs to prove to someone, I don’t know who, that he can make it on his own.

He obviously has money. That much is apparent, at least for now. So he has no problems there. What else would he have to prove though?

What is your story, Cal?

I frown. I don’t even know his last name. He never told me.

“Your friend left in a hurry.” Lawrence muses as he comes over to clear tables, but really that’s just an excuse to come and talk to me.

"Yeah, he has some stuff to do," I say, still staring out the window hoping I'll catch a glimpse of him as he crosses the street.

"Did you ask him about the party?" Lawrence asks. I grimace and screw my eyes shut.

"Yeah!" I croak. "I think he might have thought I was asking him on a date."

"Oh ho!" Lawrence exclaims and sits in the stool Cal just vacated. He gives me an extremely intense look, "Were you?" I tear my eyes away from the window and regard him with a frown.

"What?" I ask, then I gasp. "No! No I was not, and don't start getting any ideas, he's my neighbor, nothing else. Besides he's too young, I'm too old for him I mean, he wouldn't be interested, obviously isn't since he ran a mile when I mentioned the party."

"Pretty good-looking neighbor though, huh? Slim but well built. Is he fit?" I give a distracted nod, because Cal still hasn't appeared from the Market yet.

"Yeah, he surfs and runs every day," I tell him, still staring out of the window.

"Bet there's a six pack going on underneath that T-shirt as well," Lawrence comments.

"Oh, yeah, you betcha. A six pack to die for," I tell him then I widen my eyes and stutter as I try to retract what I just told my friend. Lawrence gives me a smirk as he stands.

"So, just a neighbor, huh?" he says with a chuckle. I scowl.

"How do you always do that?" I ask, because he does, he gets the better of me every time and I can't hide anything from him.

"I'm just trying to get you to be honest. You like him, so get to know him better. Take your time. If he isn't gay you'll find out soon enough and if he is, then he might just ask you out on a date."

"Since when did you become the relationship expert?" I ask him, also smirking. Lawrence has been married to Lou-Anne for almost twenty-five years. He hasn't had to think about dating for a long time.

"Hey, I might be off the market but I remember how it was, and don't forget I have George calling me up every other day asking me how to ask some girl or

other out, so it hasn't changed much in twenty years I assure you." I sigh and nod.

"I guess," I say sadly. "Just never really thought I'd ever have to go through it all again." He stands at my shoulder and places his hand on my arm.

"I know," he mutters gently. "But you have to excuse me if I jump to conclusions when I see you suddenly show an interest in a guy when you've practically lived as a hermit for the last thirteen years."

I regard him with shock. Was I showing that kind of interest in Cal? Was I being that obvious? Is that why Cal ran off? I have no idea.

"Come to our party, with or without your new neighbor." Lawrence urges me, and I nod.

"I will, Larry, I promise."

I decide I need to get on with my own shopping and not think too much about Cal's quick escape and the reasons behind it.

If he really has bought the Steele place then he might just be staying longer than the summer months, so there is plenty of time to get to know him better before blundering in there with both feet in my mouth like I just did.

The rest of my week I'm stuck indoors finishing my manuscript. So I have no real opportunity to speak to Cal about the party again. Not that I think he will change his mind, I just want the opportunity to speak to him that's all.

He doesn't stop waving to me when he sees me about. We pass comments about the weather but that is all. He always disappears before I can strike up a conversation about anything else. I guess he sees I'm busy and doesn't want to get in my way.

I don't mind him getting in my way at all. It's just as well though, because by the time Saturday comes around I have finished my work, sent off the manuscript, and I'm ready to celebrate. Lou-Anne's party is the perfect excuse.

I do try to ask him one more time about the party, but he politely refuses. I'm a little sad that he won't be joining me, but finishing my book means I will have plenty of time to spend on getting to know him next week. So maybe we can do something next weekend. Hopefully, his refusal is simply because he doesn't like parties and not because he doesn't like me.

Chapter Six

Moonlit Serenade

"Why do you think he said no, Lawrence?" I ask, probably for about the fiftieth time that evening, and I see I am now trying my friend's patience because he heaves a frustrated sigh.

"For god's sake, Jake," he tells me, handing me another beer. I have now lost track of how many I have had. "You've been talking about this man nonstop since you got here. Why don't you put us all out of our misery and call the guy?"

"Don't have his number," I huff sadly, feeling my shoulders droop and my lip stick out in an exaggerated pout but not being able to prevent it because I am very drunk.

There's no way I'll be driving home tonight. I had intended only to stay a few hours and then drive home so I brought my car, which will have to stay here over night while I get a cab home.

A few hours has turned into a late night/early morning drinking session and mostly me talking about Cal like some lovesick teenager.

I've seen him briefly every day since Monday but not enough to make me think he wants to be anything more than just acquainted with his much older, creepy neighbor. I think he knows that I've been watching him too. Shit.

"You live next door to the guy, Jake, how can you not already have his number?" Lou-Anne pipes up her tone semi-amused. I turn my head, a little slowly because I don't want the room to start spinning just yet.

"Yeah, okay, Lou-Anne, I know sometimes I'm a little more forward but he's different and getting his number wouldn't do any good since he's deaf, he can't talk on the phone." I snort derisively as if this is something they all should have known, but of course, they don't, because Cal hides it so well with those headphones and he doesn't speak to anyone unless he absolutely has to.

"He's deaf?" Lou-Anne asks, not incredulously, although she is giving me a strange look. "He might not be able to talk on the phone, Jake, but have you ever heard of texting?"

I frown. Of course I've heard of texting, I just prefer to speak in person. I use my cell phone for calling. I guess texts are useful sometimes, but they're so impersonal. I don't do social media at all unless my agent has my arm twisted behind my back. The internet just doesn't like me.

I bet it likes Cal though. I'll bet it rolls over and exposes its belly to Cal. I'd like to roll over and expose my belly to that beautiful, blond, surfer... Oops, who tipped the world on its side?

"Earth to Jacob," Lawrence calls and I snap out of my daydream, as he props me back up to an upright position. "So if you can't call him, go over and talk to him in person. Ask him out," Lawrence suggests and I snort again, feeling myself sway just a little and the room lurches slightly. I mentally command it to stay where it is.

"Larry, how in this universe would it be in any way acceptable for a forty-five year old man to ask out a twenty-one year old? He's the same age as your son," I point out. "Would you be happy if I asked George out?" There is a flicker of the protective parent across Lawrence's face but Lou-Anne answers for both of them.

"George isn't gay and you've known him since he was born so that gives you a whole different perspective on how you see him," she tells me. "This guy next door, you don't actually know how old he is, he could be older, and besides, you can't go placing barriers like age in the way because if you do that where do you draw the line?"

I shrug. The age thing is a barrier though, because Cal is never going to be attracted to me.

"You are a good looking man, Jacob Reuben, and anyone would be flattered to be asked out on a date by you," Lou-Anne tells me, and I huff and dismiss her praise with a drunken, clumsy wave of my hand. "What's the worst that could happen?"

"He could think I'm a pervert and slam the door in my face," I suggest. Lou-Anne shakes her head. "I don't even know if he's gay."

"Was that a barrier when Josh asked you out that first time?" she asks me, and I shake my head, because Josh never saw any barriers, just fences to climb over. He hadn't known if I was gay but he'd asked me out anyway. I hadn't even thought about it really, until his invitation sparked my curiosity, and I accepted.

We were together ten years before he... well, let's not reopen old wounds.

Lou-Anne makes a sympathetic noise in the back of her throat and lays a hand on my arm.

"Josh wouldn't want you to have been on your own for so long," she tells me quietly, and I nod sadly.

"I know, but it's not for the want of trying Lou-Anne," I whine, but she snorts.

"In thirteen years how many dates have you been on?" she asks, and I shrug.

"I don't know." I take another swig of the beer I probably shouldn't have accepted because I'd had too many two beers ago. "I haven't been counting."

"Well I have, Jake, and it's four." I stare at her as she holds up what I think must be four fingers but actually looks more like eight or maybe twelve depending on which eye I use. "You say it's not for the want of trying, Jake. I say you're living like a hermit and this guy next door has definitely caught your interest. I think you owe it to yourself to at least try to take things further."

"What if he just wants to be friends?" I ask, wondering if I could actually manage this because being with him in any capacity would be better than not seeing him at all.

"So, then just be friends, and don't rush it," she suggests. "Even if he doesn't want to date you, at least you'll have a new friend." She leans forward and whispers, "Plus, you could always accept friendship at first and hope for more later. If he is attracted to you it won't take long for you to start seeing the signs. You're a very handsome man though, and there are plenty more fish in the sea if this Cal doesn't work out."

I shrug again, at least I think it's a shrug because I'm not sure my body is still wired to my brain at the moment, and the room I was trying to keep from swirling is now moving in circles around me and increases in speed if I try to stop it. I'm not even going to attempt to stand up. I do have to reply to Lou-Anne's statement though because I think she just offered to set me up. The last time that happened was a disaster of monumental proportions.

"I don' need help, thanksh, Lou," I tell her, holding a hand up in thanksh, er thanks, "I'm getting too old for shtuff like thish anyways."

"Jake that's bullshit and you know it," she tells me, but I think she is laughing, because Lawrence is holding my arm to prevent me from falling over, which I didn't even know I was doing.

"You've had a bit too much to drink, my friend," he tells me. "Let me give you a ride home." He helps me to my feet, but since I can't actually feel my feet it is a little difficult to stand on them.

"No feet, bud," I tell him as my legs become boneless and I collapse in a heap at his feet. "You have really nice feet though. Can I take your shoes instead?" I hug onto his ankles and I hear distant laughter before I feel someone's hands on my arms hoisting me up.

Lawrence wraps one of my arms around his shoulders and I turn to nuzzle into the skin at the base of his neck.

"Mmmm!" I hum, "You smell really good, Lawrence." I point out and he snorts.

"Jesus, you're such a dorky drunk, Jake. I hate to disappoint you but I'm happily married to the wife that's currently watching you trying to give me a hickey."

I wrap my other arm around him and hang onto him, clamping my lips onto his skin and making him yelp.

"S'okay, I'm sure Lou-Anne won't mind." I turn and flop my head to one side to try to focus on which Lou-Anne I'm supposed to be talking to. "We could even let her watch," I suggest.

Lou-Anne chuckles and shakes her head.

"Get him out of here before he passes out," she tells her husband, then she points a finger at me. "And don't you try anything mister, he's taken."

I give her an impish grin and a slow, clumsy wink. She knows I'd never do anything like that, and so does Lawrence, that's why he's willing to drive his amorous drunk friend home. I'll probably be asleep by the time he gets me there anyway.

The moon is really beautiful tonight and I just want to sit and sing to it, but I can't actually sit. So, I lie, with my back on the porch and my legs dangling over the steps, singing any song I can think of with the word "moon" in it. I can

think of quite a few, although I only seem to be able to remember the first couple of lines of each one so I settle on a medley.

I can't actually remember how I got here. I think I was at a party at Lawrence's, and he may or may not have given me a ride home. I may or may not have tried his and his wife's patience by talking constantly about Cal. I may or may not have given my best friend a hickey, but it's all a little vague right now.

I do remember stumbling up my front steps, trying to get the world to stop spinning. I may or may not have fallen over, but however I got into this position the world is no longer spinning and I feel kind of relaxed and happy.

This is nice: moonlight, music, the world is staying still for now, and my porch, at least I think it's my porch, is really quite comfortable to lie on. There's just one thing missing.

"Jake, what in hell are you doing?" Oh yeah, an angel to share it all with, that's what's missing.

I sit up, at least I attempt to sit up, and gaze into the very blue, angelic eyes of Cal. God he's beautiful. I reach out to touch his face, but it's a little far away for me to actually touch, and a little out of focus. I frown though, because he looks unhappy.

"Oh, angel, don't be sad," I tell him. When his frown deepens to a scowl, I change my tack, "Hi, Cal!" I say with as much enthusiasm as I can muster as the world starts to spin once more. I fall onto my back again, because there the world was cooperating. I'm a little sad, though because I can no longer see Cal's lovely face.

"Jake, it's three in the morning, what are you doing out here?" he asks me as his face comes back into view. I can't tell if he's concerned or if he's amused, there's a mixture of both in those gorgeous eyes.

"I'm singing to the moon, lovely, lovely man," I tell him, as if this is something that should be understood, he should understand it.

"Is that what you were doing?" he asks as he takes a seat beside me on the steps. "I don't think you should be doing it at three in the morning though, especially when you're drunk."

I regard him with one eye closed.

"Pfft!" I snort. "I'm not drunk, I'm just happy," I tell him, and he chuckles.

“Okay, but you still shouldn’t be out here, anything could happen to you.” I prop myself up on one elbow and poke him in the side, after several attempts because I can’t actually tell which one of him is real.

“You’re out here,” I accuse him. “Hey, since you’re here, wanna sing with me?” He snorts again.

“I can’t sing, Jake, not really my thing,” is his sad reply.

“Oh, sorry!” I hang my head with a pout. Shit, I made him sad, and I don’t want him to be sad, I want him to smile.

His finger hooks beneath my chin and lifts my head so he can see my lips. Mmm! I imagine my lips, on his lips. They look so soft. I close my eyes, what a perfectly lovely dream. I open my eyes again and smile broadly as a beautiful face with amazing bright blue eyes, comes into focus properly, if briefly.

It’s Cal, the man I’ve been watching for so long, but what is he doing out here on my porch?

“Hi, Cal,” I say. “I was just thinking about you. What are you doing out here, you shouldn’t be out on your own so late.” He rolls his eyes.

“I just asked you that,” he says.

“You did?” I frown in confusion, I think I might be a little drunk. “I’m singing,” I announce, trying very hard to pronounce the words properly for him to see what I’m saying.

“Yes!” he nods. “We already established that.” He moves his hands too, which I think might have been a bit of sign language.

I catch one of his hands in mine and pull it open to examine it closely. He has long slender fingers. They’re almost elegant.

“Nice hands,” I say. “I always knew you’d have nice hands.”

He pulls away with a gasp, then stands.

“Come on, let’s get you inside, you can’t stay out here all night.” He attempts to get me to stand up too.

“Why not?” I whine. “It’s lovely out here, the moonlight is incredible, the sky is so clear and the company is amazing.” I meet his eyes and they widen slightly, then he pulls me the rest of the way to standing and leads me, stumbling and tripping to my front door.

“Keys?” he asks and I fumble in my pocket, frowning because the keys won’t cooperate.

“Why don’t you ever smile, Cal?” I ask as I fish around in my pit of a pocket. He lifts my head to look directly at me with another frown.

“What?” he asks in confusion, and I realize he didn’t see what I said. I reach out and touch his cheek and he gasps but doesn’t pull away.

“Smile!” I say. “You don’t ever smile.”

“Y-yes I do,” he tells me, but I shake my head, then steady myself against the doorframe as the action makes me slightly dizzy and the world is once more spinning alarmingly fast.

“No you don’t,” I slur, rubbing my thumb across his bottom lip. “You smile with your mouth, but not...” My hand moves up to touch his eyebrow gently. “Not your eyes.” He seems a little lost for words so I continue, “What makes you smile, Cal?” I ask him, gently drawing my finger down his cheek.

He pulls away from me with a flicker of surprise and perhaps anger in his eyes. Oh god, I am so drunk, I don’t even know what I’m doing. I think I just went one step too far with my next door neighbor. His quick movement put me off balance though. I fall forwards, but he catches me, his arms underneath mine, hoisting me to standing again.

“Oh, my god, you are so wasted, Jake.” Is that a slightly more genuine grin on his face?

“Oh, look at you.” I sigh. “That’s a much better smile. Lights up your face.” I lean close to him and his eyes widen and his breath hitches in his throat. “I’d like to make every part of you smile like that,” I whisper softly.

He gives an incredulous laugh then moves me away from him.

“Keys!” he orders, holding his hand out for them, and I immediately go back to trying to find them.

“They are in here somewhere, Cal,” I tell him. “I just can’t seem to locate them.” I present my stretched open pocket to him and he steps away from me with his hands in the air in surrender.

“Jake,” he exclaims, laughing helplessly, “there is no way I am putting my hand in your pocket.” I shrug, give him a goofy smile and a clumsy wink and fish out my keys.

"Worth a try though," I tell him, then I groan and turn and lean my forehead against the door frame. "Holy shit, I'm so drunk."

"Jake!" Cal exclaims in frustration and I realize I have turned away from him again.

"Cal!" I say in the same tone as I turn back. "Please ignore everything I just said, because I am so very drunk, and I am going to be very hung over in the morning and probably won't remember a thing."

"Really!" Cal says, sounding dubious and also a little relieved I think.

I try to aim my key towards the keyhole but miss.

"Damn, who fitted the extra keyhole? I can't see which hole to put it into," I huff. Cal chuckles and takes the key from me.

"I sincerely hope that isn't something you usually have any problem with!" he mumbles, but the door is open and his face is turned from me as he attempts to stop me from falling inside, so I can't really reply anyway.

My feet refuse to work, so my body is inside but my feet aren't.

"Come on Jake." Cal grunts, trying to pull me inside. "Stop messing around. I can't carry you."

"It's an interesting thought though," I reply, waggling my eyebrows at him.

He chuckles then grabs me before I tip over again because I am standing at a rather stupid angle. He pulls me inside a little too quickly and I over balance.

Suddenly I'm lying on the floor, but something soft broke my fall.

"Nnngh, Jake, gerroff me you great oaf." Cal grunts.

Oh my god, I'm lying on top of him. How the hell did that happen?

Suddenly I realize I'm lying on top of *him*. Oh, he's so soft and warm and he smells so good. He's struggling. Shit!

I tip off him and lie on my back holding my head.

"Shit Cal, I'm sorry, I'm so fucking drunk I don't know which way is up." He is going to leave now, because that was one drunken stumble too far.

He shuffles to a sitting position and then I hear something that sends my spirits soaring. He's laughing: a full on genuine laugh. When I manage to focus on him, he's wiping tears of mirth from his eyes. His laughter is infectious and

a relief when I thought he'd be totally pissed. Soon, I'm wiping tears from my eyes too.

"Where were you to get so drunk, tonight, Jake?" he asks me as he helps me to a standing position then supports me with my arm around his shoulders as we walk into the kitchen.

"I was at that birthday party, remember?" I remind him. "The one you didn't want to go to." I don't hide the extreme disappointment in my tone, and I think I might be pouting. He simply nods his head in understanding, not reacting to anything else.

"Right," he says, then frowns. "Did you drive home?" He sounds disapproving.

"Pfft, no." I snort, although I can't actually remember how I got home, did Lawrence bring me? I seem to recall bending his ear about Cal while we were sitting in his car. Was he driving? "Lawrence drove me I think. I'll have to get my car tomorrow." I frown again and give him a curious look. "What are you doing up so late?" I facepalm because god that sounds so lame, and I'm not his parent. Cal, however is looking extremely embarrassed, and I don't really know why.

"I, er, kind of saw you go out," he says, not meeting my eye. "And when I woke up about twenty minutes ago I noticed your car wasn't there, so I looked over and saw you just lying on your porch. I didn't know what you were doing, but I thought I'd better come over and see if you needed any help."

"Were you watching to see if I got home okay?" I ask, frowning. Because that's my job, isn't it? He snorts, but looks away awkwardly.

"No!" he says forcefully. "I just woke up and happened to look out of the window." I don't believe him, but I don't have the brain power left to question him about it. Something is ringing in the back of my head though, like bells.

"I did the same on Monday." I confess with a shrug, and he looks at me funny, waiting for me to continue as he helps me up onto a stool at my kitchen counter. "When you didn't want a ride home, I did my shopping then went back to the coffee shop and waited until you got on the bus, then I raced it back here and waited to check you got home safe."

"You didn't need to do that." He looks a little taken aback rather than angry.

"Yes I did." I reach out and touch his arm. "You're so young and on your own, I was worried about you."

"I can look after myself." He frowns.

"I know that, but everyone needs someone to watch over them." I nod. "Even the independent ones, in fact, those ones need a guardian angel more than anyone else."

"Are you thinking of applying for the job, then, Jake?" Cal gives me such a direct look it scares and confuses me, and I turn away because I can't meet his eye.

There is an awkward silence as I try to process what just happened here. Are we confessing to each other? That can't be right, we hardly know each other. I think I might have come on a little strong out on the porch, but he is still here, when he could have just seen me inside and left. I don't want to push it though, and I am far too drunk to do anything else but fall into bed and sleep anyway.

Why did I have to drink so much at Lawrence's? I don't usually get this wasted, but I was celebrating finishing my manuscript then we started talking about old times, and then I got talking about Cal and time and beers just got away from me.

"Oh god, I'm getting too old for this." I groan as I hold my head in my hands. I lift my head up and face Cal as I continue, "I don't do this very often, I feel the need to point out." He raises his eyebrows, "I don't!" I exclaim indignantly. He gets up and walks across my kitchen.

"Do you want me to make you a drink or something?" he asks, and I shake my head.

"Just water, please. Glasses are in the cupboard above the kettle." I grimace. "You don't have to do this." He shrugs as he hands me a glass of water and I thank him. "I used to go out drinking all the time but now, it takes longer to recover from the hangover than it does to get drunk so it's not even worth it unless it's a special occasion."

I groan and hold my head. It's starting to throb now and my stomach is not feeling its best really.

"I think I'm gonna throw up," I announce to the world in general.

"Oh my god," Cal exclaims, "and you think I need someone to look after me?" He stands and helps me up. "Let's get you to the bathroom." I shake my head.

"No! No! I'm fine now, just a wave, it'll pass." He lets go, and I sit back down.

"Holy shit."

"Getting old, Cal," I start to ramble, because I know he is about to say it's time for him to go, but I want him to stay, even though the sensible part of me is screaming at me to let the guy go because it's three in the morning. The drunk part of me wants to hold onto him as long as I can. "I never thought it would ever happen to me, though," I continue.

"Thought what would happen?" he asks.

"Getting old," I repeat. "Fucking sucks," I curse, then apologize and burp and apologize again.

I look up and I see he appears to be trying not to laugh. Well, good, I'll continue then, because he needs to laugh more.

"When I was your age I could do this every night, well not every night, but more often and not have any kind of hangover. Now though, shit, I am gonna regret this when I get up in the morning, if I get up. Have you any idea what it feels like to get old?"

"You are not old, Jake." Cal rolls his eyes and I want to kiss him for that compliment. What a lovely thing to say. What a lovely person to be saying such a lovely thing.

"You wake up one morning and you have hair growing out of your ears, Cal... *hair*," I continue with an incredulous tone of voice. He snorts.

"You are not old enough to have hair in your ears," he assures me, then he looks into my ear before he speaks again. "You don't have any hair in your ears."

"I found one." I sadly hold up a finger. "Just the other day. One, but that's enough. I pulled it out, but it's still there, waiting to grow back, hiding until it knows I'm not watching then pow, it explodes out of my ear like some kinda bear factory mutant trying to set up shop in my earlobe. I'm old, past it, over the hill, past my expiry date, wrinkled and hairy. I'm shrinking," I wail and he giggles out loud. What an amazingly sweet sound.

"No, you're not," he assures me. "You're the same height as you were on Monday."

"Well, maybe I was exaggerating a little, but you just have no idea, Cal, really. When I was your age, what are you twenty, twenty-one?"

"Twenty-one," he replies. I am momentarily thrown by this information. I audibly groan, for many reasons but mainly because I had guessed right. God he's just so beautiful and young, with so much life ahead of him, so many possibilities.

"When I was twenty-one I had all the answers. You'll know how that feels right? Because you're twenty-one right now."

"I don't have all the answers, Jake, I wish I did," he says sadly, suddenly not laughing anymore. "Sometimes I don't even know the question because I didn't hear it."

"Oh that's good, that's funny." I laugh heartily. "You're funny, Cal." I see his serious expression though, and shake my head, immediately ceasing my laughter. "No, that's not funny. I don't think that's funny at all. It must really suck."

"I get by!" He shrugs.

"But you shouldn't have to get by, Cal, you should be out, enjoying life, having fun, finding someone to make you smile," I tell him. Cal regards me with a curious, unreadable expression on his face.

"I think I already did," he whispers softly.

Oh god, when did that happen? I haven't seen him with anyone. Maybe he met them on Monday. Why did I take my eyes off him for even a second?

"Good." I nod, trying to sound pleased for him. "That's great." It's so not great that it's almost painful, but I can't let him see that. "When did you meet him/her/it." He frowns and bites his lip as he looks at me funny. "Sorry," I grimace, "I can be a little nosy when I'm drunk, even when I'm not drunk, I assumed some things there that I had no right assuming."

"If I was to define who I would be most interested in," he tells me, still with that curious, slightly confused look on his face, "it would be your first assumption: a he."

"Oh, well that's just great," I say with more than a little enthusiasm, then I remember that he's trying to tell me he has met someone he likes and doesn't need me drooling over him. "I mean, not that I'm saying... you know, that we... er... I mean, I'm gay too," I blurt out.

"You make that sound like a confession." He chuckles.

"It's not, it's really not, but I just thought you might like to know that anyway." I'm aware that I'm rambling, but I can't stop myself. "So you know you have an ally, just so you know." God, I am such a fool, such an old, drunk, damn stupid fool.

"I already knew it," Cal says quietly, and I raise my eyebrows.

"You did?"

"Yep, like I already know you're a writer because I've read all of your books."

"You have?" My ears are ringing again, and the world is beginning to spin uncontrollably. I can't really form more than two word answers without danger of throwing up. I know I should be more interested in what he's saying. I just can't even keep my eyes focused.

"You would not believe how excited I was when I realized Jacob Reuben was my next door neighbor."

I regard him with one eye closed.

"The reality is a bit of an anticlimax, huh?" I ask him, although I can't really be sure that's actually what I said.

"No, it's kind of the opposite actually," he confesses, his eyes shining, then looks me directly in the eye. "And I can tell you this because I don't suppose you'll remember in the morning," he tells me, hopefully.

"I don't suppose I will, no." I shake my head. I don't think my brain has even registered what he's said right now let alone remember in a few hours' time. My eyes close as the world starts spinning again. He helps me stand with a grunt.

"Come on, funny guy, let's get to bed." He pauses with a gasp. "Er, I mean I'll take you to bed, I mean, I'll help you get to your bedroom."

"Are you helping me to my room?" I ask, smiling slightly stupidly and showing too much teeth. He smirks, as he helps me along the hall.

"Yes, Jake, I am, except I don't know which one is yours." We stop outside my room and I pat the door.

"This one," I tell him brightly.

“Great, so now I’m helping you into your room,” he informs me helpfully. He’s such a nice person, so gentle, so strong, so warm to touch; just the right amount of hair on his arms to feel silky and soft. He makes me want to purr.

He deposits me on my bed, on my back and I fall with a startled giggle. I open my eyes to see him having some kind of struggle with his emotions, it’s playing across his face, but the emotions are all so tangled and mixed up and my vision is so blurry I can’t read what he’s thinking. He’s so lovely though, so gorgeous.

“You’re so beautiful, Cal.” He blushes from his neck to the roots of his hair.

“Thank you,” he replies and I realize I said that out loud.

I sit suddenly to explain what I’ve just said, but the sudden change of position was a bad idea. I feel my stomach churn and the room spins deliriously fast. I hold up my hand and place my fingers to my lips, swallowing hard and trying to stay upright.

“I’m really gonna throw up this time,” I warn him so he has time to run. Instead, he sits down beside me and runs his hand down my back.

“Want me to stay?” he asks. Oh god, yes please, but I shake my head, because that would be a really bad idea.

“No, you’d better go. I already lost ninety-five percent of my dignity, don’t let me lose the rest in front of you, please. I’m sure you have no desire to see an old guy shouting to Huey down the toilet bowl.” He snorts then stands as I do. He pushes me in the direction of my bathroom and he moves towards my bedroom door.

“Okay I’m going then, but I’ll come back tomorrow to see if you’re okay.” I turn and stumble towards him, then press my door key into the palm of his hand.

“Take my key, because I’ll still be in bed, I might even be dead. Old people die in their sleep sometimes.” He rolls his eyes.

“Oh my god. Word of advice, Jake, please don’t die in your sleep, I would be very unhappy if you did.”

He gives me a kiss on the cheek and my reaction time is so slowed by alcohol I missed my chance there, because if I hadn’t been so wasted I would have turned my head and caught his lips with mine and we’d have kissed. I wonder how much further it could have gone if I’d done that.

Oh holy shit, I'm screwed, and I'm going to die I feel so crappy: about everything. He's gone and probably won't be back, even though he has my key. He'll probably just post it through my mail slot tomorrow with a restraining order.

I stumble across the floor to my bathroom and make it just in time before I splatter the inside of my toilet bowl. Yeuch!

When I'm done I crawl back into bed and fall into a disturbed, restless sleep filled with confessions of attraction and love and desire and that's just from Cal. I have an overactive, fucking imagination, that's my problem.

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Chapter Seven

Hangover!

Urgh!

Why did I think drinking so much last night was such a good idea? I should have been more careful. I should have paced myself. I should have been more responsible.

There're a lot of things I should have done but I didn't. Well, I'm living with the consequences this morning.

Is it morning?

I don't even know, except the sun is shining directly into my brain from somewhere.

Somebody please turn it off!

I can't remember anything about last night after Lawrence brought out the whiskey. After that it's all very sketchy at best. How did I even get home? Did someone give me a ride? I hope they did. I hope to god I didn't drive in this state. Neither Lawrence nor Lou-Anne would have let me, surely.

I reach across the bed and grab my phone. I wince at the cacophony of pain the movement sets off and then again at the brightness of my phone screen.

There is one text from Lawrence:

"We're bringing your car round early because I have to open shop for Lou-Anne. She's a little worse for wear this morning. Hope your head isn't too bad. L."

"Thanks. Just put my keys through the mail slot because I'm dying."

I text back, then throw my phone onto the bed covers without looking at the time.

I cover my head with my pillow to block out the excruciatingly bright sunshine. I have no curtains mainly because no one overlooks me so what would actually be the point, and also so that the first thing I see when I wake up is the incredible view of the beach. It also means the sun has no barrier when it

wants to wake me up and it really wants to wake me up today, and make me suffer.

Oh boy am I suffering. My head is pounding, my stomach is churning and my tongue feels like an old, dry leather insole. I don't think I dare risk moving at all right now because either my head will explode or my stomach will.

Maybe I should go back to sleep.

I close my eyes to attempt to forget the fact that I am close to death but they shoot open again when I hear the front door. I hold my breath waiting for the inevitable call from my sister, who is the only other person in the world that has a key to my house.

There is no call.

Who the hell just opened my door then?

I listen some more but there is nothing. Then I remember Lawrence's text; it was probably him putting my car keys through my door, like I asked him to.

I close my eyes again and drift off to sleep.

In a semi-dreamlike state, I start imagining all sorts of things, mixed with remembering things that happened last night, except I can't tell which are real memories and which are just wishful thinking.

Did I talk to Cal last night? I remember seeing him. I was very close to him at one point, touching his cheek in such an intimate way that it can have been nothing else but a dream. There are other things too that don't seem to be right. Did we talk? Why would we? Why would he even have been up when I got home, it was way after midnight.

Nngh! Stop thinking, Jake, it's causing pain.

Sleep, I need sleep.

When I next wake, it's to the sound of the waves lapping on the beach and birds calling outside my window and I realize the French doors that lead from my bedroom onto the deck have been opened to let in some fresh air. When did I do that?

I feel a little better so I must have slept off most of my hangover. I still feel like shit, but no longer as if I am going to die three times over. The fresh air has definitely helped.

When exactly did I get up and open my French doors though?

Intrigued now, I gingerly move to a sitting position and then, when nothing seems to be pounding, throbbing, or threatening to break, I swing my legs over the edge of the bed.

I am still wearing the shirt and boxers I had on last night, but at some point, after throwing up, I took off my pants.

I don't remember throwing up. I just know I did because my throat feels as if it's been rasped with sandpaper.

I groan. I haven't gotten that drunk in a long, long time. It's just not a great idea when you live on your own: no one to look after you the next day.

My throat is actually very dry, and so is my mouth, painfully so. I could really use a cool glass of... oh... there is a glass of water on my nightstand. When did that appear there?

I pick it up. It is deliciously cool; it has ice in it and a slice of lemon. What. The. Fuck?

Who put this here? It can't have been here long. The ice hasn't even begun to melt.

I sure as hell didn't get it and if Sarah was here she would have made a show of waking me up and making sure I knew how much she disapproved of the state I am in.

I smell it cautiously.

"It isn't poisoned, I promise."

"Holy Shit!" I screech. The voice startles me so much I drop the glass and its contents in my lap. I do a weird little juggling act with the glass and ice cubes as the whole lot is dumped in my lap. I jump up with a yelp because it's damn cold. I turn to the source of the voice, which seemed to come from my deck.

Cal's face is peeking above the back of one of my wicker loungers. His eyes widen when he sees I have spilled my water all over myself and he gasps.

"Oh my god, Jake!" he exclaims as he jumps up from the lounge, tipping a protesting Jizzie from his lap. He rushes through my room and out into the hall still speaking, "I am so sorry!" he calls back.

He returns a few moments later with a cloth and starts to soak up the water which I haven't bothered to do myself because I'm still wondering what the hell he's doing here in the first place.

He is soaking up water from my lap now and I stop him, because I am just wearing boxers, wet ones now, that will not be hiding anything.

“Er, thanks, I can manage,” I say, taking the towel from him.

He takes a deep breath and stands, stepping back towards the French doors. Jezzie is by his feet, weaving in and out of his legs. Her name is well earned.

“I hope you don’t mind,” Cal says as I continue to dry myself. “You gave me your key last night and it got past noon and you still weren’t up so I came over. I thought you might need some TLC.” His entire body is hunched and tense and his eyes are wide and wary.

I mean, I’m startled, and more than a little confused as to why he would want to do this but I’m not going to complain if he’s come over to look after me. Wait, I gave him my key?

“When did I give you my key?” I ask him. He bites his lip and I realize my tone is doing nothing to reassure him I’m not angry.

“Last night,” he tells me. “You don’t remember?” I shake my head. “You said you wouldn’t. I never actually met someone who got so drunk they couldn’t remember what they did.”

I’m not sure whether it’s in disapproval or in awe of the fact. I’d prefer the former, since I wouldn’t want to be labelled as a bad role model. He also looks, I don’t know, a little relieved to be honest. What’s that all about?

God this is terrible. I can’t remember a fucking thing. I groan and hold my head. Cal is at my side, his hand on my arm and his blue eyes full of concern.

“Are you alright?” he asks. “Want me to make you some coffee, get you some painkillers?”

What is this? Role reversal day? Cal isn’t supposed to be the one looking after me, not in my version of the universe anyway. I should be looking after him; protecting him; keeping him safe.

Now what am I thinking? Yes, I need some coffee because my brain needs straightening out.

“Coffee, Cal, thank you. That would be fucking amazing.” I fall back onto the bed, because despite the fact it is slightly damp now, I am still completely wrecked.

Lying here on my back looking up at Cal as he regards me almost expectantly triggers a memory in my alcohol fuddled brain. He was here last night, looking down at me in this exact same position.

I frown. I don't remember anything else. My hands cover my face and I groan again. I peek through my fingers and see Cal still staring down at me, as if he's in some sort of trance, except he isn't looking at my face.

"Cal, Coffee!" I bark, snapping him out of his daydream.

"Coming right up," he calls, and bolts through my bedroom into the hall.

I lift my head and glance down at myself. What a fucking state I'm in. Of course, he was staring. I'm lying here in wet boxers. And I still didn't get a drink of water.

I stumble into my bathroom with the now empty glass. I fill it at my sink and drink thirstily, wiping my mouth and filling it again, drinking another half a tumbler before my thirst is quenched.

"Oh, god, that's much better."

Now I dare to look at myself in the mirror. Holy shit I look like fucking death warmed up. What did Cal say? It's past noon? He must think I'm such a slob, or worse: some kind of alcoholic.

I feel bad barking at him like that, but I'm cranky in the morning, I mean afternoon, especially with the mother of all hangovers. And he was staring, and making me feel, I don't know, uncomfortable?

I walk back out into my room and change out of my wet things. I pull on some sweats and a clean T-shirt, strip my bed, because the edge of the sheet is damp, then pad out, yawning and scratching through my bed hair to straighten it out a tad. I want to see how Cal is coping in my kitchen. I'm hoping it is clean and presentable because I'm not the tidiest of guys.

"Hello!" a female voice calls, and I freeze halfway along my hall.

This is all I fucking need: my sister. Couldn't she have called first? Maybe she did though, I haven't checked my cell or my voice mail.

Oh shit, she's gonna find Cal in my kitchen and me in my sweats having just got out of bed. What is that going to look like?

"Jake, I brought you some apple muffins," Sarah calls as she approaches the kitchen and I just listen, helpless to stop this inevitable meeting. "I used Mom's recipe. They're still warm if you... oh!"

That's it; she's going to be jumping to all sorts of conclusions now. I should have headed her off but my body just isn't working quick enough to have reached her before she reached Cal. Plus, part of me is curious to see how he reacts and interacts with someone else other than me without those damn headphones over his ears.

"Who are you?" Sarah is asking as I reach the kitchen door. She sounds amused more than anything.

"Er, hi, I'm Cal," Cal is saying and I imagine he's holding out his hand, and giving her the benefit of those baby blues.

"Uhuh!" my sister replies, sounding unaffected. "Mind telling me what you're doing in my brother's kitchen, Cal?" she asks.

"I'm erm, making him some coffee?" Cal tells her, making it sound like a question.

"Oh, that's nice. And where exactly is Jake?" she asks, an edge to her voice that I don't understand.

"H-he's in his room, getting dressed."

Holy fuck, this is not going well. I think I'd better get in there and give some better explanations.

"Hi!" I say as I enter the kitchen trying not to look like I just got out of bed, but I know my hair will be the giveaway: that and the fact my eyes are hanging somewhere around my knees at the minute and probably look like piss holes in the snow.

"Oh, hello!" Sarah says sarcastically as she approaches me and stretches up to kiss me on the cheek. She gives me a significant look, nudging her head ever so slightly towards Cal, then her eyes twinkle and she smirks. "Just got up have we?" she asks.

I ignore her question, opting for checking that Cal is not freaking out because he looks like a rabbit caught in car headlights. I meet his gaze as I step further into the room and raise my eyebrows. Out of sight of my sister, I sign to him "okay?" and his eyes widen then he smiles and nods, signing "yes" almost imperceptibly. This is the extent of my sign language knowledge though.

"Cal, this is my sister, Sarah," I tell him and he grimaces slightly as I turn to Sarah. "Sarah, this is Cal."

“Yes,” she says, that twinkle still in her eyes. “I know, we just met.”

“Er, Jake,” Cal calls, and I turn to him. “I think I should probably go.” He looks awkward and tense, but I don’t want him to go.

My eyes are pleading and apologetic but he grimaces and looks past me at my sister. I sigh as I accept the inevitable: that this is another missed chance to get to know him better, and it was such a nice feeling having him here looking after me.

Sarah, at this point, has this smug smirk on her face as she watches Cal and I interact. What is going through her head right now? I probably don’t want to know, but I don’t want Cal to go without talking to him a little and at least thanking him for being here in the first place.

I take his hand, trying to ignore the electric shock that courses up my arm as I do, and pull him out of the kitchen, through the living room and out to the front door.

“You know you don’t have to go, Sarah probably won’t stay long.” I am whispering because I don’t want Sarah to hear but knowing it doesn’t matter how loud I say it to him.

Cal shrugs. “That’s okay, I should go anyway. I just came to check you were okay after last night.” I smile at him and touch his arm in thanks.

“Thank you, that was incredibly nice of you considering I probably acted like an ass.” Cal chuckles and his eyes sparkle.

If I didn’t feel so crappy I would be able to enjoy the full impact of that lovely, genuine smile he just gave me and that delightful pink blush on his cheeks, but I can’t right now so I store it all away for future reference.

“You weren’t an ass, Jake, you were kinda funny,” he tells me. “You were singing.” I raise my eyebrows and grimace.

“Oh god!” I exclaim in embarrassment. He chuckles again.

“Sometimes being deaf is a blessing.” He has a wicked twinkle in his blue eyes.

“Hey!” I say archly, feeling myself blush. “And I thought you were a really nice guy as well.” He bites his lip but continues to smirk.

“I really should go though.” Before he can turn, as he usually does in order to end a conversation, I stop him with a hand on his arm.

"Maybe I'll see you later?" I ask, searching his face, clutching at straws, hoping he'll not read anything creepy into this. "We could get a pizza and watch a movie or something. I think I need to apologize for being a drunken ass even if you don't think I was one."

He smiles, and to my delight, he nods. My stomach should not have as many butterflies in it as it does right now.

"Pizza sounds good," he agrees. "I'll come back later, when you're feeling a little better." I roll my eyes and he smirks then makes his escape almost hastily, probably because he doesn't really want to be any longer in the presence of someone who probably smells like a brewery, or worse.

I watch him disappear down my front steps and across the drive to his house. I know it's cheesy, but in every sappy RomCom I have ever seen the main love interest always glances back at the last minute and smiles. I'm watching to see if he does. Am I a hopeless case? Is he ever going to see me as anything but a friendly neighbor? I doubt it. To him I must seem so old: past it, especially when I look like I do right now.

He reaches the bottom of his own porch steps and stops, turns back and waves, flashing me another of those amazing smiles, then disappears up and into his house.

Well, okay, maybe my heart did kind of miss a beat when that happened, but does it mean anything, really? Can I allow it to mean anything?

It's only when he's actually out of sight that I realize he still has my front door key.

"He's kinda cute," Sarah tells me as I return to the kitchen. I scowl at her because she has an altogether too smug look on her face.

"You scared him off, Sarah," I tell her sullenly. She raises her eyebrows as she hands me a much-needed mug of coffee.

"I scared him off?" she asks. "What about you?" She waves her hands up and down in front of me. "You're the one that looks like the first wave of the zombie apocalypse."

I groan and rub my hand over my face, then take a sip of my coffee, not bothering to hide my pleasure as the liquid soothes my still raw throat.

"Good night, last night?" Sarah asks. I nod. "Get drunk?"

“Very!” I groan.

“Get lucky?” she continues, and I gasp.

“What? No!” I exclaim. “I didn’t sleep with Cal if that’s what you’re implying.” She raises her eyebrows in disbelief. “I didn’t!” I say hoping that will be the end of it. “He came by to see how I was because he’s a nice guy and a good neighbor.” She looks unconvinced.

“Okay, don’t get snippy,” she tells me. “I was just asking.”

“Well don’t.” I hope my tone warns her to stop digging.

“He’s a little young, Jake,” she goes on. I slam my mug down on the counter as her casual comment hits a rather raw nerve.

“I didn’t sleep with him, Sarah,” I yell this time. God if my own sister is feeling the need to point out how young Cal is, what is the rest of the world going to think about my attraction for him? I turn to leave, hiding the wince of pain that shouting caused in my head and my throat.

“Where are you going?” she asks in concern.

“To take a shower,” I huff.

“Jake, don’t be like that, I’m sorry,” she says. I stop and sigh.

“I’m sorry too,” I tell her. “Look, Sarah, I’m not the best company today. I’m just gonna go back to bed.”

She walks up to me and places her hand on my forehead looking concerned and I feel terrible for snapping at her.

“Can I get you anything, sweetheart?” she asks, and I shake my head.

“No, thanks,” I say, a little more graciously and gratefully. “It’s just a hangover, it’s self-inflicted.”

She smiles tenderly and gives me a quick peck on the cheek.

“That doesn’t mean you shouldn’t have someone to look after you though. I don’t mind staying.”

I shake my head. “I’ll be fine, and I think Cal is coming back over later. He still has my key.” I frown. Why am I not even freaking out about that? I never felt comfortable enough with a neighbor to give them my key before. Why do I feel so comfortable with him? My head hurts too much to have any theories on this puzzle right now though.

“Okay,” Sarah says, with an unreadable expression on her face, breaking my line of thought. “I’ll leave you to sleep this off.” She fetches her purse from the kitchen counter and turns to leave. “Did you finish your latest manuscript?” she asks. I nod. “Good,” she says. “Then you can come over for dinner sometime this week.” She gives me a significant look. “It’s been a while.”

She leaves me before I can object. I suppose I should make an effort. I don’t do “going out” very often though. Last night was the first time in a long while. I usually have to have my arm twisted. Sarah can twist like the best of them.

Urgh, my head feels like there’s a power tool inside it trying to drill its way out and I feel like I got hit by a bulldozer. I need to sleep this off before Cal comes back because I want to be better company than I am right now. I am never drinking again. Ever!

I stumble back into the kitchen to get some more coffee. I glance at the delicious looking apple muffins that Sarah baked for me but the thought of eating one churns my stomach. I swallow down some painkillers, feeling worse than I did when I first woke up, if that’s even possible. I only manage to get as far as the couch in my living room before I collapse there, pulling a blanket over me as I do.

Jezzie jumps up onto my stomach, but I’m too damn tired to shove her off. She starts to get comfortable, kneading the comforter and purring so damn loud it sounds as if the power tool in my head has a twin.

God, I think I’m dying. As I slip into oblivion I wonder who will miss me the most: Jezzie? She’ll just find someone else to “own”; Sarah: of course she’ll miss me, or will she just miss mothering me? Or Cal: will he miss me? I hardly know him, yet he’s managed to carve himself a niche in my heart without even trying. I have this urge to protect him that I’ve never really had before and I don’t understand it.

Whatever is going on though, will have to wait until I sleep this damn hangover off. Things will be clearer when my head is clearer. Either that or I’ll be dead so there’ll be no worries at all then.

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Chapter Eight

Not a Hangover

Not a hangover.

That is the vague thought that passes through my head as I slowly die on my couch.

I am vaguely aware of a woman's voice talking somewhere in the distance: Sarah? I thought she went home.

Someone places a cold cloth on my forehead and tucks a blanket around my shoulders. My head is lifted and a pillow is placed behind it before being gently lowered again. Fingers draw softly down my cheek and I am suddenly very aware that this is not my sister playing nurse.

My sister would never touch me like this and my body would never react the way it just did as I lean into the caress and moan softly.

"Hush, Jake," a calm voice whispers softly.

"Cal?" I croak.

"Yes." Is the simple answer.

"What..." I try to swallow but can't, it hurts so damn much. I try to lift my head, but I can't do that either.

"Lay still, Jake," he tells me, his hand on my forehead. "You have a fever. I don't think you have a hangover, I think you have the flu."

"Or worse!" I groan. "I think I'm dying." To my surprise I don't get sympathy, Cal chuckles.

"Don't be such a worry wart, it's just a virus. Oldies are such hypochondriacs." There is so much in that statement to take offense at but I feel far too crappy to be able to respond. "Do you want me to make you anything to eat?" he asks me.

I open my eyes and see that Cal is sitting cross-legged on the floor beside the couch, level with my head. Even through the grit in my eyes, he's gorgeous. His blue eyes are full of concern, despite his amused reaction to my pessimism. Is that concern for me? What is he doing here though? Then I remember I invited him over for pizza. I groan.

"I don't know if I can face food right now, Cal," I tell him, my sore throat making my voice raspy and gravelly. "We might need to take a rain check on that pizza and movie night." He clicks his tongue and gets up.

"Don't worry about it, Jake. I'll heat some soup for you." He's gone before I can stop him.

Having any kind of conversation with this guy that is not completely on his terms is going to prove very difficult. When he doesn't want another opinion or any protest to what he's doing he just turns his back. He's either very clever or a pain in the ass. I can't make up my mind.

As he walks away, I can't help noticing his deliciously pert ass in those jeans he's wearing. If he's a pain in the ass then he's a fucking sexy one, dammit.

I flop over onto my back and groan. I am too sick to be thinking things like this, it makes my head hurt.

I close my eyes for a second and I must drift off because the next thing I know he's back, with soup and telling me I should eat it.

He helps me sit and I'm surprised by how weak and shaky I feel. This is stupid, it's just a virus, like Cal said. I shouldn't feel so bad.

Cal gives me a cushion to balance the soup bowl on and hands me the spoon.

"What?" I ask as I take it from him. "You're not going to feed it to me?" I can't help the snippy tone in my voice, and I wonder if he picks up on things like that.

Watching him purse his lips and fold his arms in front of his chest tells me he does.

"Eat!" he orders me so I do, in a way that I hope says it is under protest since who the hell is he to order me around like this?

It's chicken soup, and although my stomach wasn't telling me I was hungry, the smell triggers a rumble. It also triggers memories of childhood when I was sick and my mom would make me her own chicken soup. I can't help smiling as I swallow the first mouthful despite how much it hurts my throat. I glance up at Cal who is watching me carefully.

"Okay?" he asks, signing it as well. I chuckle.

"It's great, thanks, and you do realize that is the only sign I know, don't you?" I tell him. He smirks.

"Oh, I'm sure we can remedy that, sometime." He bites his lip as if he's said something he shouldn't then looks away as he blushes all over.

It's like he has some kind of newfound confidence but isn't quite confident using it yet. It's kind of adorable that he's sassy one minute: self-doubting and shy the next. I doubt it will last, since the sassiness and cockiness will eventually overpower the shyness. I hope it doesn't too much though, because damn, that blush!

I take another sip of soup, watching him over the rim of the spoon and wondering just how far down the blush goes.

"Now that you're awake and eating, I'm going into town for the usual groceries," Cal tells me and I frown. Something about that sounds wrong but I can't put my finger on it yet. "I'll get yours too if you want. Do you want me to get anything specific?"

I frown even harder, trying to think why he would want to go to the store on a Sunday evening, plus there isn't a bus this late, although I have really no idea how late it is.

"What time is it?" I ask him, still frowning.

"About nine," he says. "I'll have to go soon if I want to catch the next bus."

I freeze and the soup spoon hovers in my hand halfway from the soup bowl to my mouth.

"Tell me again what time it is. It's far too late for you to go to town even if there was a later bus, it's Sunday. There are no buses." He sighs, seemingly in sympathy, and sits on the floor beside me again.

"Jake, it's nine a.m. on Tuesday," he breaks it to me gently. I simply stare at him.

"What?" I ask. "How?"

How the hell can I have lost a day? I don't remember this. What the fuck?

"I came back here Sunday night about six-ish. To see if you still wanted pizza," he tells me. "I knocked but you didn't answer and I still had your key so I let myself in. You were asleep here, but you were so hot, and feverish I knew

things weren't right." He looks down at his hands that are clenched in his lap. "I got your phone and texted your sister."

"You did what?" I splutter.

"I was worried!" Cal tells me defensively. "I couldn't wake you up. You were delirious." I just stare at him. "She came by. She doesn't live far away, huh?" I shake my head. "She told me to keep you cool and that if you were still that bad today I was to call a doctor but you cooled down and slept all of yesterday and peacefully last night..."

"You've been here two nights?" I ask him incredulously. He nods. "Cal!" I exclaim. What am I supposed to say to that? We hardly know each other but he's willing to nurse me through a high fever. "I don't know what to say, thank you." He smiles.

"You just said it," he tells me brightly, meeting my gaze briefly, before lowering his eyes with a slight blush as he stands up. "Sarah told me she would come by again this afternoon. You should let her know you're feeling a little better though, she was worried."

Well, I might have something to say to my sister for leaving me in the care of a relative stranger, although, she thinks we're more than that doesn't she? She thinks we've already done the horizontal tango so she'd think it was natural for him to want to look after me.

I guess I would have done the same, and for some reason I want to trust this enigmatic and intriguing young man. He seems to have so many layers to his personality I suspect I am simply scratching the surface at the minute.

"So do you want me to get you anything specific?" he asks.

I take another sip of soup and purse my lips as I think. If he is going to get groceries for both of us, it's going to be far too much for him to carry on the bus. He could get a cab but I am forming another plan. The execution of which depends on how much I am willing to trust this angelic apparition before me.

"Cal, do you drive?" I ask him. He widens his eyes and nods.

"Yes, I do. I haven't had a car for about a year, but my license is valid." He fetches out his wallet and shows me his driver's license. I only get a flash though, not enough to read it properly.

"You could take my car," I tell him and he just stares at me. Oh god, am I doing the right thing? "I mean, it would be quicker," I say quickly, to hide any

doubt I'm feeling, "and you'd have too much to carry on the bus, so take my car as long as you're not gonna carjack it or go joyriding, or do donuts in parking lots or anything else young people do with cars these days."

Cal rolls his eyes as he stands with his thumbs hooked in his low-slung jeans. He makes me want to bite my lip, bite him, bite anything!

"I wouldn't know the first thing about doing donuts, Jake," he assures me with a chuckle. "And even if I had any friends I wouldn't take them joyriding in your car."

"Great." Although I'm actually thinking it isn't really that great since he just admitted he has no friends. It's actually very sad.

"I can really take your car?" he asks me incredulously, as if he can't quite believe what's being said. I nod.

"Yes, Cal, I just said so didn't I? It's a stick shift, are you okay with that?" He nods, fizzling with so much excitement that I want to laugh. I wave my hand in the direction of my front door. "My keys are, erm..."

"On the table in your entrance hall." Cal finishes for me and I give him a confused look. "I picked them up off the floor when I let myself in on Sunday morning."

Urgh, my head hurts, but yeah, I vaguely remember Lawrence telling me he was dropping my car off and me asking him to put my keys through the mail slot.

Cal disappears then returns with my car keys, waving them with a questioning look on his lovely face. I nod.

"Any special orders?" he asks, as he hands me a couple of painkillers and a glass of water, which I just accept without question. "Or should I just get stuff." I chuckle.

"If by stuff you mean chocolate, cookies and potato-based snacks then yes," I tell him and he smiles.

"You can't live on junk food, Jake."

"I can try!"

He snorts then leaves before I can add to the list.

"I'll get you some flu remedy and some vitamin C as well," he calls back then he's gone.

I hear my car starting in the drive. I grimace as the gears crunch then the engine growls. The engine noise interspersed with gear crunching disappears into the distance, and I wonder for a fleeting moment if I've done the right thing and if the poor gears will ever be the same. I also wonder if I'll ever see my car again. The thought is very fleeting though, because what would Cal possibly have to gain from stealing my car? And it's not as if I don't know where he lives.

I chuckle as I finish my soup that I didn't even know I needed, then I lie back and wonder about the turn of events that has the neighbor I have been watching for the last month looking after me when I have just spent most of that time feeling protective towards him.

Until I woke this morning, I thought I just had a bad hangover. I guess I'm lucky he was around really. I could have been in trouble if he hadn't been.

Despite the soup and the painkillers he handed me before he left, I am still feeling like shit: gritty eyed, aching joints and a killer headache. I snuggle down into the blanket he has obviously fetched from my bedroom and decide that sleep is the best order of the day.

I go to sleep with mental images of Cal wandering through my house checking everything out. Something about that makes me a little uncomfortable. I hope he didn't look in my study. I hope that damn notebook where I wrote his schedule isn't lying in plain view. Oh shit! Too late to worry about that now, though.

I wake to the sound of my sister's voice, talking to someone else who does not reply verbally, presumably it's Cal. They are in the kitchen and she is ordering whoever it is to sit in her inimitable motherly way. I assume she and Cal must have arrived back here at the same time. I can't imagine who else she would be ordering about like that.

I sit up and then stand gingerly, and make my way to the kitchen holding onto furniture, walls and doorways as I do because I'm a little unsteady on my feet.

The scene there is disturbing to say the least. Cal is sitting at the kitchen counter looking extremely pale and shaken. He has cuts and grazes on his face and what looks like a bruise forming above his left eye. My sister has her arm wrapped around his shoulders and is talking to him quietly, as if she's soothing

him and reassuring him. He gives the occasional nod but says nothing in reply. Then she starts using sign language and I roll my eyes, I should have known my sister would know sign language, she's a teacher and she knows everything.

Cal replies in kind, and then gasps as he notices me in the doorway.

"Jake!" he exclaims, and his pale and anxious expression is replaced by something altogether brighter, along with a delightful flush to color his pale cheeks.

He is just lovely, but I can't think about that right now because there is something very wrong. What the hell happened to his face?

Sarah stands and turns to me. She looks somewhat less excited to see me, in fact she looks positively livid. I know her well enough, though, to realize that she is not angry with me but instead, is bursting to have a rant about something.

"Jake!" she exclaims sternly. "What are you doing up?" She walks over and immediately places her hand on my forehead, her gentle tone incongruous with her fuming expression. "How are you feeling sweetie?" she asks and I purse my lips and roll my eyes, meeting Cal's gaze and making him snort weakly at my embarrassment. He still looks shaky though, and I am feeling very concerned about those cuts and bruises.

"I'm feeling a lot better thanks, Sarah," I tell her, even though I'm not really, I just have something else to focus on. I maneuver around her making a beeline for Cal.

"What's going on?" I ask, my voice barely a croak because my throat is still very sore.

Cal grimaces and looks away biting his lip.

"Sheriff Jefferson is what's going on," Sarah spits, making sure that Cal can see her too. "That damn sheriff is an asshole," she hisses angrily and I see Cal's worried expression change to slight amusement at her choice of description for Oakwood Bay's esteemed but sometimes bombastic lawman. "You're laughing now, Cal, but it wasn't funny at the time." He shakes his head. He seems to have been struck dumb, the only word he's said so far is my name.

I look from Sarah to Cal then back to Sarah, none the wiser after her outburst.

"Will someone please tell me what's happened?" I ask, as I take the stool next to Cal. He immediately shuffles his stool closer, as if by doing so he feels

safer. Not sure I can process this yet, so I try to ignore it, but I am very aware that his knee is now pressed against mine. He takes a deep breath and rubs his hands anxiously along his legs before speaking.

"The Sheriff arrested me!" he tells me, his voice sounding more hollow than it usually does.

"He what?" I splutter. "Why?" Cal shrugs. I'm not sure what to think now, because is he reluctant to tell me because he's done something wrong or is he just embarrassed? Did he get in a fight? It certainly looks like he did.

"He had your car," Sarah explains, her tone sarcastic and acidic. I wait for more of an explanation, bracing myself for the inevitable "*He crashed it*" or "*Someone rear ended him and there was a fight*," but she doesn't add to the statement. I look back and forth between the two of them in disbelief.

"What? That's it?" I ask with a confused frown. "He arrested you for having my car?" Cal nods. "The last time I looked there wasn't a law about letting a friend borrow your car," I say in utter confusion.

"Yes, you know that," Sarah tells me sarcastically, and I am beginning to see the source of her anger now. "Cal knows that, I know that, hell, even Jezzie your cat knows that, but Sheriff Jefferson?" she huffs, throwing her hands in the air before bending to pick up two large grocery bags, which she plonks on the counter next to me. She leaves the room still muttering angrily about asshole Sheriffs, I assume to go get whatever else she and Cal have brought from town.

As she leaves, Cal seems to deflate by my side, as if he was simply holding himself straight to put on a show for Sarah. I immediately place my arm around him and try to ignore the fact that he melts against me as I do.

"Are you okay?" I sign the word too and he nods with a sigh then starts signing as I watch helplessly. "Cal I don't understand," I tell him to his face. He bites his slightly swollen lip, looking shaken and upset. He mimes writing into his palm and I jump up, ignoring a wave of dizziness and fetch him a notebook and pencil from another part of the counter.

He writes.

Can't speak!

"What? You have a sore throat?" I ask, wondering if nursing me over two nights has given him my bugs. He shakes his head. "You can't speak when

you're upset?" He nods. I sigh. Oh god, I want to cry for him. "How come the Sheriff arrested you?" I ask, because this is the source of the upset, and I need to know.

He shrugs again and scribbles furiously on the pad.

Thought I was punk, stealing your car. Says he shouted at me to stop but thought I was resisting arrest because I didn't turn around.

I gasp.

"What happened?" I ask. Cal looks even more upset now, and he's shaking a little.

He writes shakily.

Cuffed me. Took me to station, couldn't speak. Sarah came.

He looks exhausted. I just want to wrap him up in a blanket and hold him on my lap except he's almost the same height as me and he'd probably protest. Or would he? He's pressed so close to me now he may as well be sitting on my knee.

I lift my hand to his face and trace along the line of one of the grazes on his cheek. He winces slightly with a soft hiss.

"They hurt you?" I say quietly, watching his face for any signs that he's been roughed up. His mouth is a tight line as he shakes his head.

"No!" he tells me out loud as he hangs his head and scribbles more words on his pad,

This happened during arrest.

He shows me his wrists now and I see they are red and bruised as well.

"You struggled?" I ask him and he bites his lip again, his eyes becoming watery.

Jumped me from behind. Thought I was being attacked.

As he writes the words, I gasp and tighten my grip around his shoulders.

"Fucking hell," I hiss.

I want to ask him more but Sarah returns.

"It was Lawrence that told me about the arrest," Sarah continues the story as she deposits two more big bags of groceries onto the counter, then steps up to Cal and checks his face by cupping his chin and turning it from side to side. "Do you want me to clean those grazes, sweetheart?" she asks him gently.

Cal shakes his head, and I think he is reluctant to move away from me. I think Sarah sees this so she returns to sorting out groceries.

"Lawrence saw what happened?" I ask incredulously. "But he knows Cal, he's seen us together in the coffee shop." Sarah nods.

"A lot of people saw but it all happened so fast no one knew who it was that Jefferson arrested. I knew as soon as Lawrence told me because you'd just texted me to tell me you'd lent your car to Cal. I rushed to the Station and walked in on them trying to process him but not getting very far because how the hell was he supposed to communicate when they had him cuffed?" She shakes her head in frustration, and I can see that she is also quite visibly shaken by the entire experience. However, where Cal seems upset and anxious she is quite simply livid. She reaches out and touches Cal gently on the shoulder so he knows she's speaking to him. "I don't know which of these are yours and which are Jake's, sweetie," she says. He nods and shrugs.

I'll sort in a bit he writes and places the pad down on the counter before getting up, making a sign across his shoulder and then disappearing from the room.

I look at Sarah for an explanation.

"Bathroom," she translates helpfully, watching him go.

"Oh. My. God, Sarah," I gasp when Cal is out of sight. My own woes are forgotten now. Poor Cal, he must have been terrified.

"Oh, Jake." Sarah takes Cal's place by my side. "You should have seen the state he was in. He couldn't speak he was so upset. Lawrence told me what he saw. Cal was walking away from the car and Jefferson shouted at him, but obviously he didn't respond. Jefferson tried to imply Cal was resisting arrest. Lawrence told me Jefferson just launched at him, tackled him to the ground and had him cuffed and bundled into the patrol car before anyone could even blink. When I got to the station, they were trying to get his name out of him but by then he was in such a state he couldn't get a word out. I explained he had the car with your permission and that he was deaf and asked politely what the

procedure was for suing for wrongful arrest and police brutality and they let him go. Poor kid was beside himself.”

“I can imagine.” I am watching the door for signs of his return.

“Jake.” She places her hand on my arm. “You’re the first person to get anything out of him since it happened. Lawrence, Lou-Anne, and I all tried in the coffee shop but he just clammed up. It’s a good thing I know a little sign language otherwise he’d have been stuck with writing it all down but he couldn’t even do that after it first happened, his hands were shaking so badly. His face when he saw you just now. I don’t think I’ve ever seen anyone look so relieved.”

This information is surprising and troubling at the same time. Why would he be so relieved to see me? I mean we’re barely at the beginnings of a friendship for him to be so dependent. Plus he doesn’t want to be dependent on anyone, he told me. He wants to prove he can do it all by himself. Maybe he realizes that everyone needs someone. That’s fine with me, because the closer I can get to him the better. I’m happy to be his friend, shoulder to cry on, whatever. What happens when he realizes I’m attracted to him though? What then? I guess I’ll just have to be good at hiding it because a friend is what he needs right now, not something that could just become complicated.

He returns from the bathroom with slightly red-rimmed eyes. Sarah gives me a significant look and I feign a yawn, which isn’t that fake since I am still suffering, I’ve just had something to distract me.

“I’m done in. I’m going to sit back on the couch, plus we should never get in the way of my sister when she is organizing stuff,” I quip and Cal gives a small smile. “Come into the living room out of her way. We can watch a movie or something, huh?” I ask him.

Cal glances over at Sarah and also at the grocery bags that are still unopened.

“Oh, go on and sit down the two of you, before you both fall down.” She makes a show of us both being under her feet. “I’ll sort all of this. If you end up with each other’s groceries I don’t suppose it’ll be a hardship, will it?” Cal gives her the first real, full smile since they got back from town.

As I guide him through to the living room, I glance back at my sister and smile in thanks. She is amazing, Sarah. I have no idea how she knew Cal was deaf, she only met him for five brief minutes on Sunday, but then I remember

it's Tuesday and I guess they had the rest of Sunday and all day yesterday to get acquainted. I dread to think what they talked about.

The thought of my sister blasting into the police station to bust Cal out of jail makes me smile. I bet Sheriff Jefferson never knew what hit him. The mental image of her "asking politely" about police brutality is not going to be one I'll forget easily.

Cal sits beside me on the couch, although not as close as he was sitting at the kitchen counter. I think he realizes that was perhaps a little too close. Not that I was complaining, just... oh well.

"So what do you want to watch?" I ask him and he shrugs.

"What do you like?" he asks, his words slow, as if he is warming his voice up again after having lost it. What must that feel like though? To get so stressed you can't even speak. It must be horrible.

I indicate the shelves containing my extensive DVD collection and his eyes widen. I'm surprised he hasn't noticed before, the fact that two entire walls in my living room are taken up with shelves from floor to ceiling stacked full of DVDs. Or maybe he has and just hasn't felt confident enough to ogle over it yet. I can see him struggling not to get excited now though.

"Take your pick." I am quite happy to leave the choice up to him.

He stands and walks over to take a look.

"Oh my god, Jake, you have hundreds of old movies." He turns back to face me with an air of excitement so I have to take this as a compliment rather than a dig at the age of my movie collection. "What do you want to watch?" he asks. I shrug this time.

"I prefer to call them classics, Cal, but just pick anything. You can pretty much guarantee that if it's in my collection I like watching it."

Cal bites his lip and nods.

"And you don't mind watching with the subtitles?" I just stare at him as if he's grown two heads.

"Why on earth should I mind that?" I ask him. "Have you seen how many foreign language movies I have?" He frowns and looks back at the shelves.

His eyes are darting everywhere with great interest and vainly disguised excitement. I think I may have successfully found a distraction for him, and I didn't have to even get up off my seat.

I sink back into the cushions with a heavy sigh, finally focusing on my own aches and pains that I had put on hold to concentrate on him. Although I think I might have found my perfect distraction too: in the form of the excitement in Cal's blue eyes as he drools over my movie collection.

My head still hurts, but not as much. I still feel like I was hit by a bulldozer but the aches have all dulled a little. My throat is still raspy and raw but that will get better I'm sure.

Cal returns to the couch with two boxes in his hands.

"I can't decide." He shows me both choices. "I haven't seen either. I think they were both released before I was born."

I glance at the titles and he's right. If he's twenty-one then these two movies were released well before he was born. I can't believe he hasn't seen either of them though.

"Your education is seriously lacking, Cal," I comment. "How are you ever going to understand the older generation if you have no idea what influenced us?"

He chuckles. "So you're saying you were influenced by teenage vampires and kids on adventures without their parents?" he asks with a shrug. "That's pretty much what I've been influenced by as well."

"Yeah, but come on, this one has Kiefer Sutherland in it when he was super hot," I tell him. "Before he started looking like his dad."

"Kiefer Sutherland has a dad?" Cal asks me and I groan, because I know where this is going from the impish tone in his voice. "He must be even older than you." I notice his smirk and I nudge him playfully.

"Asshole," I hiss. "Put the damn DVD into the machine and let's watch it, then you can decide who was the hotter vampire: Kiefer Sutherland or Robert Pattinson."

"Don't forget David Boreanaz," he reminds me. "He was a hot vampire too."

I bite my lip and groan, closing my eyes and picturing the perfection. "Oh god, yes."

He chuckles, out loud, which I've never actually heard him do before, and it makes me smile. It actually lights me up from the inside, makes my heart beat faster than any of the sexy vampires we've just been talking about.

I actually have a great sense of achievement too. Ten minutes ago, this guy was as close to breaking down into a heap of gelatin on my kitchen floor as anyone I've ever seen and now he's laughing and smiling and I did that. I made him laugh, and I made him smile. Well done, Jake. Mission accomplished. Now I just have to hide this growing attraction I have for him before he discovers it and runs for the hills. Although, I can't actually remember when we discussed the big thing we have in common. When did he actually tell me he's gay? When the hell did I tell him?

There are still some big gaps in my memory about Saturday night and I am going to have to ask him just exactly what I said and did.

That can wait though, because discussions while you're watching a classic movie, and concentrating on subtitles is not really possible, plus, discussion becomes rather more impossible when you fall asleep in your host's lap.

Sarah walks in about twenty minutes into the movie with steaming mugs of hot chocolate for us all and some delicious looking doughnuts with chocolate sprinkles. She takes one look at the scene before her though and sighs deeply.

"Oh," she whispers as she places the mugs and doughnuts on the coffee table. "I think I might just go now," she tells me in as hushed a tone as she can, although it's not as if she's going to disturb Cal who is now sleeping peacefully, snoring slightly, with his head on a cushion that is resting on my lap.

I have no idea how he got there, it just happened. My hand is resting on his shoulder though and I think he placed it there. I have my feet up on a footstool and I am close to falling asleep as well. I shrug my shoulders at Sarah's questioning look. She gives me a knowing smile and creeps out so as not to disturb either of us.

I fall asleep listening to Cal's soft snoring, too sick to wonder what the hell is going on.

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Chapter Nine

More Stalking (or Old Habits Die Hard)

Two weeks I've been laid up with that virus. Two whole fucking weeks, and if it hadn't been for my amazing, kind, capable and incredibly patient next door neighbor I think I might have gone mad.

He's been here every day since that first morning when I thought all I had was a hangover. He even stayed a few nights, although I suspect his need to stay had nothing to do with how sick I was and everything to do with the fact that our bombastic Sheriff arrested him for no reason. I also suspect my DVD collection was the main draw since I can't imagine spending several hours a day camping out on a couch with a sick, snotty, smelly old guy can have been any fun for him otherwise.

Whatever the reason though, I am very grateful he has been my greatest source of company, amusement and entertainment for the last two weeks. His presence is monumentally more welcome than my motherly older sister. She has currently taken up residence in my kitchen along with Lou-Anne. They've been in there a good hour and a half. I have no idea what they have had to talk about over that time. I think they've started a coven.

"When are the two of you going to actually get up off that sofa?" Sarah asks us as she enters the living room and stands with her hands on her hips taking in the sight with a look of disapproval in her eyes.

"In case you haven't noticed, I've been too sick to move," I say archly, giving Cal a wink and making him smirk.

"I've been looking after him." Cal gives her an innocent look while also managing to have a hint of impishness in his expression that is altogether too distracting.

Sarah huffs loudly.

"The two of you are as bad as each other. You've spent two weeks watching movies like a pair of couch potatoes. You'll grow roots if you stay there much longer. Time you got up off your sick bed and took a shower," she huffs, pointing her finger at me. I scowl, what is she implying? I showered yesterday. "And you..." she points at Cal who sits back a little in the seat looking slightly

shocked. "It's a beautiful day, get out there and go surfing with all your buddies already taking advantage of the waves today." She turns and leaves us to it with another snort of disapproval.

"I take offense at that," I announce to the room in general but making sure Cal sees me.

"Yeah?" Cal answers, and I smile at him. "What part was offensive, since most of it was actually true?"

"We haven't been sitting on this sofa for two solid weeks, no matter what Sarah thinks. You've been out surfing a few times and I've even managed to change my sweat pants and socks." Cal chuckles silently, his shoulders shaking.

"Yeah, thank god for small mercies," he mutters. I huff and throw a cushion at him but miss, despite the fact he is only sitting at the other end of the sofa.

"That was useless," Cal snorts. "Where did you learn to throw cushions?" he throws it back and hits me square in the face. "That's how you throw cushions." He snorts at the indignant expression on my face.

Cal then bites his lip and looks torn as his eyes flicker towards the window that overlooks the beach and then back to me.

Suddenly, I feel monumentally guilty and utterly selfish for keeping him cooped up in here all this time. In two weeks, he's only been out surfing twice, despite the weather being amazing. I know he didn't have to be here, and he could have stopped coming after a few days once he knew I wasn't actually going to die (I'm certain he thought that at first). Sarah is right though, he needs to get out there in the sunshine and fresh air.

He told me he has no friends, but I can only think that's because he hasn't been here long enough to make any his own age. He's not likely to either if he's here and not out there amongst all the rest of the surfing crowd. They're all a pretty friendly bunch, it won't take him long.

Part of me is dying inside as I wonder whether our friendship will continue as intensely as it has once Cal has a wider circle of friends. I know I've obsessed about him, and I still do think he is the most exquisitely beautiful creature I've ever set eyes on, but I think I have to accept there can't be anything but friendship between us. I'm sure the thought of us being anything else but friends would reduce him to hysterics anyway. The age gap is too big, despite how well we get on together. And that's fine with me, because if we're

friends at least I get to spend some time with him. He'll get bored staying here with me out of some warped sense of loyalty though, and then where will I be?

"Go on!" I urge, hiding my reluctance to push him away. He gives the beach another wistful look. "You know you want to, and I don't need a nursemaid anymore." He grins.

"You sure you can manage on your own now, old man?" he asks, using a nickname he's found for me that just seems to sum up our friendship and draw a line that just can't be crossed. I purse my lips and narrow my eyes.

"Get outta here whippersnapper," I snipe and shove him off the sofa with my feet.

He snorts and stands, smoothing down his slightly crumpled T-shirt causing me to have to avert my eyes when the cloth pulls taut over his firm, flat stomach. How the hell have I managed to spend two weeks lounging on this couch with him and not have any kind of reaction, only to feel myself getting hot under the collar when he straightens out his T-shirt? That's a sure sign that I'm feeling better. I think I need some time to get my thoughts in some kind of order and to concentrate on something other than Cal.

"Should I come back over later?" His expression is almost hopeful, like he really wants me to say yes. Or, is he simply showing friendly concern and I'm letting my imagination read more into it than there is?

I should refuse, but I can't. I want him to come back over. I know I'm making a rod for my own back and there'll be heartache later but I need to bask in his sunshine while I can.

"Yeah, okay," I say brightly. "We can get pizza and watch another movie that's older than you." He grins.

"That'll be just about every one you have in your collection then." he calls back as he disappears through the door. I shake my head and chuckle.

"Cheeky bastard," I mutter as I stand and stretch out the kinks in my muscles.

I need to get myself motivated into doing some work but first I need some coffee and that means running the gauntlet of the coven that has gathered in my kitchen.

"Well, well, well, look what the cat dragged out of his pit." Sarah gets up to give me a kiss on the cheek. "How you feeling, tiger?" she asks me affectionately.

I roll my eyes.

"A lot better thanks." I give Lou-Anne a wink and she giggles.

"I guess partying hard just isn't for us oldies now huh?" she asks. I grimace.

"I don't think the hangover that mutated into flu has persuaded me to carry on my partying lifestyle, no."

She chuckles.

"Is Cal still here?" Sarah asks as she glances around the door to check if he has really gone.

"No, he's gone surfing, like you suggested," I tell her. "Because you used your Teacher Voice on him and terrorized him into doing as he's told." She wrinkles her nose but ignores my jibe.

"I was beginning to think he'd taken up permanent residence." I shake my head with a sigh.

"No, Sarah, I did not sleep with him."

"I didn't say that," she says archly. She turns to Lou-Anne. "Did I say that?" Lou-Anne shakes her head chuckling.

"Methinks the lady doth protest too much though," Lou-Anne quips and I scowl. She's no help at all.

Why are they both so convinced that I've slept with Cal? The only people who don't believe it are me, because I know it didn't happen and Cal who is oblivious to the fact that anyone is thinking this is what our relationship is.

I'm sure if he did have any kind of inkling that people are thinking this about us he wouldn't be over here as often, or even at all.

"He showered here the other day." Sarah nods knowingly at Lou-Anne and they both watch for my reaction.

"So?" I cock one eyebrow archly. "He'd just been surfing."

"He just lives across the drive," Lou-Anne continues with amusement.

What is this anyway, the Spanish Inquisition?

"My shower is as good as any." I shrug. "I really have no problem with him using my shower instead of his."

"Yeah, but he's here all the time, Jake." As if I needed to be told that. "What is going on with you two?"

"We're just friends," I tell her. "He was concerned that I was sick so he stayed to keep me company. That's what friends do. We're just friends." I have no idea why I need to say that twice, except maybe to convince myself as well.

"Yeah, but come on Jake, he's twenty-one and you're forty-five," Sarah pipes up. I meet Lou-Anne's eyes and she shrugs, because I remember her saying that I shouldn't let the age gap be a barrier.

"So!" I feel stubborn, sullen and a little defensive now. "There's no law against intergenerational friendships is there?"

"No." She's beginning to sound just as sullen. "Just, be careful," she says, as if this is only advice she can think to give me. As if this is the only objection she has to my friendship with Cal.

Doesn't she realize that I have thought up enough arguments myself against pursuing anything but friendship with this guy? I know full well that Lou-Anne will have told my sister everything we talked about at her party that night though. They tell each other everything so they both know I'm attracted to Cal. Well attraction has to go both ways, and he might be gay, but he's never going to be attracted to me so that's that.

"Well, ladies, it's been amazing talking to you both, but if you don't mind I'll just get myself some coffee and go get some work done." I suddenly need some time alone to my morbid, hopeless, unrequited thoughts.

Sarah huffs at me and Lou-Anne shrugs her shoulders. My impression is that they've already discussed the situation between Cal and me to the nth degree and have agreed to disagree.

I take my coffee and go to the desk in my study. It has a great view of the beach, so I can check my emails and keep half an eye on the surfers out there enjoying the waves.

I doubt I'll be able to spot Cal, although I have watched him surf before and he is by far the best out there, so graceful. Maybe I'm biased, I don't know. I step out onto my deck for a few minutes, shading my eyes from the sun and trying to spot Cal amongst the other surfers all floating on their boards just beyond the breaking waves. I think I see him, but I'm not too sure. The sun reflects in sparkling crystals off the water and I think I see the bright, sun-bleached hair of my neighbor turned friend, but without binoculars I can't tell for certain and I refuse to get them out because if Sarah catches me I think she'll have me committed.

With a sigh, I go to sit at my desk but leave the French doors open so I have an unobstructed view of the beach and the surfers.

After about an hour of plowing through and answering my emails, I hear voices from the beach. There's laughter and shouting and I reckon the surfers have given up for the day. When I glance out of the window, I see a bunch of them walking back up the beach. Cal is one of them.

Now I'm interested to see what he is like with people closer to his own age. Will he talk to them as animatedly as he does to me? Will he fade into the background like he does when he's in town so he doesn't have to talk to anyone? One thing's for sure, he won't have those headphones to hide behind, not that he's been using them at all while he's been with me.

The group stops just below my decking and are talking. I know I shouldn't watch. I thought I was past this stage of watching him from behind the shrubbery on my deck, but I am far too curious for my own good, so I duck down and peek through a gap in the ivy.

There's about half a dozen of them all laughing and fooling around. They all look about Cal's age and they're all of the same build and physique. None of them hold a candle to Cal of course. He seems to be included in the group, smiling and laughing along at the antics of one of the guys who is currently standing on his hands, balancing from one hand to the other. Cal stands out, his light blond hair and bright blue eyes striking amongst the others who are all slightly darker in coloring and looks.

He also stands out as not laughing quite as hard or smiling quite as easily as the others in the group. There's a delayed reaction from him when the others laugh at a joke and I can see each time that his eyes do not smile, or laugh or twinkle in any way. Not the way they do when he's with me.

I'm so engrossed in watching him interact with the others that I don't notice I am being watched myself.

"What on earth are you doing, Jacob Reuben?" Sarah asks me incredulously. I almost fall over in fright and I hiss at her to shush as she regards me with her hands on her hips, "I thought you'd given up stalking and spying on the poor guy," she hisses as she crouches down beside me and peeks through the ivy to see what I'm watching so covertly.

"I had, I mean, I have," I tell her. "I just wanted to see what he's like with his friends."

"You are so screwed up, Jake, it's unbelievable," Sarah whispers.

"Says the sister who's watching through the ivy with me." I feel the need to point out to her. She's about to retort but I shush her with my fingers over her lips because I want to listen to the conversation below.

"So are you guys all coming to Don's twenty-first tonight?" one guy asks.

Several answer in the affirmative. Cal is making a show of checking his board for marks and scratches so the guy next to him nudges his arm.

"What about you, Cal?" I see Cal frown in confusion. The guy rolls his eyes, "Hey guys, Cal spaced out again." They all chuckle almost indulgently and Cal smiles good-naturedly.

"What about me what?" he asks, encouraging the guy to tell him what he wants to know.

"Are you coming to Don's party?" he asks. Cal makes a face and I can see him trying to think of a way to refuse without causing offense or upset. What he doesn't see are the others all waiting, with great anticipation, to hear his answer.

"I don't know, Pete," he says. "Where is it, what time?" he asks.

"It's at Tropicana's. Everyone's getting there about eight thirty," the guy called Pete tells him.

"Tonight?" he asks. Pete nods, and I can almost see the relief in Cal's entire being as I realize what he is going to say before he says it. "I have other plans tonight, sorry guys."

He goes back to examining his board, so he does not see the looks of genuine disappointment on Pete's and several others' faces.

Oh my god. He blew off all these potential friends because he is honoring lame plans for pizza and a movie with me. He would rather eat take out with a grouchy old neighbor than go to what could be a great party? I cannot believe that. I do remember him saying he doesn't like parties though, and the relief was evident when he realized he had a genuine excuse not to go.

I can't let this happen though. He has to go to that party, but how can I persuade him that going there will be better than hanging out with me, even if I don't think it will be? This is for his own good though. He needs friends his own age. Plus, a large part of me is thinking he can't know choosing to be with

me will be better if he hasn't sampled what else is out there, even if that means I might not have the pleasure of his company as often as I'd like. Oh, but what if that means I end up not having his company at all?

Oh god, that would be terrible.

Stuck in my awkward dilemma, I don't notice Sarah standing and leaning over the deck railings until it's too late. I feel a panic attack coming on, because what the hell is she doing?

"Hey guys," she calls down cheerily to the gathered surfers. "Surf good today?"

There are several positive replies. A couple of the guys call her by name, since they probably know her from school. She probably taught most of them at Oakwood Elementary.

"Hi, Sarah!" I hear Cal call to her. "Is Jake busy?" I am sitting on my ass waving my hands at my sister in an attempt to stop her giving away my compromising position.

"Why no, I don't think so, Cal, he's just here, hiding behind the ivy." She tells him matter-of-factly as if this is a perfectly normal activity for me.

I am going to kill her. I am really truly going to commit murder, right after I've died of embarrassment.

"Sarah, what the fuck?" I hiss. She ignores me.

"Come on up, Cal." she calls to him.

"Okay, I'll just put my board away," he tells her. Is there a hint of laughter in his tone? He calls good-bye to the other surfers as the group disperses.

Before I can get myself up off my ass I overhear one guy, I think it might be Pete, talking to another as they walk off in the opposite direction to Cal.

"You know I really thought he would come this time since the party's at Tropicana's."

"I wonder why he always refuses," the other voice is saying. "He seems like an okay dude, and he's an awesome surfer."

"Yeah well, maybe next time huh?" Pete says sadly. Anything else he says is lost as they walk out of earshot. He sounded altogether too disappointed to me.

Oh god, what am I going to do about this? They all really wanted Cal to go. Has he used me as an excuse because he doesn't want to go? Or is he really just being loyal? Either way I feel like a total shit for getting in his way.

"Jacob Reuben." Sarah hisses as she crouches down beside me, shocking me slightly. "You get yourself off your ass and you think of some way to get that kid to go to that party tonight." I stare at her helplessly.

"How the hell am I supposed to do that?" I squeak. "If he doesn't want to go I can't force him."

"He blew them off because you made stupid plans for takeout and a movie, which you've just spent every night over the last two weeks doing. He needs to broaden his horizons."

"Oh god, I know that, Sarah. Don't you think I know that?" I can't help whining because it hurts to admit that she's right. She huffs, folding her arms across her chest. There's a hint of sympathy in her expression though: sympathy and understanding.

"Yes, I do, but I'm warning you, if he doesn't go to that party tonight I am going to tell him all about your stalking activities. I will get that damn notebook and show him that you wrote down his every move for three weeks." I gasp, frozen in the act of getting up, hovering between sitting and standing with my jaw falling open in shock. There is no sympathy or understanding, at all, in the threat my sister just made.

"You wouldn't dare!" I exclaim in horror. She raises her eyebrows.

"Wouldn't I?" She turns as she hears Cal's feet on the deck steps. "Hi sweetie," she calls, her tone changing instantly from threatening and acidic to light and airy. "How was the surf today?" she signs. I scowl at her, because she's better at signing than me, even though Cal's been very patiently teaching me, because she just threatened to turn my life upside down, and because I know full well she will carry out that threat if I don't somehow get Cal to go to that party tonight. She's a witch.

What can I do though? Feign illness and say I'm not up for pizza and a movie? That's not going to make him want to go out. It's just going to make him want to stay with me more than ever if his actions of the last two weeks are anything to judge by.

Holy shit. I'm stuck between a rock and a hard place here. I don't want to manipulate Cal into going to a party he doesn't want to go to and may hate, but

at the same time if I don't do my ultimate best to try to get him to go, Sarah is going to expose my scary stalker activities and Cal will probably never speak to me again.

I am totally screwed.

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Chapter Ten

Manipulation

Sarah watches us both as Cal steps around her to regard me with a curious expression.

“Hi.” Cal says, almost awkwardly, shuffling his feet and not meeting my eye.

I have no idea why he would be so awkward now unless... Oh my god, has he guessed I was watching him? I am going to kill Sarah for sure now.

“I’m not interrupting you am I?” Cal asks me and I frown.

“Interrupting me how?” I ask, trying to sound innocent. He shrugs.

“I just thought that, now you’re better, you might want to get some work done, and I might be kind of in the way.”

Here’s me thinking I was getting in his way, when he’s been thinking the same thing. Oh!

“You’re not interrupting anything Cal,” I tell him. “I was just going through my emails, but I finished my manuscript three weeks ago, so I’m kind of taking a break.”

“Oh!” he grins. “Well that’s okay then.”

Sarah nudges me slightly and I scowl at her. I’ll get around to the subject of the party in my own time thanks.

“I’m not actually interrupting you, am I?” I ask him and it’s his turn to frown in confusion.

“No, why?” he asks.

“Well...” I grimace slightly, because telling him I know about the party is going to give me away. However, him knowing I was watching him this once will be better than him finding out I’ve been stalking him for weeks. “I overheard a couple of the guys on the beach talking about a party and I just wondered if making plans with me was getting in the way of...”

“Were you watching me from the deck?” Cal interrupts, his hands on his hips, his eyes wide.

"Oops, time for me to go," Sarah says, then makes a hasty exit trying hard not to giggle, but I hear her snort as she disappears back into the house. She is in so much trouble. So am I, apparently, judging by Cal's expression.

Oh god, so he knows. I could play this one of two ways. I could deny it and make an excuse about why Sarah thought I was hiding or I could confess everything and then Sarah wouldn't have any leverage with which to carry out her threat.

As Cal regards me with his intense, blue-eyed stare I find I just can't lie to him, but how can I tell him the truth? He'll kick my ass.

"I wasn't watching you as such!" I grimace as I try to think of a really good reason for being on my hands and knees on the deck and then "accidentally" overhearing his conversation with his surfing buddies.

"What were you doing hiding behind your ivy then?" Cal tips his head to one side and drums his fingers on his hips impatiently. He almost looks like he is enjoying watching me squirm. Cocky little...

"I wasn't hiding behind my ivy, Cal," I gasp. "I was, er, fastening my laces and you just happened to be there." Cal's eyes wander down to my feet. He frowns then looks up at me again.

"You're not wearing any shoes," he observes casually.

I splutter helplessly. He seems to be trying to contain himself. Is it anger or is it amusement? I have no idea. Either way he's caught me.

"Okay, so maybe I was watching," I confess, regarding him with a grimace and one eye closed as if that will somehow help him not be angry with me. "But I swear it wasn't on purpose."

He appears to be having some sort of struggle with his emotions. Is he trying not to laugh?

"Uhuh!" his voice sounds a little strained. He's waiting for further explanation though, and I guess I owe it to him.

"So, yeah... erm!" I run my fingers through my hair and feel myself losing the battle to keep my blush of shame under control. "I saw you walking up the beach with those other guys and I was curious." Cal frowns.

"Curious why?"

I regard him carefully, thinking I could turn the attention back on him now and he'll hopefully forget I was essentially spying on him.

"You told me you don't have any friends, but those guys all seemed friendly enough." He shrugs and looks away sullenly. "Why aren't you going to that party?" I ask as he turns back to face me. He narrows his eyes and purses his lips.

"I told you before I don't like parties," he explains and I nod.

"They all seemed to want you to go though." I smile encouragingly. "I guess you didn't see, but when you said you had other plans a couple of your friends looked kinda disappointed." Cal frowns and regards me as if he really truly cannot believe this.

"They're not my friends," he protests. "They're just guys I know from the beach, I never met up with them anywhere else."

"Maybe you should," I suggest, feeling really quite conflicted, because I am encouraging him to go and spend time with other people when a massive part of me, irrational or not, wants to keep him all to myself. I can't be that selfish though.

Cal shrugs again.

"Parties just aren't my thing though, Jake, and besides I made plans with you." He looks into my eyes, and I really can't read his expression, and I really don't understand why he would choose to be here when he could be out having fun. "I wouldn't blow you off for a stupid party I would probably hate anyway."

"I wouldn't feel like you were blowing me off," I assure him. "And you don't know you'll hate it until you go." Cal shakes his head and turns away from me slightly, his posture all defensive and closed.

"I do know that, Jake." He sounds more than a little upset now. "I told you, I don't like parties. I don't like groups. I don't follow the conversation and I get left behind." He gives me an intense look. "If you were watching you'd have seen how damn useless I was in that group," he almost shouts. "I didn't have a clue what they were laughing at but I laughed anyway. I smiled when they did and laughed when they did, but I had no idea what any of them were saying because none of them looked at me when they were speaking."

I did see, all of it: his awkwardness and his attempts to cover up that he hadn't heard what was said. He seems angry about it all, and I don't know why, because all he has to do is tell people he's deaf and they'll compensate for him.

“Why don’t you tell them you’re deaf?” I know he prefers to hide behind those headphones of his and I don’t really know why, but he can’t do that when he’s surfing and they already think he’s an incredible surfer. Knowing he’s deaf won’t affect that surely. He scowls.

“It’s none of their business,” he huffs. I shrug.

“Then you can’t get angry with them for not knowing what to do to include you in the conversation.” From his expression, I can tell he has heard this all before.

“It’s not their problem though, is it, Jake?” he snaps. “It’s mine. I have to adapt to them, I can’t expect the entire world to adapt to one person. I just avoid situations like that altogether. It’s a hell of a lot easier.”

“You never struck me as someone who took the easy path, Cal, although telling them would actually be easier than trying to hide it as if it’s something to be ashamed of.”

“I’m not ashamed.” His eyes flash angrily, his entire body vibrating with fury and defiance.

I fight to stay calm, but I feel my own irritation rising because what he is doing is holding himself back by hiding his deafness. I really don’t understand why he would do this.

“Okay, if you’re not ashamed tell them you’re deaf.”

“No!” he shouts. “I just explained to you why I won’t. You don’t understand!” He turns to leave.

Oh, no you don’t, sunshine. You’re not ending the conversation this time. I jump past him to the top of the decking steps to prevent him leaving.

“So help me understand, Cal,” I urge him gently and I know he saw, even though he’s avoiding my gaze. “Tell me why you keep it hidden.” He sighs and his shoulders slump. He doesn’t try to get past me.

“Because I don’t want to be treated any different,” he says. “And they will, they’ll all see me as a freak, and a novelty.”

“No they won’t,” I tell him gently. He didn’t see how they all looked at him, how they hung on his every word when he spoke. He shrugs.

“It always happens when I make new friends. They find out I’m deaf and suddenly I’m the odd one out, the ‘*special kid*’. They treat me different. They treat me as if I’m stupid.”

“Did I ever do that?” I ask him softly. He looks up into my eyes and my heart skips a beat as I drown in those deep blue orbs.

“No!” he smirks slightly. “But you’re different and I didn’t have to tell you, you guessed.” I smile broadly.

“Maybe I am different, but you can’t make a judgment on these guys before you get to know them.” The way they were with him made me suspect they know already anyway, but I don’t point this out to Cal. I look down at my feet and bite my lip before continuing. “The thing is though, you are different, Cal,” I say, poking him in the chest, as he gives me a startled look. “But I mean that in a good way. Not because you’re deaf, but because of all the other awesome things that make you the person that you are.” He looks away with a blush.

Damn that blush, it sets my heart racing. I think I need some serious time away from this guy before I disgrace myself.

“You should go to that party,” I say. He rolls his eyes and groans in frustration, “Those guys really looked as if they wanted you to go, and besides we can do pizza and a movie anytime I really don’t mind.” Anger flashes once more in his eyes and I really don’t know what I said that’s made him angry.

“I said I don’t want to go to the damn party, Jake,” he shouts at me. “If you’re so eager to get rid of me why don’t you go?” He folds his arms and regards me furiously.

I narrow my eyes. I really didn’t want this to turn into a fight, but he is pushing my buttons. I’m not trying to get rid of him, though. I’m trying to help him fit in; make a few friends; spend some time with people other than a guy old enough to be his father that has unsavory thoughts about him. Maybe a little reverse psychology wouldn’t go amiss here.

“Okay,” I say brightly. “I think I will go.” His eyes widen and the anger leaves him to be replaced with surprise.

“What?” he gasps, shocked at my turn around. “B-but you haven’t been invited.” I raise my eyebrows.

“It’s at a nightclub, Cal, I don’t need an invitation.”

“It is?” he frowns but he leans forwards, a spark of interest in his eyes.

“Yes.” I nod. “And Tropicana’s isn’t just any nightclub.” I lean close to him and flick my eyebrows making him laugh in surprise despite his outburst of anger. “It’s a gay nightclub.” He catches his breath.

"A gay nightclub?" he repeats, suddenly more curious.

"Uhuh!" I nod. "But you don't want to go though, so I guess I'm going on my own, unless..."

"Unless what?" Cal asks breathlessly, his eyes searching mine; no longer angry, sullen or defensive, instead, full of interest and anticipation.

"I was gonna ask you to come with me but if you don't want..."

"Yes, okay, yes, I'll come," Cal blurts out before I can finish the sentence, almost knocking me over with his enthusiasm. "Wow, thanks Jake, I mean really, thanks."

He bounces around the deck like he's made of rubber. He reminds me of Tigger and I can't help laughing, but I'm also a little confused, because that was just a little too easy.

"I think the party starts at eight thirty," he shouts, as he bounds back across my deck and down the steps. He turns and runs backwards across the drive as he continues to shout up at me, "I'll come back about then. Wear something nice." Then he's gone.

Wear something nice? The cheeky brat! And he's left now, so I can't even give a suitable retort.

Wait, did he just manipulate me into asking him out? Is that what just happened here?

Oh holy crap! Does he think we're going on a date?

No!

He did actually, really want to go to the party and just needed someone to go with him. This isn't a date, although, I don't understand why he couldn't just have asked me. I would have said yes. I don't think I could ever say no to him. I don't need to be manipulated, but it did seem as if he had simply been waiting for me to offer to come.

"Where did Cal go in such a hurry?" Sarah asks me as she reappears through my study door. If I know her, she was listening. She taught me everything I know when it comes to stealthy stalking skills.

"He's gone to get ready for that party," I tell her.

"You persuaded him to go?" She smiles. "Good."

“Now if you don’t mind, I’m going to get ready too,” I say. She regards me with wide eyes.

“For what?” she asks innocently. I narrow my eyes. She knows damn well.

“For the party, Sarah, now get outta here, and you too Lou-Anne,” I call through to the kitchen. “I know you’re still here plotting evil deeds with my sister. I swear it’s like the ‘Witches of Eastwick’ in my kitchen.”

Lou-Anne appears in my hall with a wide grin.

“What’s this about you going to a party tonight?” she asks with interest. “Is that Don’s party at Tropicana’s?”

“Er, yeah!” I say, warily. How did she know this? Did Sarah tell her? She grins even wider and claps her hands.

“Great, Larry and I will see you there because we’ve been invited too.”

“Oh!” Well this might not be too bad after all. If Lawrence and Lou-Anne are going, at least I’ll have some company while Cal goes off to do whatever with his new friends. “How come you’ll be there?” I ask.

“We’re Don’s godparents, so he asked us.”

“Oh, he asked us too.” Sarah tells Lou-Anne, as if she’s only just remembered. I gasp, since she might have told me before. “But Sam has another tournament tonight.”

“Great.” I try not to sound too sarcastic when I say it. Did everyone get an invite to this party except me? “I’ll see you there then,” I tell Lou-Anne as I usher both women out of the door because I really need to go and get ready. “Tell Sammy good luck from me,” I tell Sarah.

“Enjoy your date, Jake.” Sarah calls back to me with a slight smirk as she gets into her car.

“Hey!” I shout. “It’s not a date.”

“You just keep telling yourself that,” she tells me and drives off leaving me a little stunned.

Lou-Anne drives off too after giving me a knowing smile and a wink.

Chapter Eleven

Not a date! Not. A. Date!

I am now standing in my bathroom, staring at myself in the mirror while I decide if I need to shave or just keep the beard I've been cultivating. It's kinda grown on me, pardon the pun.

"This is not a date," I tell myself out loud. Despite what Sarah said, this is not a date.

The pounding of my heart and the knot in my stomach tells me different, but I ignore them. You can do that when you're old(er).

Eight thirty is approaching far too quickly for my liking. Cal's parting shot about wearing something nice has ground me down to a shadow of my former self. Much as I sometimes grouch about my sister's mothering and constant presence, she is still my best chance of getting some good advice here.

I call her.

"I have searched through every item of clothing in my closet that could be considered nice and rejected every single one, Sarah," I blurt out as soon as she answers her phone.

"So what do you want me to do about it?" she asks me. *"Why are you so bothered about it if you're insisting that this is not a date?"*

"It isn't a date, but he said wear something nice," I wail. "Everything I have would be considered nice by our mother, which makes everything I own about forty-nine years out of date for Cal. What the hell does a twenty-one-year-old expect his forty-five-year-old 'not date' to wear on their 'not date', Sarah?"

"Jake you're not making sense." She chuckles. She can laugh, she's not stuck in the middle of this impossible situation.

"I don't want to embarrass the guy. It'll be bad enough when we turn up at the club together. People are going to think he's brought his dad." I groan.

"You aren't going to be the only adult there you know, Lawrence and Lou-Anne are going. It's a party, I'm sure there'll be other parents for you to talk to."

"Fucking hell, Sarah, you make it sound like I'm taking him to a kid's party."

"Yeah?" she asks, as if this is exactly what it is.

Oh my god, this is exactly what it is! No, no, no, it isn't. Cal is an adult, the others there will all be adults just a hell of a lot younger than me.

"Sarah will you just help me instead of making me feel like I'm cradle snatching?"

"Really, Jake, you overthink things sometimes. Just pick something that won't stop you getting into a nightclub. I'm sure he'll be fine with whatever you wear. What did you wear the last time you went to Tropicana's?"

Oh god, when was the last time I was even in a nightclub? I can't even remember. It must have been when Josh was alive. When was the last time I was at Tropicana's though? Oh yeah, I remember with a groan.

"Oh god, Sarah, the last time I went to Tropicana's I wore a florescent orange string vest and girl's hot pants. I think my hair might have been electric blue as well." I hear Sarah's snort and hysterical laugh at this piece of information. What can I say? It was the eighties, the fashion decade everyone would rather forget.

"Somehow I don't think that's what Cal had in mind when he said wear something nice." I chuckle.

"No, I think you're right."

"Although, I would've liked to have seen that outfit, Jake." She sounds like she's taking deep breaths after laughing too much. *"Josh certainly brought out the Gay in you."*

"He certainly did." I laugh. I glance at the clock, which reads ten past eight. "Holy shit, Sarah. I need to pick something now because he'll be here any minute."

"Light green button down shirt and black dress pants." She tells me without hesitation. How the hell does my sister, who doesn't even live here, know that I even own a light green button down shirt?

I stare down at the pile of clothes on my bed and see which one she means.

"Okay, I got it." I pick the shirt up and inspect it for creases. "Shoes?" I ask. She groans.

“Just wear something that isn’t sneakers or flip flops. And socks, you’ll need socks, preferably ones that match.”

“Oh that’s it. I’m not going if I have to wear socks that match.” I’m joking although I might actually have a problem finding a matching pair.

“*Jake!*” She sounds really fed up and impatient now, and I guess even my sister’s patience can be tried sometimes.

“I’m sorry to be such a pain in the ass, sis,” I apologize and she chuckles.

“You’re not a pain in the ass, you’re a great guy. I just wish I was going to be there to see how great you’ll look. Now go out and have fun on your ‘not date’ and don’t worry about stuff so much.”

Sometimes, I don’t get her, because she’s the one that keeps reminding me Cal is so very much younger than me, but right now she just sounds happy that I’m actually getting out of the house.

“Thanks, Sarah, I owe you one. Tell Sammy good luck with beating the crap out of everyone else at that tournament,” I tell her. She clicks her tongue and chuckles as she disconnects the call.

I pull on the shirt and pants and find some decent socks (they almost match) and shoes. I know I overthink things sometimes, but I guess it’s my age and my nature, and it has been quite a while since I did something like this.

I’m not particularly a fan of dancing, or noisy nightclubs, but I never was. It was always Josh that loved that kind of thing and I just got dragged along. No, that sounds like I didn’t enjoy it, because I did. I just haven’t had the heart to go since I lost him.

I have no idea if Cal even likes dancing either. Oh my god, it’s a gay nightclub everybody is going to be dancing. I think I’ll just find Lawrence when we get there and the two of us can retreat into a booth and get quietly drunk while Cal bumps and grinds on the dance floor. I won’t be able to watch that anyway.

“Are you ready old man?” Cal calls from my entrance hall. How could I forget he has a key? “Or do you need more time to get your creaking joints working properly?”

He is pushing his luck. He doesn’t even know if I’m even here for him to insult. For a fleeting moment, I do consider hiding and making him think I’ve

ducked out. The moment passes though, because he's supposed to be the shy, retiring introvert. I'm the outgoing, gregarious, popular extrovert except I've been hiding myself away for too long, and I got out of the habit of socializing.

Maybe it's time. Maybe he's the one to bring me out and into the world again.

This is not a date, Jake! Do you think if I keep reminding myself it will eventually sink in?

Cal is not making it very easy to remember though, especially not looking the way he does right now. Thankfully, I have made the right choice of clothing because he also has on a nice button down shirt: a very nice white number with light blue swirly patterns on it that highlight his eyes, as if they ever needed highlighting. He has on dark pants, black the same as me, except he wears them so much better. God he's beautiful. My situation is hopeless.

As our eyes meet he smiles, then checks out what I'm wearing and nods in approval.

"Not bad!" He regards me, pursing his lips. "You'll do."

I'll do? Does he have any idea how long I've agonized over what to wear and all I get is a "You'll do"? I want to be indignant and irritated by his sudden cocky attitude, but I can't help laughing. The laughter helps hide the fact that I think he looks stunning, and I don't think I will be able to take my eyes off him all night.

"Cocky little shit," I mutter and he smirks at me then raises his eyebrows in query.

"Ready to go?" he asks. "I booked us a cab. I did it online. Did you know you could book cabs online?"

I give him a bemused look. I didn't know that, but then I don't do stuff online. I have no idea why he's rambling though.

"I'm ready to go. I just need a couple of things." I go over to my messenger bag and lift the flap.

"You're not taking that with you are you?" he asks, leaning over and trying to get a good view of my face as I search inside for my wallet. He's rather close and I can smell his cologne. He put on cologne? I did too, but, the fact that he did means he is at least thinking this is a special outing.

Of course it's special, he's going to meet up with some new friends, and I'm there as his moral support. Not. A. Fucking. Date.

"I might not have been out to a club for a while, Cal," I tell him archly, as I locate my wallet and phone and put them both in my back pocket, "but I do know that a messenger bag is not really an acceptable accessory on the dance floor."

"Okay, okay, don't have a cow." He turns towards the door. He spins back around with a slightly anxious frown. "You mean you might actually dance when we get there?" he asks.

Oh yeah, here it comes, the *please don't do anything to embarrass me* talk. The one you give your parents before a family party; the one they ignore because it's their job to embarrass you. It's not my job to embarrass him though, but is he going to be embarrassed by a forty-something guy showing off his moves on the dance floor amongst all the twenty-somethings?

"I-I don't have to dance," I say. "I mean, it's been a while. I really didn't even consider having any intention of dancing. I'll probably not know any of the songs anyway."

"I won't know them either," Cal tells me suddenly, as if he is trying to say something that will make me feel more comfortable. Why would he be doing that? Oh yeah, I was stuttering. He looks down at his feet. "I'm not saying it because I think you'll embarrass me or anything," he mutters, surprising me that he has understood my underlying concerns so well. "It's just that, I'm not a very good dancer, and I can only feel the base beat vibrating so sometimes I don't always end up doing the same thing as everyone else."

Oh my god, that's why he asked if I was intending to dance. Not because he thought I'd embarrass him but because he is worried he'll embarrass me. I lift his chin so he can see me speaking clearly.

"Whatever you feel comfortable with, Cal, that's what we'll do," I assure him. "And any time you want to leave the party you tell me and we will."

"Yeah but what if you're having fun?" he asks me, and I frown.

Why does he think I'm going to this party in the first place? I'm not going because I want to. I wasn't even invited. I'm only there for him.

"I'm not there to have fun, Cal, I'm there because if I didn't go neither would you."

Cal blinks in surprise and looks a little taken aback by my words.

“Why would you be so willing to do this for me?” His expression is an unfathomable mix of emotions right now. I get the feeling he hasn’t had this experience recently. Just how long has he been on his own anyway?

“I could ask the same thing about your willingness to keep me company over the last two weeks when I have probably been the worst company ever, spreading my germs and basically being a grouchy couch potato.”

He chuckles and shrugs.

“You have a better DVD collection than me,” he tells me, although he is blushing as he turns and leads the way out of the front door.

Now why would that confession make him blush? He’s an intriguing guy. I think this evening is going to be very interesting.

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Chapter Twelve

A Night to Remember

Oh my, I'd forgotten how loud this place can be and we're not even inside the actual club yet, we're only in the reception. As soon as we walked through the door our senses were bombarded with color, smell, sound, vibrations running through your very bones. Surprisingly, Cal seems more affected by it than me. The music isn't that loud from up here in the reception area but I can feel the base beat in the soles of my feet since the actual nightclub is beneath us. I glance at him as we approach the reception desk to sign in and he pats his chest.

"I can feel it here," he says with a frown and I chuckle, lifting my foot and pointing to the sole.

"I feel it here!" I tell him. "It kinda tickles." He smiles and seems to relax a little.

The guy sitting at the reception desk seems a little disinterested as he chews gum and doesn't even look up from a list he has spread out on his desk when he asks us for our names.

"Jacob Reuben." I inform him. His eyes flicker up to my face, do a double take and then he holds out his hand, popping his gum as he does.

"ID?" His expression is suddenly interested and coy.

I groan. Why the hell did I give my full name?

"Is that because you think I might look under twenty-one?" I ask hopefully, knowing this is not the reason.

"No." The guy pronounces the word deliberately slowly. "It's because I want to check out if you're really *the* Jacob Reuben, the writer."

This is one of the reasons I don't come out much!

"Would it matter if I wasn't?" I ask, trying not to sound sullen.

"Well." The guy purses his lips and pops his gum again giving me a hungry look which makes me feel kind of dirty actually. It's definitely not having the effect I think he hopes it will have anyway. "If you're *the* Jacob Reuben you can go in, but if you're not, then you're not on the list so you can't."

"He's *the* Jacob Reuben," Cal interrupts, obviously having followed the conversation, "And you can let him in whether he is or not, because he's with me and my name's on the damn list."

Both the reception guy and I regard Cal with wide eyes. Cal always seems so introverted, shy and retiring. To have him suddenly become assertive like this has my senses whirling. To emphasize his point he's taken my hand and is clutching it, his fingers twined with mine, as he leans across the desk.

"And what is your name, firecracker?" The guy turns his attention to Cal with some amusement. Cal seems to suddenly want to hide again as he blushes furiously.

"It's Cal," he blurts out abruptly. "Cal Steele."

Reception guy makes a show of looking down the list as I process everything that just happened. Cal just came out of his shell a little more. I think he's using my hand as a safety wire though. The fact that he knows his name is on the guest list is another revelation. Well, maybe not so much, because it did seem that when the surfers were discussing the party today on the beach, that Cal had already been invited and they'd just been reminding him. The biggest revelation though, is Cal's name.

His last name is Steele. I've known him almost four weeks and I never discovered his last name until now. The beach house next to mine has always been called "The Steele Place". Does this mean he owns it or at least his parents own it? I have yet to find out anything about him while I think he knows my entire life story.

All I've managed to get out of him is that he's on his own and that's how he likes it. I beg to differ, since he spends all his time hanging out at mine, although that might change now that I'm no longer sick and he did admit it is mostly because of my DVD collection anyway. I haven't dug any deeper than that, since I have a feeling the story is a sad one, and I've just not wanted to upset him by prying. I guess he'll tell me in his own time.

The reception guy checks Cal's ID carefully before handing it back with a wink. Cal's twenty-one but he definitely does not look it, to me anyway. I don't ever remember looking younger than twenty-one. I definitely don't now.

The guy hands back my ID also with a wink.

"Nice beard," He purses his lips.

Cal pulls me away, his hand still in mine and I see him give the reception guy a flinty glare before I am dragged to the doorway that leads to the basement club. I glance back at the reception guy with a smug smirk and a shrug. He's glaring at Cal as if he's taken all the cookies.

"Some guys have all the luck," he huffs, which of course, Cal does not hear but the words burn in my brain.

Who does he mean? Cal? He thinks he's lucky? Or, more likely, he means me. I mean, I'm currently being dragged, by the hand, into the club by the most beautiful creature that ever set foot on this earth. I know what it looks like, and the impression Cal gave was that I was with him even if he didn't mean to give off those vibes. As he leads me through the door, I have this warm feeling of being possessed, like he's marking his territory even though I know it was simply a ruse to get us into the club quicker. I guess he was impatient enough to throw off his shyness and do something he wouldn't normally do.

Inside, we descend a flight of stairs and find ourselves on a balcony overlooking the dance floor and bars. We take a few minutes to adjust to the dark and the noise and the flashing lights as we approach the balcony rail and look out over the scene below.

The noise in here is deafening. There's been an excessive use of dry ice and the smell is pretty acrid. The colors are neon, bright and relentlessly flashing.

I hadn't realized this was a private party, but then I should have guessed since it is midweek, plus if it's the Don I'm thinking of, his parents own about half of Oakwood Bay. You would probably be expected to rent an entire club for your son's twenty first when you have that much money.

As I search around for some familiar faces in the form of Lawrence and Lou-Anne, Cal seems to be retreating behind me and still hasn't let go of my hand. Well, he will eventually so I'm not going to knock it on the head. It feels nice.

"See your friends yet?" I am unable to resist the need to shout over the music despite the fact that it doesn't actually matter and would probably be easier for Cal if I just spoke normally.

Cal grimaces then points down to a group of people standing at the corner of one of the bars. Someone is waving furiously, and I realize it is Pete from the beach, the one that seemed just a little too disappointed that Cal had said he wasn't coming. He now looks far too pleased to see Cal has changed his mind.

With Cal's hand still in mine, I pull him down the stairs.

"Someone looks happy to see us," I observe. To my satisfaction, Cal rolls his eyes. Perhaps Pete isn't his type.

Pete meets us at the bottom of the stairs. Cal drops my hand as if it is burning him and I can't help feeling just a little bereft. I can totally understand why he wouldn't want his friends to see him holding hands with me though.

"Hi!" Pete greets Cal cheerily, hardly giving me a cursory glance. "I thought you said you weren't coming." Cal shrugs and shoots me a slight smirk.

"Yeah, I er, changed my mind," he tells Pete. I return his smirk though.

Changed his mind, my ass! Although, I am still trying to determine who actually manipulated who into coming here tonight.

"Uhuh!" Pete's expression, as he glances at me again, is dismissive and I feel my hackles rise. "Come on," he reaches out and grabs Cal by the hand, "I'll introduce you to everyone. You know most of the guys from the beach anyway."

Cal pulls his hand from Pete's, so the over enthusiastic new friend wraps his arm around Cal's shoulders and guides him towards the group at the end of the bar. Cal ducks out of the hold and turns back to me, beckoning for me to follow.

Come with me, please? He signs. It is the first time he has used sign language to communicate with me properly since he began teaching me.

Why? I ask back, feeling really quite proud of myself that I have actually understood him, and also quite proud that I haven't kicked Pete's scrawny little ass yet.

Do it, J! His fingers flick irritably back to me and his eyes plead beguilingly.

Somehow, that shortening of my name felt very, very personal and intimate, even though it was simply the need for efficiency in signing that made him do it, and the fact that he sounded very demanding. Still, it gave me butterflies in my stomach. What is that all about?

I still think I should leave him to it until Pete turns and gives me a direct and withering look that is clearly telling me to back off. Well, Pete might just be a

little disappointed because I am definitely not going to “back off”. I might not be Cal’s date, but I won’t stand by while Pete manhandles him. I already watched Cal shrug him away three times, and Pete still didn’t get the message.

I take out my phone and text Cal.

I’ll get us a drink and be with you soon. What do you want?

Beer, thanks x.

He texts back almost immediately. Was he hanging over his phone? And what was with the “x” at the end?

I get two beers and walk over to join him. I am way out of my comfort zone here. It is plainly obvious that I am going to be the oldest person in this group. The last time I hung out with twenty-one year olds was when I was actually twenty-one myself and that, to put this all into perspective, was way before any of these kids were even born. How the hell am I going to fit in here without looking like a really grumpy, old has-been? One of them is going to direct me to the “parents’ corner” for sure.

Cal sees me approach, was watching for me in fact. He makes a space for me in the circle, fitting me in between him and the seemingly overfriendly Pete. Cal looks relieved, as if I have just rescued him from a fate worse than death. Pete looks positively livid as he shuffles sullenly out of the way to allow me access.

I hand Cal his drink and he signs *thank you* with such relief etched on his face I know he’s not only referring to the drink. He takes a long swig before turning back to face the group.

“Everyone, this is Jake,” he calls, waving his hands about and then pointing to me.

Everyone in the circle greets me cheerily, some even enthusiastically. Not one of them seems to think that my presence is in any way unusual. Well, I say none of them: Pete doesn’t seem overly keen and continues to give me dirty looks. I take the liberty of ignoring him.

Cal seemed tense when I first joined him, but he’s relaxed now. I’m not sure whether it is the beer or my presence, but I’m glad he’s enjoying himself. I am too, kind of, even if I do find myself answering more than one or two questions about my writing. Apparently, two of my books were on this years’ reading list for the surrounding colleges. I didn’t even know that.

I think, rather than this group seeing my presence as odd, it has suddenly sent Cal's street cred soaring amongst the stars because he knows me. Well, I guess celebrity status can be good for some things. Most of the time, I just ignore the fact that I am Oakwood Bay's local celebrity. Everyone who knows me well enough does. That's the way I like it. I hate being the center of attention, but I don't mind being wheeled out for the occasional community fair and book signing. Cal is quite welcome to use my celebrity status whenever he wants if it means he gets accepted into the group. I certainly don't ever have any use for it.

I drain my beer and glance at Cal's bottle. His is already empty, although I don't think he's noticed. He's deep in conversation with another guy I recognize from the beach. I guess he's almost on level grounding here when it comes to conversation because no one can hear a damn thing above the music anyway. I tap my bottle against Cal's and he turns to smile at me. God those eyes, when I'm caught off guard, just blow me away.

"W-want another?" I ask, having no idea why I'm stuttering, except his eyes are just so incredibly blue.

He nods.

"I'll get these," he says. I glance over at the bar, which is a hell of a lot busier than it was when we first arrived. The entire club is. I shake my head. There's no way I am happy letting Cal wander about here on his own.

"I'll go, I don't mind," I say and I leave before he can protest.

At the bar, it is suddenly a little crowded where I'm standing and it hadn't been when I'd first approached it. The rest of this section of the bar is clear though so I just move.

No sooner have I moved than I'm crowded again. What the...

"Hi there!" A gruff, deep voice greets me and I realize I'm crowded by this one guy who followed me when I moved.

Oh my god. This guy is big enough to be a crowd all by himself, and hairy too. If this guy was any hairier he'd actually be a bear. I mean real live bears have less hair on their faces than this guy. His beard is enormous and long, and he's tall as well as wide. He looks like Gandalf, Dumbledore and Chewbacca had a love child.

“Er, hi!” I say, then, because I don’t want to meet his eye, and I can’t actually see where his eyes are beneath his bushy eyebrows, I turn back to the bar to try to get the barman’s attention.

The Wizard/Wookie half breed squashes closer to me. What is this guy’s story? I know moving will not work because I already did that and he followed.

“You here for the party?” the guy asks in his gruff voice. There’s so much hair I can’t actually see his mouth.

“Er, yeah I am,” I answer, because it would be impolite not to. “I haven’t been to this club for a long time.”

“Thought I hadn’t seen you around before. It’s usually full of kids these days!” He grunts and I just nod, giving a small, polite laugh.

The barman takes my order, and I wait with growing impatience for him to bring the drinks.

“Did you come on your own?” bear guy asks me, and I can feel the panic rising. Is he coming onto me? His knee just moved closer and pressed against mine. Eww!

I’m sure he’s a nice enough guy, but he’s just not my type. All that hair would give my entire body a beard rash, and how the hell would I even find his mouth to kiss him? I’d need a comb and a couple of barrettes; I’d need a degree in hair dressing just to find the guy’s eyes.

“No, I didn’t come on my own,” I tell him, although I can’t bring myself to tell him I came with someone specific because I don’t know how Cal would react if I was giving everyone the wrong idea. “I’m here with friends.” I point in the general direction of the group that includes Cal.

Hairy guy huffs and shrugs.

“You’re here with a bunch of kids?” he asks disdainfully, then he leans towards me and licks his lips. So, that’s where his mouth is, eww, gross, just gross. I can’t contain a slight shudder. “How about you ditch the kids and we go somewhere more adult?” he suggests, flicking his eyebrows that are so thick they bounce independently of his face. His hand comes up to stroke my own beard and I try to move back but there is someone standing directly behind me now so I can’t. “I like a guy who knows how to grow a beard,” he says seductively.

Oh my god, I've had enough of this.

"Yeah?" I ask him, containing my disgust as I reach out and grab a handful of his ample facial construction and give it a firm tug. "I like a beard too, but some people just don't have a clue when to stop."

I turn back to the bar and pay for my drinks, ignoring the flash of surprise at my brush off in Hairy Guy's eyes. His hand grabs my arm though and I look down at it, then up at his face, my eyebrows raised in irritation. I do not like being manhandled.

"Hey, listen, I just thought..." he begins but doesn't finish as a sun-bleached blond whirlwind jumps between us.

"Jake, what's taking you so long? Did you have to brew the damn beer?" Cal shouts at me excitedly. His blue eyes are wide and innocent but he flicks his eyebrows and his expression tells me he has jumped in on purpose. He turns to face Sasquatch and grins. "You don't mind if I steal him away do you?" He flutters his eye lashes and flashes Big Foot his widest grin then doesn't wait for a reply as he pulls me away leaving the guy spluttering with surprise.

The entire incident is threatening to reduce me to fits of hysterical laughter. This is the second time tonight that Cal has jumped in and laid a claim on me. It's becoming a habit. Not that I'm complaining but I don't think he realizes what it looks like to everyone else or what it looks like to me.

I glance back at Hairy Biker, and I think he looks angry that he was just cock blocked by one of "those kids", or at least his eyebrows seem to be trying to meet his moustache as he frowns, otherwise I wouldn't know.

"And I thought I was the one that needed rescuing." Cal snorts, with an adorable roll of his eyes, glancing back at the bar and shuddering slightly. "Eww, gross."

I chuckle as he pulls me through the ever-increasing crowd in the club. I realize he is pulling me away from his group of friends though. I resist. Has he lost his bearings or something?

He stops with a gasp.

"What's wrong?" He regards me with feigned innocence. "I didn't interrupt you in full swing did I?"

I narrow my eyes and click my tongue.

"No, cheeky brat." I snort. "Thanks for the well-timed interruption though!" He shrugs.

"No problem!" He grins, and then resumes pulling me away from his friends.

"Cal!" I get his attention again, he looks at me irritably. "Where are we going?"

"I found Lou-Anne and Lawrence," he says. "I thought we'd go sit with them."

"What about your friends?" He shrugs.

"They all went off to dance and I didn't really feel like it since it would have put me back in the evil clutches of Pete." I snort.

"Not your type, huh?" I ask him and he shakes his head.

"Just like Gandalf the Wookiee wasn't yours." He points out. I give an involuntary shudder, then we both burst out laughing. "Come on." Cal grabs my hand again and leads the way. I don't complain.

We spend another couple of hours and another couple of beers in the pleasant company of Lawrence and Lou-Anne. Cal is far more relaxed here, despite him seeming relaxed in our previous company. I realize why though when his head begins to lean heavily on my shoulder. I nudge him and he lifts his head and looks a little bleary eyed. He stifles a yawn and looks sufficiently embarrassed.

"Am I keeping you up past your bed time?" I ask him with a smirk. He purses his lips.

"Asshole!" he hisses, but his eyes are twinkling.

"Seriously though, are you about ready to go?" He smiles and nods.

"Only if you are," he tells me. I nod.

"I was just waiting for you." I turn to the rest of the crowd sitting in the booth. "Guys, we're heading off now," I tell them.

There are some groans and complaints that we are ducking out far too early. I think we're leaving at the right time though because Cal looks tired, and I am kind of wrecked. I have spent the better part of the last three weeks in bed with the flu.

We catch a cab and it drops us off at the end of our shared drive. We stand for a moment between both our houses in slightly awkward silence. It isn't painfully awkward, but awkward in the way that neither of us wants to end a really great night. If this was a date, I would ask him for coffee, but it isn't so I hesitate. I'm sure he wouldn't see me asking him for coffee as any different from any other time he's spent at my house, but, to me, it feels different and I'm not sure why.

"So did you have fun after all?" I ask him and Cal smiles, chuckles and nods. "You're not sorry I manipulated you into going?"

His response to this is to blush furiously and look away, and well he might, the manipulative little menace.

"I'm sorry about that," he apologizes. "I really, genuinely didn't want to go until you mentioned going yourself, although I know it looked like I was trying to manipulate you into asking me." He smiles. "I saw your expression change when you first had the idea of going, and I saw the opportunity to get you out of the house instead of moping around feeling sorry for yourself," he tells me, and I gasp.

"I was not moping around," I protest incredulously. He just shrugs as if to say he doesn't believe me and that somehow we are even because we both thought we were manipulating the other.

Cal looks down at his feet and suddenly he snorts, giggling out loud in that sweet, unrestrained way he has when the laughter is really, truly genuine. I don't care what he's laughing at, it's infectious so I join him.

"What?" I ask between giggles. Cal regards me with sparkling eyes.

"That guy with the Gandalf beard," he says. I roll my eyes and laugh harder. "Did you see how long it was?"

"Not only that, Cal, I pulled it so I felt how long it was, eww!" I make a face at the memory and he snorts again.

"Oh my god, I would never have dared do that," he says with awed respect for my brashness. "But it covered his mouth, you couldn't even see it. It's a good job he made a pass at you, I wouldn't have had a clue what he was saying if he'd spoken to me."

"Thanks, I think," I say, still chuckling.

“And kissing him would have been like kissing a door mat. I bet it would scratch like hell,” Cal observes, still unable to contain his laughter.

I stroke my own, neatly trimmed beard.

“Speak for yourself,” I say. “I’m sure it would feel awesome.” Cal eyes me curiously, still grinning.

“I never kissed a guy with a beard before,” he tells me.

“Come to think of it, neither have I.” I snort. He pushes at my shoulder playfully, and I stumble back a step.

“Hey!” I make a face at him, still rubbing my beard thoughtfully. I should really say goodnight now, since it’s late, and I have a lot of things to do tomorrow. I have some emails to catch up on, and I’m sure my first set of edits will be due soon.

“I’d like to,” Cal is saying, looking suddenly very serious, and I frown in confusion, thinking I’ve probably missed the beginning of that sentence while I was mulling over my to do list.

“I’m sorry, what would you like to do?” I ask him. He’s taken a step closer, and alarm bells should be ringing right now, but they’re not, because it’s Cal stepping closer to me, not some random guy at the bar that looked like a walking carpet. Cal smiles.

“I said I’d like to kiss a guy with a beard.” He seems slightly nervous.

“Oh!” I have no idea why he’s nervous, but I realize what he meant. “Why didn’t you say so at the bar, I could’ve introduced you to The Wookiee.” He snorts.

“Not him, bozo, you.” He pokes his finger at my chest, which is suddenly not large enough to contain my wild and erratically beating heart. His gaze is intense.

“Me?” I frown, feeling a little dumbfounded. What’s he talking about...

“Ugh!” he growls in frustration, grabs the front of my shirt and pulls me forward.

His lips are on mine before I can take another breath. My eyes are wide and my body is frozen in place. For a moment, we are both motionless: his lips pressing against mine but neither of us are moving. He feels soft and warm and amazing but tense and unsure, and then his tongue runs tentatively along my top lip as his eyes close and my entire body explodes with sensation.

I don't hesitate, I don't think, I simply react. As his lips begin to move so do mine, and with them, the rest of my body is jolted into action. My eyes close as I part my lips and allow his tongue inside my mouth. His arms move up to wrap around my neck, and his fingers bury themselves in my hair. There's a moan that I think comes from me, but I'm not entirely sure, nor do I even care. My hands move to clasp around his face, tipping my head slightly to get a better angle from which to really feel his tongue inside my mouth.

My tongue joins in, and he definitely moans this time. His hold around my neck tightens as I taste the inside of his mouth, feel his lips on mine, soft and pliable, feel his body pressed against mine, firm in all the right places as heat pools around my groin.

He's hard, I can feel the firm heat pushing against my thigh as he presses his leg between mine, and oh my god, so am I, but I don't care because this is Cal. I am kissing Cal, the beautiful, gorgeous, incredibly sexy Cal, and there is no way he doesn't want this because he initiated it.

God, this is amazing. The feel of him, the smell of him, the taste of him just overloads my senses and is everything I dared to imagine it would be. Where the hell did he learn to kiss like this? You know what though? I don't even care. It's like we're surrounded by a bubble of air, and every objection my brain might have come up with to not do this has been extracted and is stuck outside with no way of getting in.

My arms wrap around him now, pulling him, if possible, harder against me as our lips remain locked together, our tongues dancing, tasting and searching. We fit. That's what is making this so amazing, we just fit. I never want it to end, but I guess even something this good has to end sometime.

It doesn't end suddenly, in a fit of panic because one of us has realized we shouldn't be doing this. The bubble is still somehow keeping those objections at bay. It doesn't end abruptly, it simply ends naturally with our lips finally parting, our breaths, held as we kissed, released in a soft susurrus of air across our cheeks, and our eyes slowly opening at the same moment to regard each other with shy smiles and flushed cheeks.

Cal has got to be the most gorgeous creature on the face of the earth as he smiles into my eyes, and I lose myself in his.

Then the bubble bursts.

“Oh my god!” Cal gasps, suddenly pulling away from me, his hand up over his mouth and his blue eyes wide with unreadable emotions. “I... we... I should probably go.”

And then he's gone, off up his steps, into his front door and out of sight before I can even register the change in mood.

What the hell just happened? Did we just kiss? Can I even bring myself to believe that actually happened?

My lips are still tingling, and I can still taste him there. My body is shocked through with electricity, and I'm practically sizzling, so I have to believe something happened.

And then he ran away. Well, of course, he did because why the hell would he even want to kiss me? He wanted to know what it was like to kiss a guy with a beard, not me in particular. I wanted to kiss him though, and he must have realized that. He must have felt my reaction, my total surrender.

I pull at my hair in angst as I wonder what to do next. Should I follow him, try to do some damage control? He caught me off guard, and now the floodgates have opened. Oh god, there's no way he's ever going to want to be friends with me now. One moment of madness has the potential to ruin everything.

What the hell am I going to do?

“Jake?”

I spin around and stare into his wide, frightened eyes. Oh god, he's back but he looks like a scared rabbit. What the hell have you done Jake, you monster?

Suddenly his knees give way, and I instinctively catch him.

“Cal!” I gasp. “What's wrong?” This is not just because we kissed, something else is terribly wrong.

He is pale and shaking as he points a trembling finger towards his house.

“My house!” he gasps and I realize with horror he is crying. “Someone trashed my house.”

Chapter Thirteen

A Night to Forget

Tonight has turned into a night to remember for all the wrong reasons.

One in the morning and Sheriff Jefferson finally left us alone after about a million questions and getting Cal to sort through the mess in his house to see what was missing. It was difficult with flashlights, because whoever did this decided it would be fun to cut all the cables to the junction box as well as everything else.

Strangely enough, it doesn't look like anything has actually been stolen. Well I say that, what I mean is nothing physical was taken. What has been stolen is Cal's self-confidence; his privacy and his belief that home is the safest place to be.

The entire house has been wrecked. Someone broke in and simply smashed, ripped and mangled everything they possibly could. They took a spray can to everything else. I don't think there is a window or piece of furniture left intact or a wall or floor left unmarked. I'm surprised we didn't notice when we first got out of the cab because the spray paint adorns the outside walls as well, but I guess we were thinking about other things: things that will have to take a back burner right now because Cal just doesn't need the complication.

It's far too late and both of us are far too tired to think straight, let alone talk about that kiss. Cal is exhausted, it's all he can do to generate enough energy to lift his feet as I guide him up my front steps and through into my living room.

"Want some hot chocolate or something?" I ask him. He shakes his head.

No thanks, he signs wearily.

He sinks into my sofa, and I watch his dejected, desperately pale figure with concern. He hasn't spoken a word since he discovered his home in tatters. When the Sheriff asked him anything he used sign language or wrote it down. I want to cry for him, but I know that won't do any good because he needs me to be strong.

We haven't even talked about him staying here, although there is really nowhere else he can go. There is no way I would have considered leaving him standing amidst the ruins of his home, so after the cops and forensics had made

a sweep and taken what evidence they could find in the dark I helped him sort through the hell that was his bedroom and gather some personal effects before bringing him over here. There wasn't that much left intact. Whoever has done this had even gone to town on his clothes with what the cops thought might have been some kind of utility knife or box cutter. Even Sheriff Jefferson was surprised and shocked by the level of violence and destruction. I dread to think what might have happened if Cal had actually been in the house. In fact, it's making me feel quite sick.

He managed to find some personal stuff intact that was hidden beneath a fallen dresser otherwise he appears to have lost everything. Who the hell would do something like this? I have no idea. There weren't even any clothes that were salvageable. I'll have to find something of mine for him to sleep in. I'll have to take him shopping for something more tomorrow.

He looks the picture of dejection, but strangely enough, apart from the initial shock, he doesn't appear to be in much of a state of shock now. It's more like inevitability that I sense from him, like he was expecting something like this, and it was only a matter of time. Who goes through life expecting things like this to happen? God, I want to hold him so much, but I know that would be such a very bad idea at this moment in time

The truth is, if I touch him in such an intimate way I'm afraid I won't be able to stop and my lack of self-control is not what he wants or needs right now.

"Should I show you the guest room?" I ask him, for want of anything better to say. He shrugs. I grimace because he's spent almost every day here for the last two and a half weeks, of course he knows where the guest room is. "I don't know about you, but I need to go get changed," I tell him, and he nods. "I'll find you something to get changed into as well. Most of my stuff should fit you."

He's slimmer than me but sweats and T-shirts are pretty flexible.

"Thanks Jake," he says, the first words he's spoken out loud in hours. He meets my eye with his usual intense gaze, his eyes dulled by weariness but still stunning, "Thanks for everything."

"Hey!" I say, as I kneel in front of him and hook my finger beneath his chin. "No problem, really." There's a ghost of a smile on his lips. "No problem at all, and just so you know, you can stay here as long as you need to okay?" He nods,

his eyes brimming with unshed tears, which just serves to make the blue even more alluring.

I stand before I lose myself in that sapphire gaze, and leave to fetch him some clothes.

When we return to the living room, changed and looking less disheveled, we both fall thankfully into our now usual positions at either end of my sofa. I thought perhaps I might have lost this one-on-one time after I got better. However, I don't like the fact we are back in this position again because at this moment he has nowhere else to go.

This is a totally shit position to be in. I lean back into the sofa and groan, rubbing my face and running my fingers through my hair in frustration and anger at what has happened. I need a drink.

"I'm getting a whiskey, Cal," I tell him after catching his eye. "I don't know about you, but I think I need something stronger than warm milk."

Cal signs something that I don't quite catch, but his expression tells me his opinion of my drinking habits.

"I promise I won't have a hangover in the morning," I tell him and he shakes his head.

"Not what I said, old man!" he tells me, and I narrow my eyes as he smirks. At least he's smiling and talking now.

"What did you say then?" I ask with a chuckle.

He smirks some more, his dimples beginning to show as he shifts his position to sit a little straighter.

"I said I wasn't going to put your ass to bed this time if you get drunk," he tells me and I feel he's turning a corner after the shock of finding his home completely ruined.

"Yeah well, that's the beauty of living on your own though, Cal," I tell him. "No one to care where the fuck you sleep."

"But last time you were trying to sleep on your front porch," Cal reminds me.

I lean towards him and flash him an impish grin.

"I wasn't sleeping," I tell him. "I was singing, and waiting."

Cal widens his eyes.

“Waiting for what?”

“An angel,” I tell him before jumping up and moving to the door. When I turn around he is regarding me with shock. “Whiskey?”

“I never drank it before,” he says still wide-eyed and flushed.

“Ha!” I point my finger at him. “You’ve never lived.” I disappear from his sight, so I can’t say anything more. Not that I’d be able to because I am shaking inside after what I just told him.

Judging by the look on his face he understood I was talking about him. God, do I even know what I’m doing? We need to talk about what’s going on here, but I know now is not the time or the place. That doesn’t stop me continuing the momentum though. He ran from me after that kiss and I have no idea if it was because he spooked himself or if he thought it was a big mistake. Whatever the reason, we need to talk. I don’t want things to change. Friendship is good for me. Friendship is easier, especially if months down the line he finds someone younger and fitter and better. At least then I can still be his friend.

I return to the sofa with a half-full bottle of Scotch whiskey and two glasses. I place them down on the coffee table and pour a measure into each one as he watches me with interest. I hand him a glass but stop him as he goes to sniff it. He regards me curiously, one eyebrow raised in query.

“You can do this one of two ways,” I begin. He gives me a bemused smile as if he thinks I’m crazy for trying to tell him how to take a drink. “You can sip it, or down it in one.” He screws up his face. “Personally I think other spirits are for downing in one. Whiskey is for sipping. Either way it’s gonna hurt the first time.” I put the glass to my lips, then lower it. “A bit like sex, I guess,” I tell him with a wink then I take a sip.

He snorts and blushes furiously, then sips at the amber liquid in his glass. His eyes almost pop out of his head, and his hand shoots to his mouth as he fights not to choke.

“Jesus, Jake,” he croaks as his eyes water. I obligingly pat his back.

“Told you!” I say with more than a little smugness. “It ain’t called Fire Water for nothing, I’m tellin’ ya!”

He takes another sip with much the same results then places his glass down on the coffee table.

"I think I might pass," he says with a disgusted grimace.

"Wimp!" I challenge him. He narrows his eyes defiantly, takes the glass back in his hand and downs the lot.

I cannot help my bark of laughter as his face goes bright red, and he splutters.

"What the hell are you trying to do to me?" he squeaks. I pat him on the back again.

"I'm trying to distract you," I say brightly. "Is it working?"

He regards me with still narrowed eyes before barking out a laugh as well. It's rare he makes a sound when he's laughing. I know my job is done when he does. I hold up the bottle with raised eyebrows.

"Another? The second is never as bad as the first." Cal regards me skeptically but holds his glass up to receive another measure.

I place the bottle on the table and sit back into the cushions of the sofa. Cal takes up the same position at his end of the couch, nursing the whiskey glass on his chest.

"This isn't gonna stop me!" Cal breaks the silence. I sit up to look at him.

"What do you mean?" I ask with a confused frown. He waves his glass around in the general direction of his house.

"I mean this sick act of vandalism; it's not going to make me want to go back."

"Back where?" I ask, realization building slowly in my alcohol slowed brain. "Cal, do you know who might have done this?" Cal shrugs and shakes his head.

"I don't know who did it, but I do know if certain people found out they would be on my doorstep tomorrow telling me I'm not fit to live on my own, that I'm not capable."

"But that's bullshit, Cal. This isn't your fault," I gasp, brushing his arm with my hand. "Who do you mean anyway? Your parents?" Cal sits up and shakes his head, holding his glass out for a refill.

I hesitate before giving him one more measure.

"Make that the last one," I warn him. "This stuff can hit you all at once." He rolls his eyes but thanks me, sipping from his glass and sinking back into the sofa.

"My parents are dead, Jake," he tells me quietly, his voice void of emotion. I sit up with a splutter and a gasp.

"What?" This explains why he's on his own, but it couldn't be any more tragic. "How? When?" I realize this might just be too much information for him to be expected to share. I shake my head. "God, I'm sorry. I'm too nosy for my own good. Don't answer if you don't want to." Cal shrugs.

"It was a car crash, just over three years ago," He tells me.

"Shit, Cal." I feel terrible for him. I knew there was something tragic about him but this is just horrible. "How did you cope, have you been on your own all that time?"

He shakes his head.

"I was seventeen and still at school. I needed a guardian until I was twenty-one, until I could legally inherit everything that my parents left me." He takes another sip and doesn't even react this time. I guess I should watch that the two he's had already don't catch up with him too suddenly, but I'm far too distracted by his tragic past. "My father's brother and his wife became my legal guardians, and they were really nice at first, but then they tried to get control of my parents' estate by controlling me," Cal tells me and I realize what he is telling me is unfolding into a story of epic proportions. "When they discovered I couldn't be manipulated so easily, they tried to have me declared mentally incompetent because I'm deaf and because of other stuff as well. That would have meant they could control the estate after I came of age."

"They were after your money?" I ask, wondering what he could mean by "other stuff". He nods. "They obviously didn't succeed."

"No." He gives an ironic snort. "The two lawyers employed to sort out all the legal stuff were good friends of my parents. They got wise and made sure my aunt and uncle couldn't get their hands on any of it."

"Do you think your uncle and aunt could have had something to do with trashing your house?" I ask incredulously. He shrugs.

"They're religious nuts, Jake," Cal explains to me. "I don't really think they would be capable of doing something so horrible. Breaking the law isn't their style. Breaking spirits is though."

"Most people would see having your home trashed as an attempt to break your spirit, Cal," I point out and he makes a face as he considers what I've said. "They could be involved in this." He shakes his head.

"They haven't attempted to get in touch with me since I left, even though they know where I am, and while I didn't expect them to give up so easily, the worst I expected was for them to come quoting bible passages. They just aren't the kind of people who would do something as drastic as this. It has to be a coincidence." He looks at me hopefully. I shake my head, feeling bad, since I'm about to dash his hopes.

"The truth is, Cal, things like this just don't happen here. I've lived here over twenty years, and I've never heard of anything like this," I tell him. "Oakwood Bay has a very low crime rate. Sheriff Jefferson might be a bombastic pain in the ass but he's good at what he does." Cal nods sadly in understanding.

"Even so, I just can't believe they'd go this far," he says sadly.

"People can do all kinds of unexpected things when money is concerned, Cal." I offer by way of some sort of explanation, although I know it can hardly be any kind of consolation. "Maybe you should tell the Sheriff about your uncle and aunt just to be on the safe side," I suggest. He nods wearily.

"I guess." His head lolls to one side, and I see that the whiskey is catching up to him. I catch him as he sways in his seat. "Whoa!" he gasps with a laugh. "You weren't kidding about it catching up were you?" I chuckle.

"Come on, sunshine," I say with more than a little affection in my tone. "Time for bed, I think."

He lolls his head to the other side so he's looking at me sideways, a relaxed, slightly goofy smile on his face.

"If I have a hangover in the morning it's your turn to play nursemaid," he tells me before he actually passes out on my couch.

Luckily, he's already in sweats and a T-shirt so I don't need to undress him. Just as well really. I throw him over my shoulder and carry him to the guest room where I lay him gently down on the bed. I cover him with the blankets and quilt and make sure he has some water on the nightstand for when he wakes up. I consider leaving some painkillers too, but I decide to wait and see how he feels when he wakes up. He's young, he might not even suffer that badly. I never used to.

I stare down at his peacefully sleeping form, and I'm struck by how very young and vulnerable he does look. He has no one looking out for him, I feel responsible for him somehow. What was I even thinking allowing him to kiss me the way he did? He doesn't need that right now or even ever from me, especially after everything he's just told me about his family. He needs a friend more than anything else.

Whether it's wise or not, I can't help brushing some stray locks of his beautiful, blond curls from his face and leaning down to kiss his perfect forehead.

His hand moves like lightning to cup the back of my neck in such a firm hold I can't move. I'm in complete shock because I'd thought he was totally out for the count. His eyes shoot open wide, and he regards me, not with shock, or anger but with such longing it takes my breath away.

"Don't go," he whispers. My breath leaves my body all at once at the meaning in his words and his expression. But I can't do this, not now, not ever.

"Cal, I can't stay. We need to talk about this," I tell him. He shakes his head.

"No talking," he slurs. "I'll just close my eyes. I won't see what you say."

"Cal, you are drunk, I won't take advantage of you in this state."

"Meaning what?" he asks angrily. "That you think you'd be taking advantage whatever state I was in?" I swallow at the swiftness with which he throws my words back at me. I guess he isn't quite as drunk as he made out. "You think I'm not old enough to know what I want," he accuses; no hint of a slurred word. I shake my head.

"No, I don't think that at all, Cal," I tell him, because I don't. He needs to know that, but he also needs to know he's safe with me. We cannot do this now because when he wakes up in the morning and discovers what's happened he will leave and never come back. "I think you're drunk, and your ability to choose is compromised."

"Not a good enough excuse," he tells me. "You want this as much as I do. I felt that when we kissed, Jake. Don't deny it, and don't forget who it was that actually got me drunk in the first place," he accuses. As he says this, he pulls me over him with surprising strength and determination, and his hips thrust up into mine, which pushes our groins together.

“Oh, god,” I gasp, as I feel his cock, warm and hard against mine. “I did not get you drunk to sleep with you.” I feel I have to tell him. “That was not my intention at all.”

“So, whatever the reasons, it makes no difference.” His eyes are intense, pulling me in, forcing me to give in. “We are both adults and we are both capable of making the right decision.”

“Is this the right decision though, Cal, really?” I ask him.

“Are you worried I’ll hate you in the morning, is that it?” I sigh, unable to hide the pain as I nod, biting my lip.

“I don’t want to spoil what we have, Cal. I value our friendship too much.” He reaches up to caress my cheek, run his fingers gently through my hair, sending shivers down my spine.

“And so do I,” he assures me so tenderly it is actually physically painful. “But I knew from the very beginning that I wanted more from you, Jake. We’ll still be friends, we’ll always be friends, but I need more, I want more. Please, just kiss me, Jake,” he pleads and pulls me down to crush his lips against mine.

I pull away though. I need to get control of this before it gets out of hand, but his hands are suddenly all over the place. It’s like trying to wrestle a fucking octopus. I don’t want to be rough with him, but he’s strong. I have to use some strength in return as I grab his wrists and pin them above his head.

He gasps and stops moving for a moment, regarding me with wide eyes and heavy breaths. I realize this might not be the best position to be in though when his expression changes to lustful, and his tongue thrusts against his top teeth in a wicked grin. I am directly above him now and somehow one of my legs has fallen between his. Quite slowly and deliberately, he thrusts upwards to rub his groin against my thigh.

I can’t help the groan as he does it. It feels delicious. His cock is so hard, and I can feel the heat of it through the layers of our sweat pants.

“Cal!” I gasp, lowering my head into the crook of his shoulder, my entire body shuddering with need and arousal. I can no longer ignore how hard I am in response to his closeness or how damn good this feels.

“Jake,” he gasps back, his eyes dark with desire. “Stop overthinking this, and kiss me!” he demands.

I lift my head, my eyes wide as they are caught in his sapphire gaze. Oh god. Who am I kidding? I can't say no to this man. I don't think I'll ever be able to say no to him. The desire that I've felt for him over the last month and a half since I first set eyes on him has built to a crescendo and is now almost too much to bear. The memories of that kiss just hours before is still tingling through my body, and the feelings I'd put to one side when we discovered the state of his house once more come boiling to the surface.

He pulls me down into another lip-crushing kiss, and this time I don't fight against it. Our lips crash together, and our tongues push for dominance, a fight I now know for a fact he will win.

All this time I've been thinking of him as mine, when in reality he has always called the shots, and I'm his, all his. He showed me this in the club when he made sure the reception guy knew we were together. He showed me again when he intervened and cock blocked that bear at the bar. His assertiveness both times had sent my senses whirling, but I'd thought it had simply been his wish to keep me close for moral support. But even before that, during the weeks I was sick and he hovered over me, spending all that time hanging out on my sofa, I now know he was staking his claim even then.

Our lips part and we regard each other breathlessly. There is a triumph in his eyes and I feel my body reacting to his conquest over my objections. I have never felt so dominated in my entire life, but I know I like it. I want this, I want him, and I want him to tell me what he wants. I wait, releasing one of his wrists and caressing his cheek.

With his free hand, he grabs mine and pulls it between us. Without hesitation he pushes it, palm down, onto his groin. He gasps at the contact, and I watch, mesmerized, my hand, my entire arm, tingling as he presses his erection up into my palm.

"Feel that?" he asks me breathlessly. I nod. "That's all for you." He captures my gaze. "Only for you, Jake."

"Cal!" I breathe, unable to take in what he's saying, unable to believe this isn't partly the whiskey in his system talking.

"Shut up and touch me, make me come, just do something, Jake, please!" he keens, thrusting up into my hand.

My fingers close around his shaft through his sweatpants and he gasps and moans and whimpers as he ruts into my fist. He closes his eyes and loses

himself to the sensation. Oh god, he's beautiful. Even through the cloth of his pants I can feel the strength of his arousal. I imagine the silkiness of his skin against mine and my hips thrust down against him, my own erection rutting against his thigh.

"God, I want you so much, Jake," he gasps. "So much, you don't even know."

"Cal," I groan, his words sending my senses soaring. How could I not have noticed he felt the same way? I was so hung up on trying to hide my attraction for him I didn't see what was right in front of me. "I want you," I tell him. "I've wanted you from the moment I set eyes on you the first day you arrived."

He gasps again, his eyes wide. "Jake!" His breathing is erratic as his body tenses. "Oh my god, oh my god." I didn't want to make him come in his pants, but I think it might be too late.

I feel his tempo change as he ruts against my hand. He moves faster, but loses his rhythm as his moans become whines, and then suddenly I feel him pulsing and jerking as his entire body shatters. With a helpless, shuddering cry, he comes, without me even touching his skin, pulsing and soaking the cloth of his sweat pants and leaving me feeling... god, I don't know how I feel, I'm stunned at the swiftness of his orgasm and the sheer ferocity of it.

Before I can register any of it though, he has pulled me down into another blistering kiss. With a strength and a swiftness that takes my fucking breath away, he turns me onto my back so he is on top, straddling my legs. He thrusts his hand inside my pants.

"Your turn," he growls, smiling and covering my face with kisses.

I gasp and cry out as his warm, slender fingers wrap around my cock. I'm painfully hard, and the intensity of just being with him this way has me so close I won't last long.

"Cal." I want to catch my breath, but I know he won't let me. He won't stop because he knows there's a possibility I might call a halt to the whole thing.

Though, the truth is I couldn't, even if all my doubts and misgivings were calling at once. The momentum can't be stopped as his fingers stroke me to orgasm.

I cry out again and thrust up into his palm, fire in my belly: a heat so great it's almost painful.

With one more thrust, I'm coming, and coming, pulsing into his hand and spilling over my stomach. His hand slows, but it doesn't stop as he milks me, making sure he has wrenched everything from me he possibly can until the sensation becomes too much, and I have to stop him with a kiss.

He plants soft, breathless kisses along my jaw line, and I moan with each touch of his soft, warm lips. His bottom lip runs across the shell of my ear, and I shiver.

"You're mine," he whispers softly and possessively in my ear. "No one else's. Not that receptionist's or that bear at the bar, just mine, all mine."

I gasp at the sincerity and determination in his tone. I can't reply with words, I'm struck speechless, so I reply with actions, turning my head and capturing his lips, kissing him with such animalistic ferocity he moans and surrenders, collapsing on top of me like a rag doll.

I push him to one side but keep my lips on his. We're both a little sticky so we need to clean up before anything else: before I can start to process what just happened.

I start to get out of the bed, my lips the last thing to break contact with him. He falls back into the pillows with a groan. I rush to the guest bathroom, grab a couple of hand towels and throw one at him as I start to clean myself off with mine.

"Are you going to leave?" he asks me quietly. I gasp and sit back onto the bed. All of his dominance, confidence and assertiveness has left him, and he looks small and young and uncertain of what will happen next.

"Oh my god, why would you think that?" I ask him, reaching out and touching his lovely face.

I know that whatever I do and say now is going to be very important. This moment is very crucial to the future of our relationship. Whether what we did was advisable or wise is a moot point, we've done it and crossed a line we can't uncross.

His confessions tell me that line would have been crossed eventually anyway. He set that in motion when he kissed me on the drive. He needs to know I feel the same, that I need the same, that I want him just as much.

He leans into my caress, and I moan softly as I lie back down, shuffling out of my pants as I do because they're a little sticky.

His must be a lot sticky so I encourage him to do the same, looking him directly in the eye as I do.

“I’m not going anywhere, Cal,” I assure him. “I am staying right here.” *Where I belong*, I think, but don’t voice.

Wearing just our T-shirts I pull Cal into my arms and lie back into the pillows with his head in the crook of my shoulder. He snuggles against me, one of his legs coming up to rest across mine, one hand feeds up inside my T-shirt, and his fingers play gently with the hairs on my chest.

The sensation of his intimate touch and his body laying the length of mine, his cock, still warm but now flaccid, pressing against my thigh, is almost too much for me. I can feel myself reacting to the contact. I don’t think I can muster up anything more tonight though and neither can he, I’m sure. Circumstances have us both exhausted. I stroke his cheek and his hair softly, lulling him to sleep as I pull the covers over us both.

He lifts his head to look at me.

“Oh my god, we really do need to talk.” His eyes are wide with alarm. I chuckle helplessly, nodding.

“Yes, we do,” I nod, caressing his lips with my thumb. “But not now. Right now we need to sleep.”

He bites his lip and sighs, then nods at the sheer good sense of what I’ve said. He leans in for a kiss that is soft and tender and aching beautiful, just like him. He resumes his position draped across me, his hand flat on my chest as if he’s holding me in place. I feel his body grow heavier as he falls asleep in my arms, where he belongs.

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Chapter Fourteen

A Rude Awakening

I am vaguely aware that Cal has not moved from his position, draped possessively over me, all night. I think I slept, but only lightly, hyperaware of every tiny movement and miniscule change in the rhythm of his breathing. I haven't moved either. Why would I? I am exactly where I want to be. I can't even begin to fathom the intensity of my feelings right now, or the implications of what we've just shared. We are in our own little protective bubble.

The bubble will burst eventually. Then the day promises to be more than a little bit crazy as we try to sort out Cal's house, so I hover between sleep and wakefulness reluctant to disturb Cal or rouse myself.

A loud banging sound jerks me out of my dreamlike state and to a fully woken, sitting position. Cal moves onto his own pillow with a softly protesting moan, oblivious to the noise that has woken me.

For a moment, I am completely disorientated because I'm in the guest room, and therefore, all the normal noises of my house are slightly different. I'm wondering what actually woke me when the banging starts again except it isn't banging, it's knocking, followed by my door bell and another round of knocking.

"Holy shit." I turn and shake Cal awake. "Cal, there's someone at the door, wake up."

Cal sits up looking bleary eyed and disheveled in my T-shirt that is hanging off one shoulder. I'm momentarily distracted by his complete adorableness, but as he blinks at me in confusion I realize he doesn't have a fucking clue why I've just shaken him awake.

He's not even awake enough to focus on anything, so I grab his chin and force him to look directly at me.

"There's someone at the door, Cal," I tell him. "We have to get up." His eyes widen, and he swings his legs around to sit on the edge of the bed then groans and holds his head as if in pain.

That'll be the whiskey after effects kicking in. I'm surprised I'm not suffering as well. I step around to his side and kneel down, touching his knee gently. He looks up at me with pain-filled eyes.

“Hangover?” I ask. He frowns and nods.

“I think. I’ve never had one before,” he tells me, his voice cracked and hoarse. “It feels like my head is gonna explode.” I pat his knee in sympathy as I stand. His eyes follow me, wide and as intense as always.

“First time for everything,” I tell him, handing him the glass of water I got for him last night. “Drink this, and I’ll get you some painkillers when we’re dressed.” He glances down at my bare legs and then at his own and squeaks in shock. He immediately covers himself up as if he has forgotten he was naked from the waist down.

I roll my eyes. There’s no time for any unnecessary shyness especially after what we did last night. He takes the glass of water from me, and I get up and rush to the door.

“I’ll get you some clean clothes,” I tell him, and he nods, regarding me with wide, vulnerable eyes.

God, I want to do wicked things to him right now. I want to lie him back down on the bed and make him cry out my name in pleasure, like he did last night.

There is another, very insistent and irritable sounding knock at the door, which halts my unsavory thoughts. It’s followed by a voice calling through my mail slot.

“Jake, Cal. Are either of you in there?” Oh god, it’s Sheriff Jefferson!

“We’ll be right out Sheriff,” I call as loudly as I can, hoping he’ll hear.

I rush around my bedroom, pulling on a pair of boxers and grabbing clothes for me and for Cal. We can’t go out in public wearing the T-shirts and sweats we just had sex in.

I stop dead in my tracks—Cal and I had sex—or at least the precursor to sex, orgasms in each other’s presence. Oh my god! I can’t think too much about it right now, even though the thrill of the memory is causing electric shocks to course through my entire body. There are other more pressing matters, though—mainly the Sheriff at my door.

Back in the spare room Cal is still sitting on the edge of the bed rubbing his eyes and drinking his water, trying desperately to wake himself up.

“Here!” I thrust a pair of boxers, sweats and a T-shirt into his arms. “Put these on, I hope they fit you.”

I push one leg into my own sweats and almost trip, right myself and use the momentum to get my other leg in, pulling them up and making for the door as I pull on my T-shirt.

“Jake.” Cal sounds somewhat distressed and even a little irritable. I turn, and he’s still not even attempted to unfold the clothes I gave him.

“Get dressed, Cal, what are you waiting for? The Sheriff is here to see you.”

His eyes widen, and he gasps as he sorts through the pile of clothes I gave him. He discards the boxers with a twist of his face and a slightly hysterical chuckle.

“Oh my god!” he exclaims as he pulls on the sweats without underwear. “I hope you only gave me those as a sick joke.”

“Hey,” I snap back. “Next time I’ll let you greet the Sheriff in your birthday suit, or the clothes with the telltale, dried up crusty bits on them.” I take umbrage at his dismissal of my underwear. Boxers are perfectly comfortable.

“I’m sorry,” he apologizes. “I’m grateful for the clothes Jake, but plaid, cotton boxers? Really? Who the hell wears plaid cotton boxers nowadays?”

“I do!” I tell him indignantly. “Other people obviously do as well, since they are readily available to buy.” He snorts as he stands, straightening his T-shirt.

I step up to him and pull the front of his shirt so he is pulled against me. He moves, unresisting, with a soft, surprised chuckle.

“Now how the hell am I supposed to concentrate on anything today when I know you’re going commando?” I say, in a deep tone that I know he won’t hear but he will feel.

He shivers, his breath catching in his throat as he smiles and brushes the backs of his fingers across my cheek. His eyes search my face as his other hand slides slowly around my waist and pulls tight, making me gasp.

“Maybe you’re not supposed to concentrate on anything but me!” Cal murmurs, raising his eyebrows in a challenge.

I close the small gap between us and capture his lips in a soft, hopefully reassuring kiss. He moans and deepens it, melting into me and wrapping his arms around my neck, weaving his fingers through my hair and adding his tongue for good measure.

What I intended as a quick, reassuring kiss has turned into a full on, spine liquefying clinch. I pull away because I can still hear the damn knocking even if Cal can't, and I'd rather not answer the door to Sheriff Jefferson with a hard on.

"Sheriff, er, J-Jefferson?" I remind Cal breathlessly. He regards me with wide, innocent eyes.

"Oh yeah!" he says as he smooths down my T-shirt and steps around me, touching his fingertips to his lips in wonder as he precedes me through the door. "Come on, Jake, let's not keep him waiting." He has the smuggest damn look on his face, and I narrow my eyes, because did he just get the better of me again? I swear he looks like the cat that got the cream.

I pass him, pursing my lips and giving him a sideways glance as I do. I pull open the door to finally let our esteemed Sheriff inside. Cal immediately gasps, grasps hold of my shirt and hides behind me. I groan as I remember the Sheriff isn't exactly his favorite person in the world.

"Well, finally," Jefferson blurts out. "What the hell kept you? I was beginning to get worried."

Sheriff Jefferson is a large, some would say overweight; some would say cuddly, middle-aged man. Middle-aged as in he's older than me. He can sometimes be a little abrupt, intimidating and bombastic, but he's a very good and thorough professional, so when he bursts into your house in the state he's in right now you have to think that something is not quite right. He seems more excited than concerned though.

"Sheriff!" I state as his large presence dominates my hall. "Come in, by all means."

"You know I was this far from breaking down your door?" he tells me gruffly. He shows me, with his thumb and forefinger, just how far he was from what seems like very drastic action.

"We were asleep," I tell him as he makes his way to my kitchen, his thumbs stuck into his gun holster.

"So you ain't even got any coffee made yet?" he asks in exasperation. "Come on Jake, my team needs sustenance."

"Your team?" I ask him in confusion glancing quickly at Cal who shrugs, equally perplexed.

“Yeah!” he nods. “Someone was supposed to call ahead to warn ya. I got a whole team together first thing this morning to come and fix this kid’s house up.”

“What?” Cal asks in surprise, forgetting his fear of the over large lawman and stepping out from behind me.

Jefferson turns to him and nods. “Yep, when I spoke to Dave at the hardware store and he heard what had happened, he called just about everyone he knows, and I did the same. That’d be pretty much everyone in town. They all wanted to help. There’s an entire team of people out there waiting for instructions from yours truly to start tidyin’ up and fixing everything that’s broke. You’re a popular guy Cal Steele.”

“Oh my god!” Cal exclaims as he rushes to the door, me directly behind him. I hear the Sheriff’s chuckle as Cal pulls the door open and stands in stunned silence on the porch.

I am also stunned beyond words. Our shared drive and the street in either direction is full of parked cars and trucks and people getting out of them with brushes, and tools and trash bags. They’re all calling to each other as if they’re on an outing, someone has even brought along a gas barbecue and they wave to us cheerily as they carry it through to the beach. How the hell did I not hear any of this? This is completely crazy, but this is Oakwood Bay for you. Everyone gets on with their business until someone really needs some help, and then everyone rallies around and usually treats it as an excuse for a social outing.

“So here we are,” The Sheriff says, sounding really proud of himself for getting this together. “I’m gonna go and see if there’s any more for the forensic team to dig out before everyone gets started with trash sacks and stuff,” he tells Cal, who nods, utterly taken aback by the Sheriff’s and everyone else’s willingness to help him. “I’ll be back in about ten minutes to ask you both a few more questions.” Jefferson winks at us. “I also don’t want to miss out on one of Sarah’s breakfasts.” He chuckles.

He leaves us with bewildered expressions on our faces until my attention is caught by the figure of my sister striding towards my house carrying two large bags of groceries. She’s followed by Lou-Anne and two other women I don’t recognize but who are equally laden with bags.

“Jake. Don’t you ever answer your phone?” She calls as she reaches the bottom of the steps. “And what a surprise to find you both still in your pajamas.” She sounds extremely unsurprised.

"We're not in our pajamas, Sarah, they're sweatpants," I tell her, ignoring the other women's smirks. I see Cal's amused expression out of the corner of my eye and hear him chuckle. I nudge him irritably, since he's standing close enough to be actually in my damn sweat pants himself. He gives an indignant gasp but I ignore him as Sarah seems to be in one of her take over modes. "What are you doing here, Sarah?" I ask her. She snorts and shakes her head.

"All these people have to be fed," she explains, walking up my porch steps to join us. "I did call ahead but you were obviously, erm, too busy to answer your phone. You don't mind if we set up shop in your kitchen do you?" I know by her tone she's only asking out of politeness. She's going to do it no matter what I say. So I shrug and move out of her way.

"Go ahead!" I huff.

She pushes past me, places her grocery bags on the ground and pulls Cal into a hug, then pulls back to plant an affectionate kiss on his cheek.

"How are you sweetie?" she asks, holding him at arm's length and rubbing his arms up and down soothingly. Cal gives me a sideways glance that I don't really understand because there're ice crystals in those baby blues.

"I'm fine thanks," he tells her. His tone quite clearly tells me there is more to add to that statement, and I wonder, judging by his expression, if it might be: *"No thanks to Jake."*

I am getting the distinct impression that I am somehow in the doghouse. I have absolutely no idea why though.

Lou-Anne gives us a wink as she leads the others through my house to the kitchen. Sarah is guiding Cal inside, so I follow with one last glance at the organized chaos outside on my drive.

"When I heard what happened I was shocked to the core, Cal," Sarah is saying as she gives Cal an almost motherly look: the look she usually reserves for me. Well that's unexpected. She's never usually so ready to mother anyone else as relentlessly as she does me. I guess Cal deserves it though. "Everyone in town wanted to come and help in some way," she continues. "I've put together a catering team and there's a team here from Dave's Hardware store. Some others have come to just help with the cleanup. Even some of the guys from the party last night are here, nursing hangovers no doubt."

"I don't know what to say," Cal tells her, in a state of shock at the kindness and community spirit that's at work here. "I just expected to have to do it all myself."

His statement shocks me. Did he think I wouldn't help him? Sarah smiles at him and urges him to sit on a stool at my kitchen counter.

"We couldn't just sit by and let you struggle through this by yourself, Cal," she assures him softly. "This is what we do here in Oakwood Bay, we help when we can. Have you had breakfast yet?" Sarah asks as us both.

"No," as he answers, Cal shoots me another icy glare, which Sarah does not miss. "We'd just woken up when the Sheriff came."

"Really?" she glances back at me with rapidly bouncing eyebrows. "That's interesting." Those last words were only for me since Cal couldn't see. I avoid her gaze and hope I'm not blushing as hot as I feel I am.

Sarah steps aside and makes way for me, urging me to sit as well.

"There's a hell of a lot to do today," she tells Cal, loud enough for me to hear. "You need a good breakfast to set you up. My brother is a terrible host if he hasn't even fed you yet." The other women in the kitchen all click their tongues.

"That's hardly my fault," I gasp, although the looks Cal's shooting me make me feel he does not exactly agree with this sentiment. "We were both tired, we slept late."

"Right." She gives me another knowing look then turns to her friends and begins to organize.

When Sarah organizes things it's with almost military precision. All Cal and I can do is sit and watch in bemusement. Cal looks more than confused though; he looks pale and wrung out. I lay my hand on his shoulder, but he shrugs it off irritably. He turns to face me, his eyes flashing angrily.

"Hey!" I smile softly, holding my hands up in surrender. I can understand his mood swings. He's got an awful lot of shit to deal with today. He doesn't have to deal with it alone though, I'll be with him. "Everything will be okay," I assure him, trying to let him know he isn't on his own. He narrows his eyes in annoyance.

"How can you say that, Jake?" he hisses at me. "In a minute I have to go out and start picking up the pieces of my home. And as if that isn't enough to deal with, I also feel like shit. I have a hangover, and it's your fault." I sit back and raise my eyebrows in amusement, finally realizing the source of all his icy glances.

"How is it my fault?" I ask him.

"You gave me whiskey," he accuses. I'm feeling just a little irritated by this, mostly because it is only partly true. I did give him the whiskey.

"You didn't have to drink it. You're an adult, Cal," I remind him, remembering one of our conversations last night, right before we er... hmmm! "Far be it from me to try to tell you what you should and shouldn't do." And I think he knows I'm not just referring to the whiskey.

"What is that supposed to mean?" he hisses, but I don't get a chance to answer because Sarah has seen us.

"What are you two whispering about?" she asks with narrowed eyes.

"Nothing!" we both answer sullenly, at the same time. My sister sees all, unfortunately. She will not have missed the atmosphere that is quickly forming between Cal and me.

Cal shoots me a look that could be used as effective pest control if it was bottled. What can I do though? I would have lavished all the care and attention he deserved on him if my house hadn't suddenly been invaded by bombastic Sheriffs and my sister's coven. There isn't going to be an opportunity to do any kind of serious talking until tonight now. I'm sorry he has a hangover, but is that all he's pissed off about? I want to ask him if things between us, apart from the hangover, are okay but I'm distracted by someone clearing their throat behind us.

I turn to see Sheriff Jefferson waiting patiently for us to notice him.

"If you don't mind, I'll have that word with you both now," he says.

Cal's eyes widen, and he shoots me a worried look, shuffling his stool closer. Oh now he needs me! And why does the Sheriff need to speak to both of us?

Jefferson gives me a significant look that I can't really interpret, but it is full of concern and anxiety that I have never seen from the Sheriff before. Is there something he's not telling us? I feel anxious now, more so than before.

Jefferson sits on a stool at the opposite side of my counter and Sarah hands him a coffee, before setting down two steaming mugs of coffee in front of me and Cal. Along with the mugs, she hands us both some painkillers.

"I know the signs of a hangover when I see them," she quips, rubbing Cal's shoulders and giving him a warm smile.

He downs the painkillers gratefully and then takes a sip of his coffee, closing his eyes and groaning in satisfaction. He opens his eyes again and looks directly at me.

“Sarah knows how to look after me,” he accuses, and I hold out my hands in a helpless shrug as Sarah chuckles.

“I would have made you coffee,” I gasp. I never had the chance since we were woken by the arrival of the entire fucking world and their dog. I’m getting a little pissed off with his mood swings. Luckily, we have the Sheriff to distract us, or we might have had our first argument right there and then.

“Look guys, I know there’s not a lot more you can tell me that you didn’t tell last night,” he says. “But the truth is, this kind of thing,” he waves his hands back in the direction of Cal’s house, “it just doesn’t happen here.” He takes a sip of coffee before continuing. “What we need to understand about this incident,” the Sheriff explains in his most professional tone, “is that this isn’t a simple burglary. That would be bad enough. No.” He shakes his head sadly. “This is a personal attack.” He looks poignantly at both Cal and me. “Nothing was taken as far as we know, so whoever did this had something against you, Cal. They waited until both of you were out because the amount of noise that was surely made would have alerted Jake if he’d been at home.”

I gasp and feel Cal tense up beside me. Despite his anger at my seeming reluctance to take responsibility for his hangover, he has pulled his stool right against mine. I lay my hand on his knee and he takes it, holding it firmly in his.

“You think this was specifically aimed at Cal?” I ask remembering what Cal told me about his relatives last night. It’s looking increasingly more likely that they were involved in some way.

The Sheriff nods and continues.

“So, what I need you to do is to think of anyone that could have a grudge against you, Cal,” the Sheriff says gently. “Anyone who might think they have a reason to do something like this.”

Cal bites his lip and looks at me for advice.

What should I do, J? He signs. I return the look with a nod.

Tell him what you told me. I sign back, urging him to speak. He needs to tell the Sheriff about his uncle and aunt, even if he believes they wouldn’t have gone this far.

“Can I interpret that exchange as there being someone you can think of?” Jefferson asks, and Cal nods.

He gives the Sheriff a brief account of his uncle and aunt and what they had tried to do before he'd come of age. Jefferson takes notes in his notebook and asks Cal for names and addresses.

“Can you think of anyone else?” he asks, and Cal shakes his head looking quite down hearted.

“No!” he says. “But I really don't believe my uncle and aunt could be involved in this.”

“They could have got someone else to do it though,” Jefferson suggests. “If they were intending to scare you.” He now bites his lip and looks indecisive. “Now, I don't want to worry you or unsettle you more than you are already but this isn't the first time someone has tried to cause trouble for you Cal,” he says. We both gasp.

“What do you mean?” I ask incredulously. “What else has happened?” Jefferson looks sufficiently remorseful, and I suddenly realize what he's talking about. Cal does not though. He looks from me to the Sheriff and back again in confusion.

“What?” he asks in frustration.

“When I arrested you, thinking you'd stolen Jake's car,” the Sheriff tells him, “I got an anonymous tip off. The caller also told me they thought you were carrying a gun.” Both Cal and I gasp. That would explain why Jefferson had acted so quickly.

“You think the two incidents are related?” I ask, my arm naturally moving to rest around Cal's shoulders in support at this revelation.

“I can't think it's a coincidence, Jake,” Jefferson tells me. “I got a phone call a few days after that arrest incident, from a lawyer in Michigan.” Cal gasps and looks positively stricken. The address he gave for his uncle and aunt was in Michigan. “He asked me for details of an arrest for car theft because he was building a case against a Calvin John Steele. When I told him there'd been no arrest he seemed very confused, said he'd been told an arrest had been witnessed. When I told him it had all been a misunderstanding he apologized for taking up my time and hung up.”

“They wanted control of my money, that's why I had to leave,” Cal says; his breathing a little fast and his face pale. “They said I wasn't fit to be on my

own, that I needed help. They said I should give it all to them in gratitude for taking me in when my parents died. They even tried to sell some of the properties I would inherit. That was when the other executors got wise and helped me to stop them. I left, but I didn't leave them homeless or anything. I signed the house I grew up in over to them. I can't understand why they wouldn't be happy with that."

"Oh, Cal!" I say, pulling him to me and holding him in my arms. He doesn't resist and melts against me, hiding his face in the sleeve of my T-shirt, trembling slightly. I hate that his trust has been so badly betrayed.

"Would this be a good time for breakfast?" Sarah asks me gently, and I nudge Cal to lift his head.

"Breakfast?" I ask him.

He scowls at me, reminding me that he is still pissed off, and I have somehow to make amends for getting him drunk. He shakes his head at the offer of breakfast.

"Hangover!" he states unhappily. Sheriff Jefferson chuckles.

"I'll have some of that breakfast, Sarah." My sister eyes him up and down, and I know her well enough to see her bite back a retort about the Sheriff's ample waistline.

Cal nudges me then stands up and makes that sign he uses when he's going off to the bathroom. I watch him disappear with concern. He's pissed at me, but that didn't stop him almost sitting on my lap while we were talking to Jefferson.

"Jake, he has to have something to eat, there's a lot to do today." Sarah sounds disapproving. Not entirely sure who her disapproval is aimed at though.

"I know that Sarah, but I can't force the food down him." I try not to sound too irritable.

She places a plate of eggs, bacon, sausage and hash browns down in front of Jefferson who begins to hungrily eat and I realize my stomach is feeling slightly delicate as I watch.

The Sheriff points his fork at me and swallows his mouthful before speaking.

"I'm tellin' you, Jake, you keep an eye on that kid. I'll be doin' the same." I regard him in shock.

"Do you think he's really in some sort of danger?" I ask, feeling the color drain from my face, and any inclination I might have had towards some sort of food is gone altogether. Jefferson nods.

"I ain't ever seen such a vicious attack on someone's property, not in all the years I've done this job," he tells me between forkfuls of hash brown and sausage. "And that phone call I got about your car, someone must have been watching to know what was goin' on."

I gasp and nod, because, oh my god, he must be right. Someone saw him get into my car and saw the opportunity to call the Sheriff to cause trouble. They must have known how much it would shake Cal up to have that happen to him. Has someone been watching us all this time?

It's weird and a little disconcerting to think that someone could have been watching us at the same time I was watching him. Nothing else has happened except for the false arrest and the break in. Was that because I was watching over him? Has my stalking, in some kind of perverted stroke of luck, prevented something else from happening?

Sheriff Jefferson has given me pause for thought and made me feel quite paranoid now. And where is Cal anyway? He hasn't returned from the bathroom. I get up to go and find him.

"Where are you going?" Sarah asks, indignantly, since she has a plate of breakfast for me. I groan as the sight of it churns my delicate stomach.

"Ugh! I'm going to the bathroom, sorry, Sarah, I can't face food right now." It's not just the hangover that's now hovering in the background that's making me feel so queasy, it's the thought of anything happening to Cal. I need to find him. I am never going to let him out of my sight.

Where did he go? The guest bathroom? I cross the hall and knock on the guest bedroom door. I grunt with frustration because what the hell good will knocking do?

I open the door a crack and peak in. The room is empty, only the crumpled bed sheets to prove we were even there at all. Last night seems such a long time ago. I walk over to the bathroom door and listen before cracking that open as well. It isn't locked, and I discover that this room is also empty.

Where the hell is Cal?

I try my bedroom and bathroom next, but he's not there either.

I go back out to the kitchen, and I must look bewildered and slightly panicky because Sarah tells me immediately.

“You just missed him,” she says. “He left with the Sheriff just now.”

I make to follow them but she stops me.

“Oh no, you’ll eat something first, at least.” She firmly presses me into a seat.

“I can’t stay here, Sarah, I have to be out there with him, I promised him, and I know you heard what the Sheriff just said.” She nods.

“I heard, but I think you can rest assured that he is surrounded by people who care about him right now so nothing is going to happen to him,” she assures me gently.

“I care about him,” I state quietly because I do, oh god, I really do. I sit heavily in shock at the realization. Sarah pats my arm.

“I know you do sweetheart,” she tells me with great softness in her tone. She hands me a warm bagel and I take a grateful bite.

Now that I don’t have to watch the Sheriff shoveling food down his gullet, my appetite is back to almost normal. I still have knots in my stomach thinking about what Jefferson said, and about how pissed off Cal is with me right now. Everything’s just spiraling out of control, with no way of making things better anytime soon. Maybe if I took him a peace offering things might be a little better.

“Sarah, can I take one of these bagels for Cal?” I ask her and she hands me one without question.

“You know, whatever you did, Jake, he won’t stay pissed with you forever,” she assures me. “He worships the ground you walk on.” I almost choke on the last mouthful of bagel.

“No he doesn’t!” I exclaim, but she just gives me one of her looks that tells me she knows something I don’t. It’s annoying most of the time, but, right now, I think her words might have stopped my heart.

Does Cal really like me that much? I can’t even begin to believe I could be that lucky, but after all the things he said to me last night, I have to start thinking I might be.

His house is a hive of activity as I enter, stepping over some broken pieces of a hall table and a couple of picture frames. The mess is even worse in the daylight. What must Cal be going through? He must feel like shit, even without a hangover to contend with he'd be feeling terrible, no wonder he was irritable with me, and his mood swings are completely understandable. I should have been here with him from the very beginning. I need to find him now and make things right between us.

He's busy talking to several people, who are holding brushes and trash bags, when I find him. I don't want to butt in when he's busy organizing the cleanup of what was his life. I approach him when there's a gap in the conversation and thrust the bagel into his hand.

"Sarah says to eat this or she'll hold you down and force feed you," I tell him with a flick of my eyebrows, trying to keep it light. There are several chuckles from the gathered helpers, most of whom know Sarah very well.

Cal gives me a small, half smile, thanks me curtly and turns back to the group without giving me a second glance. Well, I guess that's me dismissed then. I have no idea if that tight little smile means I'm forgiven or not, but there's no opportunity to ask now, he's busy.

I wander over to where a pile of trash bags, brooms, and work gloves have been left. I pull on some gloves and make a start on clearing some of the glass from his broken windows. I'll bide my time and wait for an opportunity to speak to Cal when he's a little less crowded with well-wishers.

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Chapter Fifteen

Frustration

Well, frustration doesn't even begin to cover what I'm feeling right now. All day I have tried to catch Cal alone, and all day, I've been thwarted at every turn.

Each time I have tried to catch his eye or steal a moment alone with him someone else got in the way or, more worryingly, he would turn away from me with a flush of his cheeks and find something else more pressing to do.

I am now convinced he is actively avoiding me, no mean feat when we've been in the same house all day. I'm also convinced that he is not just pissed about the hangover. I think he's regretting what we did last night, and now he's just waiting for the right time to tell me it was all a mistake.

I knew this would happen, goddamit. I knew. I should have been stronger. I should have stopped him when he kissed me out on the drive. I should have shown more restraint when he pulled me down onto the bed, but it had felt so good to finally have him in my arms, and he'd been so damn insistent I hadn't been able to say no.

He is currently with his surfing buddies out on his deck. Someone brought along some beer and they're having an impromptu deck party. Everyone else has left. Cal's new friends are a noisy bunch, and they certainly seem to have lifted his spirits, so I really can't complain. It must be a boost to his confidence and self-esteem to have found such a group of loyal friends in such a short time.

I've spent most of the day watching them closely, Sheriff Jefferson's warning to "keep an eye" on him ringing in my head. If Cal is in danger I don't suppose any of his new found buddies will be the culprits though, they all seem to hang on his every word. Guy and girl alike all seem to melt in his wake. They are all very protective of him. He seems to instil that instinct in most people though. He has a delicate, shy and understated way about him that just charms the socks off everyone.

He certainly charmed me.

I was going to go out and join them, since I know most of them were there at the party last night and accepted my presence then. I can hear them currently

discussing where Cal is staying tonight though, and I hear some of them suggest alternative venues. I don't want to wait around to hear the rest, because of course he's going to choose to go and hang out with friends his own age instead of a jealous, grouchy old man like me. He must think I am such an old has been compared to what he could have.

I feel so damn helpless. What can I do though? I can't compete with his younger, fitter, more energetic friends. This was going to happen sooner or later, I'm just surprised it's happened so quickly and after such a promising night. Was it really just the whiskey talking when he said all those amazing things to me? Did he really just use me because I was there and willing?

I feel like such a fool.

Sarah and her team have cleared up, and my kitchen looks like new when I get back to my house. She's left some dinner out for me, enough for two, although I doubt Cal will be joining me any time soon.

I fill a plate with some food and get a beer from the refrigerator. I shut the refrigerator door with my shoulder and drop my plate in shock, since Cal is standing right there in front of me.

"Holy shit, fucking hell, Cal," I gasp.

He has this knack of sneaking up on you unawares. I swear he teleports. As I bend down to pick up the pieces, so does he, helpfully picking up pieces of food and bits of broken crockery.

"I'm getting quite good at doing this without cutting myself." He muses, which serves as a reminder to what he has been doing all day in his home: picking up the broken pieces of his life. We stand together and he hands me the last piece. I turn and dump the lot in the trash.

I turn back to face him and he is watching me with that intense, azure gaze that just has me in bits every time I see it. God, what is he doing to me?

"I'm sorry I scared you... again." He grimaces, and despite my irritation at being scared... again, I can't help the ghost of a half-smile.

"What are you doing here, Cal?" I ask him. He tips his head to one side.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, why aren't you on the deck with all of your friends?" They're all still there, I can hear them.

"Not all of my friends are there," he tells me, giving me a significant look. I can't even begin to hope what he means by that.

"Oh?" I raise my eyebrow coolly. I'm feeling petulant about being avoided the entire day. "Who isn't there? Pete?" I spit the name, making sure he sees my disapproval.

"No!" A momentary flash of confusion crosses his face.

Pete, from the party last night, has been attached to Cal's damn hip all day. I think he's going for the award for most supportive friend, although I did note with satisfaction that Cal shrugged Pete's arm from his shoulders on several occasions throughout the day. I have no idea why I want to be so petty about it now, but I'm hungry, and tired and irritable.

"Pete is over there already," Cal informs me. I snort derisively.

"Well there you go then, you have everyone you need." I walk away muttering about perfect Pete. I have my beer but no food because it just got dumped in the trash. Another reason to feel irritable.

"Jake!" he exclaims, since I realize I am not facing him and he can't see what I'm muttering. He follows me through to the living room where I slump down on my sofa but right in the middle, so he can't sit at his end as he normally does.

Instead, he stands, with his hands on his hips and regards me with an open mouth and wide eyes.

"What?" I ask him sullenly. "Would you mind moving, because you're in the way of the TV." I point the remote at him, but instead of moving he pulls the remote from my hand and throws it across the other end of the room. "Hey!" I shout.

"Speak to me!" he shouts back. "To my face." He is livid now. "If you are angry with me, tell me, don't walk away muttering about it because that's just rude."

"Oh, you're giving me a lesson in manners now, are you?" I ask archly, leaning back into my sofa cushions and taking a drink of my beer. "If that's the case why don't we discuss the fact that you've been avoiding me all day?"

He opens his mouth to speak, but shuts it, although his anger has disappeared, as suddenly as it flared, to be replaced with something that looks like remorse.

“Not much to say for yourself?” I ask him, and he simply stares at me, looking positively stricken now. “Great, now that we have that cleared up maybe you can get out of my way and I can watch some TV, and you can go back to your friends and Pete.” I emphasize Pete’s name with air quotes, then instantly regret it since I now sound like a jealous lover, and I’m neither of these because I’m not jealous of Pete, I know Cal doesn’t like him, and one night with this man does not make me his lover.

For a few more moments, Cal stands where he is, searching my face but finding only stony, cold sullenness because I’m too damn stubborn for my own good. He gives a slightly more than shaky sigh then turns to leave.

Okay, so maybe I was a little heavy handed there... Well, all right then, more than a little. Am I really going to let him leave, when he obviously came here to see me. I mean I’ve been trying to talk to him all day, desperate to hold him, as he picked up the pieces that was his home. Am I really going to push him away now out of pettiness?

I jump up from the sofa and leap across the room to dive in front of him before he gets through the door. He stops with a sharp gasp. His eyes flash with anger.

“I’m sorry!” I say, trying not to sound desperate.

“Get out of my way, Jake!” he demands, not even acknowledging my apology. Did he miss my words?

“I won’t get out of the way, no! I’m trying to apologize to you, Cal.”

He takes a deep breath then lets it go. His shoulders slump and he hangs his head.

“I’m sorry too. I acted like an ass,” he murmurs softly. When he looks up, his eyes are filled with tears. Oh god, I can resist anything but tears. My heart melts. “I’m sorry I was so pissed with you about the hangover,” he continues with a sniff. “I shouldn’t have been, and I’m sorry I avoided you all day but it was...” he takes a shaky breath, “...it was a self-preservation thing.” He bites his lip to stop it trembling, and I feel the rest of my internal organs melting as well.

I step closer to him and hook my finger beneath his chin, lifting him to face me.

“Self-preservation?” I ask him, wanting him to explain but thinking I probably know already. He swallows hard then nods.

“Avoiding you was the only way I could keep it all together. Every time you looked at me, I knew you wanted to ask if I was okay, hold me, tell me things would work out.” He wipes his hand across his eyes and swallows again. “And I wanted you to hold me so damn bad.” He sobs. “But I knew if you did that I would break down, and I didn’t want anyone there to see that I couldn’t cope.”

“Oh, my god,” I gasp, reaching up to touch his cheek. Feeling terrible for him and terrible that he felt he couldn’t let me be there for him. “Cal, no one there today would have thought any differently of you if you were upset. It’s your home that got trashed for god’s sake. Anyone else would be a wreck if it happened to them.” He nods, biting his lip.

“But no one else has anything to prove,” he tells me. I lay my hands on his shoulders and stroke down his arms.

“You have absolutely nothing left to prove, Cal.” I am suddenly bursting with pride for this strong-willed and determined young man. “You are twenty-one and living on your own when most kids your age would still be at home or at college living on junk food and parents’ handouts. Plus you are deaf and haven’t once asked for any help or special treatment because of it. You have the respect of the entire town.”

“And what about you?” he asks me, his eyes hooded, his expression hopeful.

I cup his chin in my hand and rub my thumb across his bottom lip.

“I think you’re amazing, sunshine,” I tell him and he smiles so brightly I think I might be blinded.

“Thanks, Jake,” he murmurs, a soft blush coloring his cheeks.

I can’t help myself as I lean in, tilt his chin back just a little and press my lips to his. They are as soft and as warm as they were last night and this morning. He moans quietly and wraps his arms around my neck, burying his fingers in my hair as he passes his tongue along my bottom lip opening my mouth to push inside.

He tastes of fresh mint and beer and he smells of Cal, just Cal.

I feel myself shiver as the sensation overload sends heat to my groin. His tongue brushes against mine, and I’m lost. God, I shouldn’t be doing this, he’s in a vulnerable state, like last night. He doesn’t need this. He needs a friend, and emotional support. My body doesn’t seem to have gotten the memo my

brain is sending it though, and the feelings I have for this man are threatening to shut down my conscious thoughts.

Suddenly the kiss heats up ten notches as he pushes me back against the doorframe, pressing his body the full length of mine. Our lips part and we regard each other breathlessly as his erection presses against mine. I can feel the heat of him through our pants, and all thoughts that this is wrong in any way are blasted from my head.

"You have no idea how much I have been thinking about doing this all day, Jake," he tells me breathlessly, his mouth pressing urgent wet kisses along my jaw and back to my lips. I give a short, helpless chuckle.

"I think I can guess." I breathe back between kisses. "I think it's probably as much as I have tried not to think about it." He frowns.

"Why would you be trying not to think about it, Jake?" I give him a goofy smile and look down towards my groin and his eyes follow my gaze.

My erection is tenting my sweat pants, which I've been wearing all day. He is in much the same position from the looks of it though.

"That is what I'm talking about," I say and he bites his lip, his eyes shining with vainly hidden delight. "Not the kind of thing that's acceptable for a forty-five-year-old man to be walking around with, really." He raises one eyebrow.

"So it's okay for a twenty-one-year-old?" he asks incredulously. "I've been trying to keep this baby down all day." I snort as he waves his hands over his obvious arousal. "I was even beginning to wish I'd worn those damn boxer shorts because they would have helped keep it hidden a little bit."

"Ha, see!" I bark as I poke a finger in his face. "Plaid cotton boxers are always a good choice."

Cal sniggers and grabs my finger before sucking it sensuously into his mouth and causing my breath to catch in my throat.

"Cal!" I hiss as the sensation sends shivers down my spine and turns my bones to liquid. "God you make me feel so good."

"Good, I want you to feel good," he tells me, his lips now pressed against my neck, his breath hot on my skin. "Why shouldn't you feel good, Jake?" He runs his tongue across the shell of my ear, and my knees almost give way as I buck my hips against his. "You make me feel good," he kisses my jaw, then stops, his lips millimeters away from mine, "So damn good."

He's driving me fucking crazy. I grab his arms and push him against the opposite side of the doorframe, crushing my lips to his in a frenzied, passionate kiss. He moans, pulling at my hair with his fingers, his tongue pushing so far inside my mouth I think he's trying to actually taste my tonsils.

He wraps his arms around my neck and jumps, wrapping his legs around my hips as I push him harder against the wall. My cock pushes up against his and we both gasp. He buries his face into my shoulder, his breaths ragged and urgent. Our cocks are trapped between our bodies as we rut. I grunt at the weight in my arms though.

"Jesus, you're heavy."

"Quit whining, Groucho, and take me to bed," he demands, although the effectiveness is lost when it ends in a strangled whimper as I thrust against him. "Aah, Jake, you have to take me to bed now, or I'm gonna come in my pants again, and if you make me do that again I'll be very annoyed." I chuckle.

"Gotta admit, it was pretty damn hot though," I whisper in a low tone that vibrates through him. I know it does because I feel him shiver with excitement.

"Oh god, you're so damn sexy, Jake. Bed, now!" he demands. I pull back with a frown.

"What about your friends?" I ask him. He clicks his tongue and rolls his eyes.

"They're not invited." He screws up his nose, and I chuckle.

"That's not what I meant asshole." I kiss his wrinkled nose as he giggles.

"They're long gone," he assures me. I guess I haven't heard anything for a while. I was just too busy to notice really. "I told them they could stay as long as they wanted, but that I was coming over here to screw my boyfriend and did anyone have any objection to that."

I laugh out loud.

"You liar, you did not." He raises his eyebrows.

"Jake, I had to do something to get Pete off my back. He was beginning to get on my nerves." I throw my head back and laugh helplessly, and he buries his face into my shoulder again, chuckling.

"Do you think they even believed you?" I ask incredulously, lifting his face to see.

"Of course they did," he tells me. "They all knew about us."

I gasp.

"What?"

I frown. "How?"

He shrugs. "Apparently, they all thought we've been screwing for weeks."

I gape at him, but he doesn't seem to be at all bothered by this. I can only think that my sister has had something to do with this revelation. She is the only one who suspected I'd already slept with Cal. She must have told someone, and that is how rumors begin.

"Doesn't matter, though." Cal kisses me. "It's true now." He smiles. "Or will be as soon as we get to bed." I chuckle and lean in for another kiss. As our tongues dance there is more gasping and rutting. My arms are beginning to get tired though.

"You'll have to walk there, Cal, because I don't think I can carry you all the way."

He huffs, and reluctantly drops his legs to the ground. Without warning, he tackles me, and I yelp as he hooks me over his shoulder in a fireman's lift.

"I can carry you though, old man." He laughs, then takes off at a jog for the bedroom.

All I can do is giggle uncontrollably because I don't think anyone's ever tried to carry me before. Damn he's strong. Something I tend to forget when he sometimes appears so vulnerable and small. He's almost as tall as me though, and he's definitely more fit because of his surfing and running.

We bump through my bedroom door, and he pauses at the bed then throws me down onto the mattress and falls down on top of me before I can catch my breath.

He stops himself with his arms on either side of my head, and for a moment, we regard each other breathlessly.

His eyes are shining, and his pupils so dilated the blue has completely gone. I guess mine are the same since I'm having trouble focusing. My breathing is coming in heavy, quick gasps, which catch when he slowly and deliberately thrusts his hips down onto mine.

His cock pushes alongside mine, and he bites his lip.

“Oh god, Jake,” he gasps. “We need to get naked right now.”

He jumps up and begins to pull off his clothes. He throws his T-shirt across my room and begins to push his pants down then regards me as I haven't yet made a move. I'm a little stunned to be honest, that I can possibly be so desirable to him. He's undressing in front of me though, and that's another reason to just sit and watch.

“Come on, Jake, what are you waiting for?” he asks. I raise one eyebrow.

“I was just enjoying the show,” I say, because I was, oh my, I was very much admiring the view. He actually blushes, and I get a demonstration of just how far down it does go. How can he be blushing after everything we've already done?

“God, Cal, you're so beautiful and sexy, good lord, you're sexy,” I gasp.

“So are you Jake.” He falls down beside me on the bed, finally shrugging off his sweat pants as I shuffle out of my T-shirt. He hooks a finger beneath the waistband of my pants and pulls them down to reveal my boxers beneath. “You're extremely sexy, but not...” he glances down at the plaid boxers and snorts, “...with these on.”

“Cheeky runt,” I snap at him as I sit up and shuffle out of my pants and boxers. He snorts again. “I happen to like these boxers so you're going to have to get used to them I'm afraid.”

With a surprised gasp, he grabs my shoulders and pushes me down onto my back, straddling me with his strong, firm legs. He leans in close.

“That implies I'll be getting to see quite a lot of those unsexy boxers in the future, Jake. Am I right?” he asks me.

I gasp and regard him with wide eyes. He realizes what he's asked me, and I realize what I've said, probably at the same moment because our eyes meet, and we hold our breaths for a second.

“I'm not a one night stand kind of guy, Cal,” I tell him softly, feeling suddenly exposed and vulnerable and a little spooked to be honest. Now's the time for truths though, I think. “I haven't done anything like this in a long time, and I certainly haven't met anyone in a long time that has made me feel anywhere near as good as you make me feel.” He seems to be holding his breath, so I continue as quickly as I can to help him start breathing again. “I really don't want this to be a one-time thing. I never did, even when I was thinking it might never happen at all.”

Cal leans in for a blistering, heated kiss, and we're naked, and our bodies are crushed together, our cocks knocking against each other causing my eyes to roll into the back of my head it feels so damn amazing.

"Oh my god, Cal," I breathe against the skin of his neck, and I know he can't hear me, but he can feel the heat of my breath and the movement of my lips against his skin.

"I always knew this would happen," Cal tells me as he comes up for air. "Even when I thought you were a creepy guy who stalked younger men in drugstores with baskets full of condoms."

"Holy shit!" I gasp, feeling my face flush with embarrassment as I remember the incident with crystal clarity. "That was completely unintentional, I promise you. I didn't look at what I was putting in my basket I was so busy watching you." I reach up and wrap my fingers around the back of his neck. "I couldn't take my eyes off you even then, you're so damn beautiful, Cal."

Cal sits back on his heels, tracing his fingers down my chest and abdomen before wrapping them slowly around my aching, twitching cock.

I groan, and buck my hips, finding his cock with my hand and doing the same.

"Aah, I hope you kept some of those condoms, Jake," Cal gasps, "because we're going to need some real soon."

"God, yes, I did, I mean..." I chuckle as he raises an eyebrow, "not those particular ones, obviously. I have some in the night stand, and lube."

"I have some too," he tells me, almost like a confession, although he could tell me he had murdered someone right now, and I wouldn't care. He has his hand around my cock.

"I left them in your guest bedroom." My eyes widen.

"You brought some last night?" I ask him. He nods with a grimace.

"Yeah, because I thought I might get lucky."

"At the nightclub?"

He frowns.

"No, dumba, with you!" He sounds incredulous and I snort.

"Sorry!" I feel a little bit overwhelmed that he was so certain we would finally end up in bed. I was so busy trying to think up reasons we shouldn't be

doing it, I didn't see the one massive reason why we should: because we both want it so much we can almost taste it.

He clambers off me and reaches across to my nightstand. I hear him rummage in the drawer and give a satisfied huff as he finds what he's looking for.

"Well supplied." He observes with approval as he resumes his position across my legs. He holds up the lube and a condom packet, his blue eyes shining. "Now then, who's going first?"

Well now, that opens up whole new realms of possibilities. He doesn't mind switching? I might have found my dream man. The thought of him inside me though, thrusting until he comes, hitting that sweet spot and making me scream... hmm, I think I could really go for that right now, my cock certainly thinks it could.

Cal's eyes widen at the violent twitch my erection just made.

"What the hell were you just thinking about?" he asks me in complete surprise, and I chuckle.

"Put that damn condom on and I'll show you."

Cal's pupils blow wide and dark and his cock twitches alongside mine. He leans down to capture my lips again, and we kiss slowly and sensuously. One of his hands runs down along the inside of my thigh, and I breathe his name softly as he switches from straddling me to kneeling between my legs.

He opens the bottle of lube and dribbles some on his fingers before hitching my leg over his arm so he has better access. This isn't his first time, this much is clear. He's done this before, and he's had a bit of practice.

I gasp as his fingertips rub around my opening before pushing slowly inside with two fingers, opening me up and thrusting further in with each push.

His eyes never leave my face, searching my expression for any sign that I'm not happy, but he won't find any because I am ecstatically, stupidly happy right now.

"Cal," I gasp as he widens his fingers inside me, twisting and bending them to search for the small knot of nerves that feels so good.

When my body almost lifts completely off the bed, he pulls out in shock until I grab his hand and try to pull him back inside me.

“Holy crap, don’t stop,” I gasp. “You hit the right spot, Cal, made me see stars.”

“I did?” he asks in wonder. “I never thought it would make you react like that.”

“You sound like you’ve never done this before.” He bites his lip, and regards me with wide eyes.

“Not this,” he confesses, and I gasp. How can he be so good? “I thought about it a lot. I read about it. Am I doing okay?”

I bite my lip and nod.

“Yes.” He hooks his fingers inside me again, and I yelp, “Yeeeeees!” He chuckles. “Shit, Cal, don’t stop there, keep going, fuck me, god, please just fuck me now.”

He laughs out loud and actually squeaks in delight before he positions himself at my entrance. He hitches my legs up, and I help by holding them out of his way until he, *oooh god*, until he, *holy shit*, pushes fully inside me.

Hnngh! It hurts a little, it burns but damn it feels good.

He waits for a few seconds, his breathing ragged. The feel of his full length inside me is incredible, and he looks so incredibly sexy, with his flushed cheeks and parted lips.

“S-so t-tight, Jake,” he hisses softly. “So turned on. I don’t think it’ll take much.”

“I don’t care,” I tell him, letting go of my legs and grabbing his face, pulling him down into an urgent kiss. “Whatever you do is great. God you feel so good.”

He starts to move, pulling out and pushing back in, slowly at first, but then a little faster. He shifts his angle a little, which has me crying out in pleasure as he lights me up from the inside.

“Oh god, Cal, yes,” I whisper tenderly. “Just like that, sunshine, oh god.”

He chuckles but his breath catches as his rhythm begins to falter.

“Jake!” he gasps and I hold his arms. “I’m close, oh shit.”

I fist my own cock in rhythm with his thrusts, he folds his fingers around mine to help, and suddenly, I’m coming, spewing great warm strands of semen

across my stomach and our hands. My vision blurs, and I gasp for breath as my body loses control and shudders violently with the force of my orgasm.

He yells out desperately, and his body convulses against mine. I feel him throbbing inside me as he comes.

He gives one last shuddering thrust then collapses, boneless, on top of me, his face buried in my shoulder whispering my name the entire time.

Eventually, and slowly as I hiss at the sensation, he pulls out, catching the condom and knotting it before throwing it somewhere.

“Cal!” I protest with a frown.

“What?” he asks. “I wasn’t going to leave it there,” he promises. “I’ll get it in a minute, or tomorrow maybe.”

I shift him off me with a chuckle and leave the bed to get a towel, retrieving the condom as I go.

Back on the bed, I wipe us both down and lie back into the pillows where Cal joins me, draping his sweat-drenched body across mine in much the same way as he had lain last night.

He plants soft warm kisses along my collarbone and I sigh contentedly stroking his soft hair and then his smooth, muscular arm where it lies across my chest.

“This isn’t a one-time thing, Jake,” he tells me quietly. He doesn’t want me to reply because he doesn’t lift his head, so I listen. “This is a long time thing.”

I tighten my hold on him, and I feel him smile against my chest.

“I know!” I whisper back into his hair, then I pull him so he can see as I repeat: “I know.”

With a soft, contented moan, he lays his head back onto my chest. His fingers trace lines down my chest, toying with the curls at the base of my spent cock. I gasp as his fingertips brush the over sensitive skin and I feel his own cock twitch back into life against my thigh.

Oh god, I’d forgotten how quickly you can recover when you’re twenty-one. I think I might be in for a long night.

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Chapter Sixteen

Sunshine

I don't remember having slept so well; especially considering I've spent most of the night making love to Cal.

He is draped possessively across me in the same position as yesterday morning the only difference this morning is that we are in my bed, and hopefully not in danger of any rude awakening.

Everything that could be done to tidy up and secure Cal's house was accomplished yesterday thanks to the hard work of everyone that came to help out. Today we have a break because the windows and doors won't come for about a week at least.

The very thought of waking up with Cal's warm body draped across me like this every morning for a week is threatening to undo me as I lie here. I could quickly get used to this. I really could. I feel claimed, like a prized possession, and I feel so stupidly happy about it it's unreal.

It's the way he does it that fascinates and thrills me. He does it so naturally, without thinking. It's not planned or manipulative it's simply his nature. He doesn't bend me to his will, he simply has to look at me, and I melt at his feet.

My arms wrap around him tightly, and he moans softly as he begins to rouse from what seems to be a deep sleep. I always tagged him as a light sleeper. He always seems so full of energy and alert during the day. I wonder if it's just when he's with me that he sleeps so deeply.

Speaking of energy, he certainly drained mine last night. I'm so bushed now I can't even muster up a physical reaction to his closeness. I suspect he will be the opposite. He'll wake up raring to go. I think I might have to start working out.

Oh god, what if I can't keep up with him though? What if he realizes the age gap means more than just funny looks and assumptions that he's brought his dad with him when we go out? I am twenty-four years older than him, and I know he doesn't care, he told me he thinks it's hot that I know so much more than him, but being older and wiser isn't always an advantage. Being older can be a disadvantage when you need to keep up with Cal.

The warm body in my arms begins to stir, and I stroke my hands gently across his shoulders and down his back and arms, burying my face in his sun-bright hair and taking a deep breath to take in his heady, spicy scent.

I hear him snort, then he lifts his head to look at me, his eyes heavy with sleep but shining brightly.

“Morning!” he croaks. I can’t help the wide, happy smile that spreads across my face. He is just so lovely.

“Good morning, sunshine,” I reply, my voice equally as hoarse, although I’m not really surprised after the amount of times he made me scream last night. I never knew I could make some of the noises he managed to wring from me in the throes of passion. Passion I haven’t felt in a very long time.

“What’s the plan today then, Jake?” Cal asks with an intense frown.

He lifts his head to look at me and wait for my answer.

I lazily brush some of his hair behind his ear and caress his sleep-flushed cheek.

“What do you mean, sunshine?” I ask him with a smile. He leans against my hand with a soft moan.

“Why do you call me that?” he asks curiously.

“Because that’s what you are, Cal,” I tell him. “You’re my sunshine.”

That only begins to cover what I feel though. When I look at him, I see sunshine, and stars and light and energy and such beauty.

“Oh!” He sighs contentedly. “Okay!” He lies back down on my chest. “I think you might be mine too.”

I think my heart is going to beat out of my chest.

He holds onto me as if he is afraid I will move and leave him cold, and I hold him equally as tightly to let him know I’m not going anywhere. He lifts his head again.

“Answer my first question,” he demands gently.

“The plan for today is to do what the hell we want, Cal. Did you have anything to add to that?” He smiles.

“I think I need to go shopping for clothes,” he muses with a grimace, and I nod sadly.

“Yes, you probably do, although I certainly do not mind you borrowing mine.”

He grimaces again. “Oh what?” I prop myself up on my elbows. “My plaid cotton boxer shorts are just too much for you are they?”

He giggles, his eyes sparkling with mischief.

“I prefer boxer briefs.” I hold up my hand to stop him, he pulls it down with a silent snort, and plants a kiss to my palm.

“Okay, stop right there,” I tell him. “I can’t listen to any more talk about underwear or we’ll never get out of bed.”

“I never knew you had such a fetish for boxers, Jake.” Cal giggles.

“Only when there’s a possibility of you wearing them.” I grab his shoulders and push him down into the pillows. He gives a cry of surprise as I do, which turns into a giggle that I just love to hear. “I could listen to that giggle all day, Cal,” I tell him.

“Well you better get used to it, old man, because you’re the only one that makes me giggle like that,” he whispers, pulling me down into a kiss that threatens to send me spiraling out of control again, in a way I would never have thought possible after the amount of times we shared each other last night.

“I thought you wanted to go shopping.” He regards me with one cocked eyebrow as if offering a challenge.

“I do,” he says indignantly.

“Well, I think that might be a good idea, since I think my body will implode if we have sex again.”

Cal rolls his eyes and chuckles. “Come on, then, let’s get showered and go out. We can get breakfast at Lou-Anne’s.”

He disappears into the bathroom for a shower before I can call him out for being so damn bossy. I am a little relieved he didn’t pursue another steamy sex session just yet though, because I really do think I need some time to recover. I actually think I might need a week after the amount of times we fucked each other.

His candid question about what position we both like, has been well and truly answered I think.

An hour later, we are in town, drinking coffee and eating donuts at Lou-Anne's coffee shop, both sitting in the window booth rather gingerly and exchanging sparkling knowing glances as we both know why we are sitting so carefully.

Lou-Anne has taken a break and is now helping Cal to plan which store to visit first, and there seems to be an awful lot of giggling seemingly at my expense. I'm sure I hear the word plaid in there at some point.

They are not being very nice! I keep shooting Lou-Anne warning looks and she keeps sticking her tongue out at me.

Mature!

Suddenly, the coffee shop is full of Cal's surfing buddies. It's spring break and they have all decided to meet for coffee before going off surfing. They join us in the window booth, but there is definitely not enough room for them here. Cal gives me an apologetic look as he's swept off to a booth in the corner. I watch him go with a reassuring smile and a nod. I know he's not about to be stolen away from me, I think even Pete has gotten the message that he's off limits.

There seems to be a lot of giggling at my expense from the booth as well, with Cal being the main instigator as far as I can see. I'm sure I can guess what the subject is.

What the hell is wrong with plaid cotton boxer shorts?

Lou-Anne is regarding me with a curious expression on her face.

"What?" I ask, a little more sullenly than I intended because I'm scowling.

"I think it's sweet," she tells me with a wistful look in her eyes. I roll my eyes and sip my coffee, trying not to smirk.

"Oh please!" I snort although I don't bother to hide my smirk.

She chuckles and nudges me along the bench so she can sit beside me instead of opposite.

"So come on, spill the beans," she urges excitedly.

I sniff disdainfully at her unsubtle attempt to get information. "I do not kiss and tell, Lou-Anne." She gives a delighted giggle and nudges me again.

"So you at least kissed then."

"Lou-Anne!" I exclaim, feeling my face flush hot.

"Hush," she soothes me. "I'm just... I'm happy for you. You seem so good together."

"You think so?" I ask with a slightly troubled expression on my face. She regards me curiously.

"You don't?" I shrug, biting my lip. "Is it still the age gap thing?" she asks me and I nod, indicating the booth where Cal is sitting with his new friends looking more happy and relaxed than I have ever seen him.

"Look at him, Lou-Anne, he's gorgeous, and so popular. Why would he choose me when he could have anyone and someone closer to his age that could be so much better for him?"

"Oh my god, Jake," Lou-Anne gasps. "He chose you because he's completely crazy about you. That much I saw at the party two nights ago."

"I'm completely crazy about him," I tell her. She pinches my arm gently as she stands.

"I know!" She chuckles. "Do you want another coffee?"

"Hmm, thanks, Lou," I hum in approval of her offer.

While she is away getting me another cup I take the opportunity to fall back on my Cal watching habit that I don't seem to be able to break. The more I get of him the more I think I need. He's like a drug. Is he really crazy about me?

He looks over and sees me watching. I should look away, but I can't. It's like I was waiting for him to see me. Far from being annoyed that I'm stalking him he seems somehow reassured that I'm watching his every move. He smiles shyly but follows it with a jaunty wink, before turning back to his friends. Well that just sums him up completely. That shy smile hides a very different natured young man when we're alone together. I feel a little thrill to think that I am the only one that sees him when he's dominating, confident and tenacious when the rest of the world sees him as shy and adorably charming. Oh, he's that with me as well, but the cockiness is winning over the shyness as I suspected it would. I quite like it actually.

"Excuse me, are you Jacob Reuben, the-the writer?" a voice asks tentatively from behind me and I turn to see a man about my age, a little shorter than me, and with greying hair, standing just at my side looking like a nervous wreck.

“Er, yes I am,” I say, trying not to sigh as I do.

This happens every now and then. I don't advertise where I live. I like my private life and my author life to be kept separate, but some determined readers do manage to find me. I don't mind really, since it happens so infrequently as to never be a nuisance. Even if it happened frequently, I still wouldn't mind. It always fascinates me that anyone would want to come all this way to discuss my work.

“Do you mind if I join you, Mr. Reuben?” the man asks politely, and I smile as I indicate for him to sit.

“Be my guest.” I try to sound as friendly as I can and he takes the seat opposite me.

Lou-Anne brings me my coffee and regards the man sitting opposite with a raised eyebrow.

“Can I get you anything?” she asks a little coolly, which surprises me because she's not usually like that with customers.

Is she annoyed he has taken her seat? She knows she's welcome to join me. The man orders a coffee as well and Lou-Anne leaves, with a short, irritable huff of breath, to get it for him. I am a little distracted by her unusual behavior but I remember my manners and turn to the man opposite me.

“Now what can I do for you, erm...” I leave it hanging since the man hasn't introduced himself.

“Oh!” he smiles, regarding me with piercing, blue eyes that do not reflect his smile. His nerves seem to have disappeared as well. There's something about this man that is not quite right. He seems false somehow. He reaches his hand across the table.

“I'm Jackson,” he tells me, “Jackson Steele.”

The name shocks me into glancing anxiously over the man's shoulder to where Cal is sitting with his friends as I distractedly take the man's offered hand. It can't be a coincidence, this man's name, it can't be.

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Chapter Seventeen

A Confrontation

As I shake Jackson Steele's hand, I notice Cal is no longer sitting where he had been in the booth, and his friends have all fallen rather notably silent. They are all pointedly not looking in my direction, drinking their coffees and looking for all as if they are enjoying a quiet morning break. They were before, but now there's nothing natural about the way they are sitting, as if they're all playing a part and they're all very tense and nervous. I have a moment of panic and consider getting up when I feel a gentle hand on my shoulder.

"Your coffee, sir." Lou-Anne's stilted, clipped tone shocks me into turning back to face who I am almost certain is Cal's uncle, especially considering the fact that Cal has disappeared.

Where the hell is he? As Lou-Anne places the coffee in front of Steele, she catches my eye and places a paper napkin deliberately but casually in front of me. Her eyes flick significantly down to it and I glance at it as calmly as I can. There's a hastily scribbled note.

Cal's safe, he's hidden in the back of the booth.

I crumple up the napkin and turn my attention back to the man in front of me, feeling relieved that Cal is being protected by his friends but also filled with trepidation because I have no idea what his uncle would want with me. My heart is suddenly beating twice as fast in my chest.

"What can I do for you, Mr. Steele?" I ask, hoping my voice is steadier than the rest of me.

I'm feeling much less friendly and actually a little queasy because this is the man who strikes fear into Cal's eyes just thinking about him. He's the one that has spent the last four years telling Cal he is not capable of living on his own, undermining his confidence, trying to take control of his life, trying to steal his money.

"Actually Mr. Reuben," Steele begins, "I was hoping I could offer you some help or at the very least, some advice."

"Oh?" I tip my head to one side. "What kind of help or advice did you have in mind?"

Steele smiles, there is no emotion in that smile, only ice. It leaves me cold. If this guy played poker, he'd be unstoppable.

I search the man's face for some sort of family resemblance to Cal. The man's eyes are blue, but where Cal's are a warm sapphire, this man's are hard steel with no hint of any kind of laughter hovering in the background. There's no hint or indication that this man even knows how to smile with his eyes.

Steele leans forwards and lowers his voice, as if he is divulging a secret, or trying to be covert.

"You know my nephew." He doesn't ask me, he states it, meaning he already knows. It almost sounds like an accusation, as if it is meant to unsettle me, put me on my guard. I am certainly feeling defensive.

"Perhaps," I say lightly, in full defense mode, giving nothing away. I can play poker too. "I know a lot of people."

Steele narrows his eyes, and there's a flash of anger, but he recovers quickly.

"My nephew is Calvin Steele, or Cal as you've probably been told to call him, and you do know him, Mr. Reuben, you live next door to him." He sits back in his seat in triumph as if he has won a point against me.

I lean back in mine.

"Now, then, Mr. Steele," I raise one eyebrow in disapproval, "you have me at a slight disadvantage, since you seem to know more about me than I know about you." This is not exactly true, but it seems like a good card to play.

"I have my sources." Steele plays, raising me a slimy, false smile that makes me like the man less and less every time I see it. He leans to his side, reaching down into a brief case he has on the floor.

When he sits back up, he places an envelope on the table in front of me. He's raising the stakes and since I have nothing to play at this time I bide my time, giving him as little reaction as I possibly can. He's seen my interest, however mild, in the envelope though. I see another flash of triumph in Steele's eyes, it's his tell, since he thinks he's holding a winning hand, if he was playing poker with me he would have lost by now.

"My wife and I became Calvin's guardians when he was seventeen," Steele explains to me as he taps the envelope possessively like it's his trump card, and he's simply waiting for the right time to play it.

I tip my head, and keep my poker face in place. I don't have a tell.

"His parents died tragically," Steele continues, although this information does not produce any kind of emotion in his expression or tone. "His father was my older brother. Calvin had no other family so he needed to be in the care of an adult until he came of age."

This much I already know, from Cal's perspective. What I'm curious about is the envelope and what that has to do with the story.

"What became increasingly apparent when my wife and I took Calvin on was that he had been most horribly indulged by his parents." Steele continues to tap the envelope making me think he is doing it to keep me distracted. "I didn't get on well with my brother, Mr. Reuben. He had strange ideas about how life should be lived. He was always a reckless boy and young man, and Calvin inherited this reckless, rebellious and stubborn streak."

I want to laugh in this guy's face. Cal? Reckless and rebellious? He's determined, and strong willed, but reckless? I've seen him surf, he's fearless. Is this what Steele means? All the things he sees as negative personality traits, I have only ever seen as positives.

"Calvin was supposed to stay with us until he reached his twenty first birthday, at which time he would legally inherit his parents' estate and be able to live independently. What we discovered was that Cal was completely incapable of living independently. His deafness has only compounded the problem."

"Mr. Steele." I lean forward now, with a deep frown on my face. "I wonder if you can actually be talking about the same Cal." Steele frowns now. "You see, the Cal I know is very capable and doesn't appear to need any help whatsoever to live independently."

Steele's frown disappears, and he pats the envelope again as if it is his life line.

"Oh Mr. Reuben, how wrong you are. You see I know for a fact you've been helping him. Perhaps you may see it as being neighborly when really you haven't been helping his case for independence at all. You were seen bringing him into town. You've been seen taking him out at night. And I also know he has spent several nights sleeping at your house rather than his own. These are all indications that he isn't ready to live alone. My wife and I do not wish him to be an inconvenience to anyone, so I have come to take him home where he belongs."

I sigh and take a breath to speak, then stop, feeling a little baffled by this man's attitude and his interpretation of Cal's and my actions over the last few weeks. Not to mention the fact that this man knows all these things in the first place.

"Mr. Steele," I begin. "I'm a little bit confused." I take another deep breath. "I am very curious to know how you actually found all these things out."

Steele nods in acknowledgement.

"Yes, yes, of course you would be, I can understand that." He takes a breath and a sip of his coffee. "Calvin left us just before his twenty first birthday; about a month before. He went to live with one of the lawyers who is another executor of his parents' will. My wife and I were not very happy, but you know how lawyers are, they twist the law to mean what they want. They got themselves declared Cal's legal guardian saying it was for his protection, and we couldn't do a thing about it. Since then we have been building a case, with the help of a private detective, to get Calvin returned to us."

"But he's twenty-one now," I blurt out, forgetting the game altogether. "You can't make him go anywhere. He doesn't need a legal guardian anymore."

"Oh, but we believe that he does, Mr. Reuben, because of his disability and because of the other problems that prevent him from making sensible decisions about his life and the way he spends his money."

"I don't think there is a court anywhere that would decide those things about Cal." I lean forwards and look Steele directly in the eye. "I know what you're trying to do, Mr. Steele, and I have to tell you that Cal is happy here, he's popular and well-liked. Not once has anyone here thought he needed any extra help nor has he ever asked for any. He's definitely never been in any kind of trouble."

"I beg to differ, Mr. Reuben, I know for a fact he was arrested just three weeks ago, for suspected car theft and for resisting arrest."

"You need to get your facts right then, because he was driving that car with the permission of the owner."

"Oh?" Steele still looks annoyingly smug although his cool, smug exterior is beginning to crack just a little.

"The car was mine," I tell him.

“Really!” Steele leans away from me looking as if he concedes this one point but is searching for the next one to gain.

“And resisting arrest?”

“A misunderstanding on our Sheriff’s behalf. Sheriff Jefferson made a full apology the next day.”

“Mr. Reuben, I can understand why you would be trying to defend Cal. He can be very charming when he wants to be. But the advice I came here to give you was not about Cal, it was aimed at you specifically.”

I frown and the man opens the envelope he’s had his hand so possessively covering and slides out several large photographs which he passes across the table to me.

“I’m a little worried that Cal’s deviances may in some way damage your reputation as a well-renowned author, Mr. Reuben.”

I stare down at the set of four photographs. They’ve been taken with a long distance lens, so the pictures are slightly grainy, having been blown up to a large size. One is of Cal holding out his hand to me as I lie on my back in the ivy below my decking. One is of us talking on my deck; another of us here in the coffee shop and the last, most intrusive of all, is of us kissing two nights ago on our shared drive the night Cal discovered his break in.

“What is this?” I ask Steele, feeling decidedly defiled and very angry that my life and Cal’s has been so intruded upon. “Why do you even have these? How do you even have these?”

Steele smiles his most slimy, smarmy, oily smile yet.

“Oh we have many more, Mr. Reuben, and we will not hesitate to distribute them if you don’t agree to help us in returning Cal to his family.”

All bets are suddenly off. This man is taking things too far. My poker face has gone out of the window. “Are you trying to blackmail me?” I ask, incredulously. Steele shakes his head.

“No!” he gasps, I don’t believe him, I’m not supposed to. “I’m trying to warn you. Your relationship with Cal could seriously damage your career.” He sounds calm, even reasonable, he really does believe what he’s saying will have some sort of effect on me. “I’m sure you don’t want the world to know that you share his homosexual deviances, Mr. Reuben.”

I actually do bark out a laugh this time, loud and unrestrained. This guy is unreal. Who the hell talks this way nowadays? This attitude belongs back in the dark ages. I lived through a generation of bigotry and prejudice and thought I'd left it all behind. Steele takes my reaction as an expression of helpless shock though.

"I'm sorry to be so heavy handed, but Cal just won't speak to us, and since you seem to know him so well, we thought you would be persuaded to speak on our behalf."

"I'll do no such thing," I spit, sitting up straight. Steele smiles sadly, although I can see a flash of excitement in his eyes, as if he is enjoying this immensely. The smug, slimy, contemptible bastard!

"Then you leave me no choice," he sighs, a look of false regret on his face. "I will be uploading these pictures to every social media site and every author web page where your name is mentioned. Your name will be mud by the end of the day, Mr. Reuben. I'm sure you know how quickly these rumors spread nowadays."

I don't actually, because I have no interest in social media, but that's beside the point. I think he believes he has me over a barrel. I lean forward as much as I can without getting in the man's face. Deliberately and slowly, I slide the photographs back across the table without my eyes leaving his.

"You go right ahead," I tell him, calling his bluff, not that it would make any difference to my career whatsoever. "If you'd done your research properly, Mr. Steele, you'd know that I am not only a very well-respected writer, but also, an openly gay one, who was happily married to another man for ten years until he died thirteen years ago. Your warning and your threat to *out* me, I'm afraid, has come, ooh let's see..." I roll my eyes as if I'm doing some calculations. "...about twenty five years too late. The whole world already knows." Steele's face pales slightly. "So you can take those damn photographs and shove them up your oily, despicable little ass."

He puffs out air through his nose as his metal-cold eyes narrow. He moves to take the photos but I stop him, sliding the one of Cal and I kissing, back towards me.

"Not that one though," I tell him, suddenly knowing exactly what I can do and say for maximum impact. "Because I like that one. Think I might get it framed actually, and give it pride of place in my living room. It's not often you

get a record of a first kiss, Mr. Steele, but that kiss was a damn good one, and if you'd be so kind as to give me the name of the photographer I'd like to thank him personally for preserving it in print for us to enjoy forever." I take that photo back, and he snatches the other ones away in disgust. "Now, where to go from here."

I sit back in my seat with my hands in front of my face, drumming my fingers together thoughtfully. I regard Steele with narrowed eyes as he becomes increasingly less composed.

"I'm sure our Sheriff would be very pleased to know that you were attempting to blackmail me," I inform him casually, enjoying his attempt to hide his squirm. "You do know it is actually a crime don't you? Poor Sheriff Jefferson, he doesn't get much intrigue to deal with around here. I'm also sure he'd be thrilled to know that you had a photographer on hand at the time Cal's house was completely trashed, perhaps he took some photographs of that, or maybe he saw something while he was waiting in hiding for us to appear. I'm sure you could help him a great deal with that investigation as well." I give Steele a significant look, and he does actually manage to look guilty, which confirms our suspicions that he was involved with the break in. I don't think I see any remorse in his eyes. I take out my phone. "I think I might just call the Sheriff right now," I make the comment casual but my actions are decisive.

Steele looks positively stricken now as his eyes dart in panic towards the door.

"That's right, Mr. Steele," I tell him without looking up from my phone. "That's where the door is. I suggest you walk through it now. I suggest you leave town and don't come back. Cal doesn't need you, and if you're in any way worried he won't be looked after, let me assure you I will take very good care of all of his needs." I give him a wicked grin and flick my eyebrows suggestively. "Especially his deviant ones."

Steele stands, recoiling from me, unable to hide his disgust, his expression is livid, his face pale.

"I knew there would be no reasoning with you," he hisses. "Your kind are all the same. I feel sorry for you, Mr. Reuben, and you can tell Calvin he will be hearing from our lawyers very soon. He will be coming back to us. Once he is away from your bad influence, I'm sure he will thank us for saving him from a life of deviance and sin. You can rest assured, I won't be leaving town without him."

I can't help the derisive laugh that escapes my mouth as I also stand, enjoying the fact that I am at least three inches taller than this man, and I feel a sense of satisfaction when I see a flicker of panic in his eyes as he realizes this. "I think you might have a very long wait then, Mr. Steele, because I don't think he wants to go."

Steele regards me with narrowed eyes, but his smug, self-satisfied expression is back.

"With all due respect, Mr. Reuben, you are not the best qualified person to answer that question." Steele sniffs disdainfully. "I would like to ask Calvin that myself."

I am about to answer when I see a flicker of movement out of the corner of my eye. I turn to my side just as Cal steps from behind me.

"Uncle Jackson," he says, his voice calm, but I can see the tension in his shoulders, the knots in the muscles of his back. I want to reach out to him, but I know this is not the right moment. He already knows I'm right there by his side whatever he is going to say or do, I see that in the look he gives me before he turns back to glare at his uncle.

"Calvin!" Steele sighs, opening his arms in an attempt to seem relieved and welcoming. Cal just stares at the open arms, staying right by my side, until, with an uncomfortable clearing of his throat, Steele lowers his hands. "Calvin it's so good to see you are safe and well, especially after what has happened to you over the last few days."

Cal narrows his eyes.

"No thanks to you, Uncle Jackson," he hisses, his body taut with anger.

Steele affects a look of innocence, but I saw the anger flash in his eyes at Cal's rebuke.

"I have no idea what lies this man here has been feeding you, but your aunt and I have had nothing to do with what has been going on here. This town is not a safe place for you, Calvin. Look what happened to your home."

"You were there?" Cal asks. "You saw what happened?"

Steele nods sadly.

"So you must have seen how many people came to help me after it happened then," Cal adds. Steele frowns.

"All with a guilty conscience I think," he judges. Cal shakes his head.

"The only person here who should have guilt on their conscience is you, Uncle Jackson." Cal points a finger. "You are the one that's been feeding me lies, undermining me at every turn and trying to control me so you can control my money."

"Calvin!" Steele gasps, it's almost an angry snap, and I do not miss Cal's imperceptible flinch. I move closer to him, ever so slightly. "You know that's not true. Your aunt and I only ever had your best interests at heart." Cal gives a derisive snort.

"The only interests you were ever worried about were your own," he spits. "You and Aunt Leslie were only ever concerned with how to get around the limits that were set on you when it came to spending *my* money."

Steele steps forward, and I think I see several bodies dotted about the coffee shop that all move in response, tensing, ready to jump in if we need any help. Cal moves back, his shoulder pressing back against mine. I don't waver, my body providing a firm solid wall for him to lean on.

"That money should have been mine," Steele hisses. "I should have had it all." His fists clench in anger, his eyes are wild with fury. "None of it should have gone to you, you're an abomination that should never have been born: my brother's punishment for living his life the way he did."

Cal gives a strangled gasp, but the noise is lost in the collective gasp from me and everyone else in the coffee shop who can hear since he is now shouting.

I've heard enough though. I step forward and place a hand on Steele's shoulder, turning him before he can argue. Grabbing his arm with my other hand, I frog march him towards the door.

"What do you think you're doing? Get your filthy hands off me." Steele's face is now red with apoplexy.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Steele, but I think you've said everything you need to say, and it's time you left." He shrugs me away from him when we reach the door, and he makes a show of brushing himself down.

He gives me a dismissive, filthy look then turns his gaze to Cal, who has followed me, providing my back-up this time.

"You're an abomination Calvin, a product of an abnormal home and deviant parentage. I'll see you and all your deviant friends burn in hell."

"I'd rather burn in hell by Jake's side than spend an eternity in paradise with you, Uncle Jackson. That's my idea of hell."

Steele sneers and curls his lip. He raises his fist as if to strike Cal. I feel myself moving to intervene although my brain is on fire as Cal's words echo in my head, *by Jake's side; by Jake's side*.

Steele is poised, ready to throw the first punch when we hear a booming voice.

"I'd think twice about that if I were you, mister." Sheriff Jefferson's tone is unbending, no nonsense, and his presence is as large as ever. His over ample form completely fills the doorway he has just emerged through. I've never wanted to kiss the bombastic, pompous ass so much in my entire life.

Steele lowers his fist and steps away from Cal as if he'd been pulled by some unseen force. Jefferson steps to the side, unblocking the exit.

"Jackson Steele, I believe." Jefferson sneers. Steele gives him an ice-cold glare, "Cat got your tongue?" Jefferson snaps. Steele flinches. "I asked you your name."

"Yes!" Steele hisses sullenly through his teeth.

"SIR!" Jefferson bellows, his face red with rage. "The correct response, Mr. Steele, is: YES SIR!" Steele flinches again and mutters the correct response.

Damned if that wasn't the hottest thing I've ever seen, apart from Cal sprawled out naked on my bed of course.

"It's time you left, Mr. Steele," Jefferson tells him. "I think you'd better make sure you're out of town within the hour, or you might find yourself under arrest."

"On what charge?" Steele sneers. Jefferson grabs the front of his shirt.

"On any charge I damn well want because I'm the law round here." He throws Steele back, releasing his hold. "Now get outta here before I decide to arrest you right now!"

Steele stumbles in his attempt to get out of the door as fast as he can.

Jefferson takes out his radio and speaks briefly to one of his deputies giving a description of Cal's uncle and asking him to make sure he leaves town, then he turns to us, his apparent anger suddenly gone.

“You guys okay?” he asks in a concerned tone. We both nod.

Cal’s mouth has fallen open, and I think he had the same response to the Sheriff’s handling of his uncle as I did. We exchange amused glances before we are suddenly surrounded by well-wishers as the entire coffee shop erupts with applause for us and for Jefferson.

“Okay now, that’s enough, everyone settle down. Give the men some space.” Jefferson waves his hands in a calming motion. “Lou-Anne,” he calls, as he ushers Cal and I to an empty booth by the window. “Bring us some o’ those delicious donuts and some of your best coffee. I think we all need a sugar boost.”

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Chapter Eighteen

Coffee and Donuts

Jefferson's order of donuts and coffee is welcome, and after the adrenaline rush of confronting Cal's uncle the sugar boost is definitely needed.

I tell Jefferson everything that Steele said to me. He's especially interested in the fact that Steele had employed a private detective to take photographs of us. I show him the photograph I managed to keep. It's an intimate and obvious intrusion of our privacy, but it does show that there was perhaps a witness to what happened to Cal's house. Jefferson asks to keep the print, and I try to ignore Cal's shocked but pleased expression when I ask him to look after it because I'd like it back.

It's a nice picture, a nice memory, despite the circumstances under which it was taken.

"When Uncle Jackson walked through the door I froze," Cal explains his part of the story. "I think the others thought I was having some kind of fit. When I told them who Jackson was they pulled me to the back of the booth where I was hidden from his view."

I make a note to thank Cal's friends for their quick thinking. They've gone now, but they promised to call round to my house later. I rest my hand over Cal's to steady it because, despite his uncle having left, he is still trembling and wide-eyed.

"He's gone now," I assure him. "He won't be back, the Sheriff will make certain of that. You're safe here." He flashes me a grateful smile and leans his head on my shoulder. I glance at the Sheriff for confirmation of what I've said.

Jefferson's mouth is full of donut so he can't reply, but he grunts an affirmative and waves his hands about as he nods enthusiastically. I see Cal's mouth twitch slightly, and he meets my eye with a flicker of mirth in his. I have to look away because Jefferson is providing a very effective distraction from the trauma of the morning and I feel the urge to laugh hysterically myself.

There is a call on Jefferson's radio, and the Sheriff stuffs the last piece of donut in his mouth before standing.

"Gotta take this outside boys." He mumbles, spraying crumbs and causing Cal to cover a snort by coughing. I helpfully pat him on the back feeling my eyes burn with tears of mirth.

Jefferson leaves us to finish our coffee. As soon as the door closes, we're both reduced to snorts of helpless laughter.

"Well now, that's a sight for sore eyes," Lou-Anne tells us, smiling at our hysterics, as she clears Jefferson's mess from the table. "Sheriff Jefferson can be quite entertaining sometimes, when he wants to be and sometimes when he doesn't even realize."

"He sure can," I agree. She leaves us with a wink and goes back behind her counter.

Once she's gone and we're finally alone, I take Cal's hands in mine and meet his earnest, clear gaze.

"Are you okay?" I search his face with concern. He smiles weakly and nods.

"I'm fine," he assures me, although I think that might just be a default response. "What about you? You're the one that had to deal with my uncle, which..." he turns his hand so that he can link his fingers with mine, "I am very grateful for Jake." He looks down, and I feel my heart flicker as he blushes. "I think you might be my hero."

"Huh, you just think?" My eyes search his face, smiling. He gasps and lays his hand on my cheek.

"I mean I know you are, you are, definitely," he splutters, then smiles tenderly as I chuckle at his back stepping. "My hero!" he whispers softly before leaning forward to press his lips to mine.

I pull him to me with a moan, deepening the kiss, not worrying how many people can see us.

Someone clears their throat, and we jump apart.

"Well now," Jefferson is standing regarding us with a twinkle in his eye, "sorry to interrupt but I thought you both oughtta know that one of my deputies followed Jackson Steele out o' town, but the guy hasn't gone far, he's staying at a motel about ten miles from here."

Cal tenses by my side. I squeeze his hand reassuringly.

"It's on the other side of town to you two so he'd have to come through here before he got to you, we'll be looking out for him. I assure you he won't get anywhere near either of you. Once I've brought him in for some questioning, he'll be sent packing for good."

"Thank you, Sheriff," I say gratefully.

"Least I can do for this special guy." Jefferson leaves us with a wink at Cal and a nod to me.

"I'm not special," Cal exclaims in surprise once the Sheriff is gone, although his face has flushed adorably pink.

I hold his face in my hands so he definitely does not miss one word I want to say to him.

"Yes you are, Cal," I tell him with so much passion I feel weak inside. "You are so very special, I've always thought so. Don't let anyone tell you any different, especially not that damn uncle of yours."

"You heard what he said, though, Jake?" he asks me with a frown, and I nod.

"I can assure you that no one here feels that way. No one here will give any of your uncle's words a second thought."

Cal looks relieved but unsettled. I suppose if he's spent four years being told all that crap by his uncle it's going to take a while to undo the damage.

"He was okay at first, my uncle," Cal tells me, as if he's searching for some kind of positive about the guy, "but he showed his true colors when he realized he couldn't influence me the way he thought he could. After that he took every opportunity to make sure I knew how he felt about me and my parents." God his life with that man must have been terrible.

"Didn't your aunt ever intervene when your uncle started saying those things?" Cal shakes his head.

"She was just as bad," he says sadly.

"Oh Cal!" I sigh, taking his hand in mine and rubbing my thumb across the back of it. I have no idea how to make this better for him except to do what I'm doing now, since he seems to take comfort from me, and I'm more than happy to give it.

His words from before are still running in a loop in my head:

by Jake's side; by Jake's side.

I want to ask him what he meant. He told me last night that this thing between us wasn't a one-time thing but a long time thing. I know now is not the right time or place to discuss how we feel about each other. It will wait until we get home. I do feel that we have reached a relationship milestone in just a few weeks that it takes some couples a lifetime to even contemplate. Cal, I have come to realize, is used to getting what he wants, and what he appears to want is me. I very much doubt I will dispute his claim at any time in the near or distant future, but, yes, a long talk is well overdue.

Right now though, I think we need a little bit of normality.

For a little while we sit, leaning into the corner of the booth with Cal's head resting comfortably on my shoulder. Lou-Anne brings us each another coffee, and I think I've lost track of how many we've had now. We only planned to come in for one cup before going to get Cal some new clothes. Something we still have to do I guess.

I nudge him, and he sits up. He looks tired.

"Do you still want to go shopping?" I ask him. He gives me a wry half smile and nods.

"I suppose we'll have to. I need some clothes, although..." he sighs, "I really just want to go home now."

"We can do that," I say brightly. "I have a ton of band T-shirts that have been out of fashion so long they're probably cool again, and there's always my plaid cotton boxers to fall back on." Cal snorts and nudges me.

"Asshole," he gasps. "That settles it, let's go shopping Jake."

He stands and helps me out of the booth. I make that noise that all people over forty make when they stand up, it's compulsory. I'm just glad Cal doesn't hear it.

"Did you just make that old guy noise?" he asks, and when he sees my shocked expression he giggles. "You did didn't you?"

"No!" I protest, then I concede with a smirk. "Maybe." I poke my finger at him. "You have all this to look forward to, whippersnapper."

"What is a whippersnapper anyway?" Cal asks as we walk out of the café, waving to Lou-Anne and several others as we go.

"I have no idea, Cal," I tell him in surprise. "Although it seems to fit you to a tee."

"I prefer the name Sunshine," he admits, a little shyly. I wrap my arm around his shoulders and pull him close.

"Okay, sunshine," I kiss the side of his head, "tell me where you want to go first."

He turns me to face him with his lips pursed.

"I think you keep forgetting I can't hear you." He sounds indignant and I gasp because I do, he lip-reads so well.

"I'm sorry." I apologize, feeling really bad. I brush some of his blond curls behind his ear. The sun is at his back and it shines through his hair like a halo. He's an angel: he's my angel. "Forgive me?" I flutter my eyelashes, he chuckles.

"Always," he murmurs then leans in to kiss me on the cheek.

Suddenly, he gasps sharply, his entire body instantly tense. His hands grab my arms before pushing me to one side with such force I am thrown into the doorway of the coffee shop. I fall to the ground stunned, but then everything slows down as I look up and see why I was pushed.

Cal saw it before I heard it: the car that's mounted the pavement and is rushing towards us. His quick thinking has pushed me out of the way, but that action hasn't left him enough time to get out of the way himself.

The car barely misses me but hits him and throws him up into the air like a rag doll. It stops with a screech of brakes and he comes down onto the hood with a sickening thud only to roll off the front as the car crunches into reverse. He lands on the ground in a crumpled heap, and the sunshine is suddenly gone.

The car pulls back, its wheels inches from my feet. My lungs are filled with the acrid smell of burning brakes and exhaust smoke. I screw up my eyes against the sting of the fumes. The engine revs as if it is going to make another run. Cal doesn't move, he just doesn't move. I don't give a thought to my own safety: I move. If that maniac is going to run over Cal again, he's going to have to go through me first.

I scramble to reach him and throw myself as a shield between the front of the car and Cal. I close my eyes and wait for the inevitable. Whatever the driver

was planning to do next is never carried out as several bodies descend on the car from all directions. The driver is dragged out before he can do anything more.

I don't see who the driver is. I don't see anything. As I open my eyes, I only see Cal, lying so still I feel my breath leave my body in an anguished cry even though I don't even recall taking the breath in the first place.

"Cal!" I scramble around on my knees to face him. I think my heart has stopped beating. I see his still body in tunnel vision. The rest of the world is dark and silent.

"God, please, don't be hurt, please." I know this is a useless prayer, because how could he not be hurt? I hover over him. I daren't move him. My hands shake as I try to think what I need to do. My eyes are wet with tears as I rub my hand over my face trying to remember my first aid training.

Pulse. I think: pulse first. Gently, taking sharp, sobbing breaths, I brush his hair away from his throat and press the tips of my fingers to the side of his neck to feel for a pulse. There is one, faint, but beating fast. My hand moves to hover in front of his mouth, and I feel the heat of his breath as I do. He's breathing. Oh, thank god.

He's lying on his side with his back to me. I want to pull him into my lap but I know I can't. He needs to stay where he is but the urge to hold him, protect him, is so overwhelming that when someone else kneels down beside me I throw myself across him like a protective shield.

"Don't you fucking touch him," I yell out in panic and alarm, a warning in my tone that says I will defend this man with my life if I have to. It scares me how fierce and how strong the emotions are.

"Jake!" Lou-Anne's calm voice sounds distant as she lays a quiet hand on my shoulder. "I've called the paramedics. They're on their way."

I nod. Her voice has grounded me, and other things start to come back into focus. I can hear shouts and yells coming from the other side of the car. Whoever was driving is being held by the people who dragged him out of his seat. I can only assume it must be Steele. Who else would want to do this to my beautiful angel?

I lie protectively across Cal's prone body so I feel him move and hear him groan as he begins to regain consciousness. Suddenly, the light begins to brighten as the sunshine returns.

“Cal!” I gasp as I press my lips to his rapidly bruising cheek. “Cal, wake up baby, come on, please.” I know he can’t hear me, but he will be able to feel the vibration of my voice, and the warmth of my breath on his skin. He’ll feel the touch of my hands, holding him safe.

His hand moves to grab my arm, and with a weak cry he’s suddenly in my lap, pulling me close, burying his face into my shoulder breathing words of relief he knows I can hear but can’t reply to when he is in this position.

“You’re safe,” he whispers. “I needed you to be safe, I couldn’t let him hurt you, Jake.”

“Oh Cal.” Relief washes over me like a wave over the sand, washing away all the dread I’d felt as I’d seen him hit by the car. It’s a miracle, but he’s okay, bruised and shaken but not badly hurt.

“This isn’t going to stop me though,” he mumbles into my shoulder, and I push him away to regard him with bemusement.

“What?” I ask. He gives me a surprisingly bright, impish grin that is mixed with a determination made of pure steel.

“I’m still going shopping for clothes, there’s no way I am going back home without something more to wear than your damn boxers.”

“Oh my god!” I exclaim, with a slightly hysterical laugh. “You are one determined son of a bitch when you set your mind to something aren’t you?”

He bites his lip and nods, leaning in to press his lips against mine.

“You betcha, Jacob Reuben.” He gives me a jaunty wink, and I feel myself blushing. “I always get what I want.” And I realize with a gasp, as he gives me an extremely possessive once over, that he isn’t just talking about boxer shorts.

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Chapter Nineteen

Conclusion

Raucous laughter erupts from my bedroom and the deck outside, and I meet my sister's eye as we sit in the living room talking to Sheriff Jefferson.

Cal is currently holding court in my room, which has somehow become his room, although I suspect he is thinking of it more as "our" room. He has about a dozen visitors in there, either sitting on the bed or lounging about the deck enjoying the late afternoon sunshine, and basically, reassuring themselves that their newest friend is fine after his ordeal this morning.

"Sounds like they're having fun in there," Sarah muses as she stands and begins to clear away empty coffee cups and plates.

"He's a very lucky guy to have so many good friends," Jefferson adds, and I nod to both statements.

Cal is lucky. He never did get any shopping done because any amount of determination was not going to disguise the fact that he had a broken ankle. But I think, with a broken ankle and a few cuts and bruises, he got off easy after such a horrific accident. Except it wasn't an accident at all. His uncle had driven the car at him in a fit of what I can only imagine was complete and utter madness. When I said people did all sorts of strange stuff for money, I hadn't really thought that attempted murder would be one of them.

I'm still reeling from everything that's happened today. I guess Cal is too, but at least he has his friends to help him through it.

Jackson Steele is now behind bars where he belongs, and Cal is safe.

"Steele ain't gonna be causin' any more trouble for that young man o' yours," Jefferson assures me. "I got enough witnesses willin' to say he deliberately drove his car onto the sidewalk. He'll be charged with attempted murder. I doubt there'll be any appeal against it. He can't deny it, we all heard him threaten you both in the coffee shop."

I heave a sigh of relief. Cal's ordeal is over, finally. We will have to face Steele in court sometime in the future, but there's no way he will get off any of the charges being brought against him. Cal won't have to face any of this by himself though. He'll have me, right by his side.

Right by his side is where I want to be right at this minute as I hear another round of laughter coming from my bedroom.

I glance in that direction and sigh. I don't want to interrupt, but they've all been here some time, and Cal should be resting.

"Go in there, and send them all packing," Sarah tells me. "Visiting time is over."

I chuckle.

"I don't want to spoil his fun." There'll be plenty of time to spend with him later. "He needs his friends right now."

"Nonsense!" Sarah scoffs. "He needs you right now, and you need him. Get in there, and thank them all for coming, then ask them all, politely, to get lost."

I snort. "I can't do that, they're his friends, and they did save his life." I remind her. Sarah shrugs her shoulders.

"So they saved him just to wear him out? Get in there. What are you hesitating for?"

I bite my lip. Why am I hesitating? Am I a man or a mouse? And this is my house after all. I shouldn't feel so anxious about asking a bunch of twenty-one year olds to leave my house, except these kids are all friends with my boyfriend, and that is also a scary thought: that I will be included in that circle of friends. Maybe I should be in there with them. Part of me wants to be, but another part still feels completely bewildered by the fact that Cal wants me at all, and that our age gap means nothing to him, or to anyone else for that matter. No one has said anything against us so far, although it is all still early days.

I can imagine if there were to be any objections they would be most likely to come from Cal's friends not understanding, or not approving. The approval of your peers is what you live for when you're that age. Will he be swayed? Somehow I doubt it.

Sarah pulls me to my feet and pushes me towards my room.

"Go on, get rid of them, or I'll go in there and use my teacher voice."

"Holy shit, not the teacher voice." I smirk. "You'll scare the living daylights out of them all."

Sarah clicks her tongue and gives me another push.

I saunter, as casually as I can, to stand in the doorway of my room.

Cal is sitting in the center of the bed. Several girls are sitting around the edge fawning over him and basically being girls. The rest of the group are draped over various pieces of furniture, some of which are not actually designed as seats.

Cal's eyes light up when he sees me, and I feel my heart doing back flips. As soon as my presence is noted, there are several gasps and some furious, guilty shuffling from the gathered group to make it look like they weren't all sitting along my dresser. One of the guys hides the TV remote behind his back and I wonder what they were actually all watching considering the mix of sexes in the room. I hide a smirk, they all have guilty looks on their faces, and it reminds me of when I was that age and caught by a parent watching porn. I only really have eyes for the young man sitting in the center of all this attention though.

"Hi!" Cal calls to me a little breathlessly, his cheeks color ever so slightly, and he looks positively delicious, but he also looks pale and tired and I'm suddenly glad I've come to ask everyone to leave. His deep, blue eyes appeal to me, and I give him a silent nod of acknowledgement. He needs them to leave as well, and was just too polite to tell them to fuck off.

"Okay, everyone." I try my best not to sound like a parent, but I think I might not be succeeding. "I hate to spoil your fun, but doctor's orders were: Cal has to get some rest. That means on his own, without you."

There are several groans of protest, but mostly there is agreement and acknowledgement. One by one, Cal's visitors stand, say their good-byes and leave. Cal and I both thank them for coming, and I thank them all again as I see them out of the door.

These people helped save Cal's life. I'll be forever grateful.

Sheriff Jefferson leaves, after taking one more of Sarah's apple muffins and popping his head around the door to say a crumb-filled farewell to Cal. Then finally, Sarah leaves after giving Cal a tearful hug and making sure he has everything he needs. Yes, Sarah, I can look after him!

Finally, we're alone.

I wander back into the bedroom and lean once more against the doorframe.

"Well now." I flick my eyebrows and he actually blushes as he meets my eye. "Alone at last."

Cal cocks his head to one side and pats the bed beside him.

"It's cold over here without you," he says with an artful smirk, and I chuckle as I push myself away from the doorframe and join him on the bed.

As I sit, I make sure I am facing him. He regards me expectantly. It's like he knows what I'm going to say. His expression is slightly anxious.

"How are you feeling?" I ask. He shrugs.

"A little sore. Tired." He continues to search my face.

"Are you too tired to talk?" I ask softly. He bites his lip and shakes his head, not able to meet my eye.

"I know what you're going to say, that all of this is happening too fast." He sounds quiet and subdued. I sigh. I should have begun better, rather than sounding like a parent about to chastise a child.

He isn't a child by any sense of the word. He's my equal in every way, except age, that is the only thing that separates us.

I shuffle closer to him on the bed and cup his chin in my hand.

"Can I start that over again?" I ask him and he raises one eyebrow.

"I'd actually rather you did." I grin, as I see a glimmer of hope in his lovely eyes.

I lean in and claim his lips; lips so soft they are like velvet, and so warm they send heat through my body like no one else ever has. Not even Josh could make me feel so completely his with one touch of his lips.

Whatever this talk is going to be about, it certainly isn't going to be about things happening too fast. Right now, my body seems to think things aren't happening fast enough.

I pull away from him reluctantly, trying to ignore the butterflies in my stomach, or the stirring in my groin or the disappointed little whimper that escapes from Cal's mouth as I do.

"I don't think this is happening too fast, Cal." I lay my hand gently on his cheek and he leans into the caress, linking his fingers with mine. His eyes search my face in that intense way he has that just drives me crazy with desire. Is it only me that feels that way when he looks like that? "What we need to talk about is why this is happening at all."

Cal tips his head to one side.

"I don't understand Jake." He sounds confused. "Are you saying that you don't think it should be happening, or are you saying you don't understand why?"

I pinch the bridge of my nose, because it's all of those things and none of them. I'm so damn confused I don't know where to start.

"Cal, I'm not saying we shouldn't be together." He sighs with undisguised relief, as if he was simply awaiting my approval. I gaze at him softly and caress his bottom lip with my thumb. "God, why are you even here?" I ask him. "You're so young and beautiful and you have so much going for you, why would you choose me?"

"Jake!" Cal exclaims. "Why do you assume that I don't think all of those things about you?"

"How can you?" I am astounded he would even consider me as young. "You are twenty-one, and I am forty-five."

"So!" He sounds stubborn. "I've already told you that doesn't bother me. I'd have thought after two nights together and after everything I said to you, you would start to see that." I can't help the flush that heats my face, but I continue with my line of thought.

"You might not think this is a problem now, Cal, because you're right, we are both still pretty young and fit, but one day soon, you will be my age now and I will be almost seventy." I am playing a risky hand here, because in this statement I am warning him but also seeing how far he thinks this relationship can go, if it is a relationship at all.

Cal shrugs and straightens the blankets around him.

"So, if you're worried about keeping up with me in the bedroom, by the time I'm forty-five I'll have slowed down to your pace and things will even out."

For a moment, there is a stunned silence from me while he tries desperately not to meet my eye, since he is smirking. I burst out laughing, and he looks up and joins in.

"I'm not stupid Jake." He brushes a lock of my hair from my face so tenderly it's almost painful. "I can do the math, and I know what you were

doing just now.” I catch my breath as he leans closer to me. “I told you last night this was a long time thing. That includes when you get to be a septuagenarian before I do.” I make a face at the thought. He chuckles and runs his fingers down my cheek. “Why don’t we cross that bridge when we come to it huh?” he asks. “I don’t know about you, but I just can’t rule out finding the love of my life simply because he’s twenty-four years older than me. I’m only sorry you had to wait so long for me to reach the right age to come looking for you.”

I shake my head and laugh. “Cal, you are one cocky, self-assured son of a bitch, do you know that?” He grins with pride.

“My parents always told me to go for what I want; to never let anything hold me back. Nothing should ever be a barrier; there should only ever be fences to climb.”

I gasp and feel tears burn in my eyes. Cal looks concerned.

“What?” he asks me, concerned that his words have somehow upset me. I give a great sob and grab his face with my hands, holding him steady.

“Josh used to say that to me all of the time.” Cal sighs and nods. “It’s why I became a writer in the first place when he told me to climb that fence.”

He lets out a long breath and smiles, nodding.

“I wish I could have met him,” he says sadly.

I pull him to me with a soft cry and stroke my hand over his silky soft, sun-bleached hair. I kiss the top of his head then push away to speak to him once more.

“He would have liked you very much,” I whisper softly, tracing my thumbs across his cheekbones. “I like you very much.” I groan inwardly since this seems a totally inadequate confession after he has just confessed I am the love of his life. I don’t know how I can be. His confession has only increased my anxieties.

“Cal, I still don’t know why me, when you are so damn gorgeous you could have anyone.”

Cal cries out in frustration as he cups my face in his hands. “You have absolutely no idea how amazing you are Jake, do you?” he asks me fervently. “I mean look at you, you are sex on legs. Those dark eyes, they’re like melted

chocolate. They make me want to eat you up every time I see you and that damn beard.” He groans as he strokes it so reverently I feel more of those stirrings in my groin, and I take a shaky breath to calm it all down, oh dear lord. He leans close, brushing his fingertips across my lips. “I wanted you the minute I set eyes on you, but then you started watching me...”

I gasp and pull back from him with a strangled gasp. I jump away from the bed and stand halfway to the door, ready to run if he starts throwing things, because that’s what angry people do, they throw things, especially when they can’t get up and give chase.

“What?” I feel my eyes widen and my breath quicken. “How?” My heart is pounding in my chest in a fight-or-flight reflex that threatens to have me a gibbering wreck at his knees, begging for forgiveness.

Cal smirks at me as he leans back into the pillows and regards me with an extremely smug expression, but not, I realize, an angry one.

“You think I didn’t notice all the times you hid behind your ivy, or stood just beyond my sight in your kitchen, Jake?” He is smiling, but I have no idea why, because he should be frowning, scowling, spitting furiously. He should be kicking my ass for every time he’s caught me covertly spying on him. Why isn’t he? “I’m deaf not blind,” he explains. “And because I’m deaf I see a hell of a lot more than others do, I notice a hell of a lot more.”

I regard him with a feeling of dread, because he knew. He knew all along I’d been watching him, and he never said a thing.

“W-why aren’t you kicking my ass right now?” My voice is barely a whisper. “Why don’t you hate me? Or-or think I’m a creep?”

“Why would I do that?” He looks incredulous. “Don’t you see? It was your watching me that kept me safe.”

I gasp, because this is what I have thought, but it was only wishful thinking on my part, only a way to justify what I’d done.

Cal pats the bed to urge me to sit once more but I’m too wound up. I begin to pace, my hands in my hair as I begin to ramble.

“I shouldn’t have done it, I know. I shouldn’t have been watching you. I couldn’t help it though. God you were so beautiful, and I wanted to get to know you, but you wouldn’t answer your door that first day. You were so alone and looked so lonely and sad. You kept inside most of the time, and when you went

outside you had those head phones on, and you were so watchful and wary and always so careful.”

“Jake!” he shouts at me. “To my face or not at all,” he orders, and I stop with a gasp and turn to him. “You’re rambling, old man,” he says a little more gently. “I need you to say it to my face otherwise there’s no point in saying it at all.” I give a helpless shrug.

“You know it all anyway.” I feel defeated, hopeless. He’s going to hate me forever, although, without thinking I have flopped back down on the bed. I hang my head in despair. “Why don’t you hate me, Cal?”

“Jake, I don’t hate you, god, how could I ever hate you?” He lifts my chins with his forefinger. “I was the luckiest man alive when I moved next door to you.”

“I-I don’t know how you can think that? You know all about my stalking, you probably even know about the notebook.” He frowns.

“Notebook? What notebook?”

“Oh, holy shit!” I gasp hoarsely, because if he didn’t know about it he does now. I take a breath, intending to add this confession to my other indiscretions.

Cal dismisses the notebook explanation with a shake of his head.

“Whatever, Jake, tell me later, I have something I need to tell you. I need you to listen, and then you can decide whether or not to have a nervous breakdown, okay?” He looks deep into my eyes and I try to meet his gaze but I can’t, I just can’t. I screw my eyes shut and just nod.

“Okay.” I swallow hard, because this is where he tells me he doesn’t want a relationship with a creepy pervert who watched from behind his curtains despite everything else he’s said to the contrary.

“When I first moved here, I knew my uncle and aunt wouldn’t leave me alone for long. I suspected something would happen, and I suspected they were having me watched. I’d suspected I was being watched before I moved here.” I nod, opening my eyes now and meeting his gaze. What he is saying is making sense, the feelings of inevitability I’d sensed from him when his house had been trashed. He’d expected something to happen.

“I thought something would have happened before it did,” Cal continues, “but it didn’t and I know why now. I understand why.”

“Why?” I ask with a frown. Cal grabs my face again and stares deep into my eyes once more.

“Because of you Jake,” he whispers. “Because you were watching me, like a guardian angel. Who was ever going to try anything with my guardian angel watching over me?” I gasp incredulously. He laughs and runs his thumb affectionately along my bottom lip. “When I realized this was the case I started getting bolder. I started going out surfing more, making sure you’d seen me and noted where I was going. I knew I was safe going for a run because you would see what time I started and would know what time I usually finished. I knew if I wasn’t back in time you would have come looking for me.”

“Oh, Cal!” I sigh, feeling suddenly weak that he had had so much confidence in my ability to protect him before we had even met.

I dare to touch his cheek, caress it even, and he leans into the caress with a soft moan, holding my hand against his face and kissing my palm.

“I wanted to meet you so badly, and I had a plan, but when you took matters into your own hands I got kind of spooked.”

I chuckle at the memory of how scared he’d been when I’d just accosted him in the street the day he’d left his wallet in the market.

“I’d sensed I was being watched in town, but I just didn’t know who by. I felt like such a fool running away from you both times, but you genuinely did scare me that second time. I worried I’d got you all wrong when I saw what you had in your basket.”

I groan and facepalm.

“I am never going to live that down am I?” I ask him and he shakes his head with an impish giggle.

“Never!” His smile and giggle is infectious and I return it, shuffling closer to him and holding his hands in mine as he continues to give me his explanation. “So I thought I’d got you all wrong, but then when you delivered that basket of stuff from the drugstore along with the flowers and an apology I realized I’d got you all right. I was plucking up the courage to come over when you fell off your deck and I had no choice. I had to see if you were okay.”

“You were so defensive though,” I tell him. “I thought I’d blown it when you just up and left.”

Cal shrugs. "I wanted to play it cool. I couldn't let you know I liked you straight away, I was afraid you'd treat me like a kid, tell me it was a crush. I knew it wasn't. Lord knows I dropped enough hints though." I gasp and he giggles. "I knew we were being watched. I had to be careful." I remember the photographs of Cal pulling me to my feet and of him standing on my deck that day. I feel sick knowing he was going through so much stress.

"Cal," I press a kiss to the corner of his lips, "I watched you because you were beautiful, and I wanted so much to get to know you. I watched you because you were so alone, and I wanted to see you smile so damn much."

"You told me that when you got drunk, and I found you singing on your porch." He presses a kiss to my lips this time, and I feel the sensation tingle down my spine. I grimace at the reminder of my drunken night though.

"I still can't remember everything that happened that night," I confess. "You are going to have to fill in the blanks."

"You didn't say anything to be ashamed of," he assures me, drawing closer to me and cupping his hand around the back of my neck. "You said all the right things, Jake."

"All the right things for what?" I ask, feeling my breath hitch as his lips brush tantalizingly close to mine again.

"All the right things to make me fall in love with you."

His breath ghosts across my cheek as his lips close the miniscule gap. His tongue brushes my bottom lip, and I open to him with a sigh. His words send delightful shivers down my spine, and I melt into his touch.

Gently, I lower him down onto the pillows and brush his hair from his face, covering his lips, his cheeks, his jaw with feathery kisses as he whispers my name so softly I think I might be hearing it in my head.

"What did I say to you that was so effective?" I ask him, suddenly curious. "I think I might need to say those things again, just to see the moment for myself."

Cal chuckles and runs his fingers through my hair.

"You told me you wanted to make every part of me smile."

"Then that's exactly what I'm going to do right now, Cal," I tell him, leaning in for another soft tender kiss that I know will soon heat up to

blistering. "Because I fell in love with you the morning you arrived, and you brought the sunshine with you, the only thing I needed to make it all perfect was your smile."

Our lips crush together in earnest now as he pulls me down on top of him, his hands knowing exactly where to touch me for maximum effect. I gasp and moan into his mouth as he feeds his hand up inside my T-shirt to find my sensitive nipples. This is only our third time together, but it's as if we know each other by heart.

He's right to say it was stupid to dismiss the possibility of finding the love of my life just because there was an age difference. If I'd listened to myself, I might not even be here with him right now telling him I loved him with all my heart.

I pull back from his urgent kisses with a gasp.

"I haven't told you that yet." He frowns.

"Told me what?"

"That I love you." His eyes widen and he smiles, reaching up to pull me back into another blistering kiss that goes straight to my groin without any preamble.

"I don't need to hear it." His words are soft breaths in my ear. "I see it with my eyes. I feel it with every inch of my body."

I feel the reaction in his body, the hardness and heat of his cock against my thigh.

I hesitate though, because he is hurt, he needs to be resting, not grappling with me between the sheets.

"Are you sure you're up to this?" I ask him, pulling away again and eliciting another frustrated growl from him, although this time he is more amused than irritated.

"It's my ankle that got broke, Jake, not my dick," he tells me bluntly. Far from finding his words crass, they've turned me on even more. He pulls me back down to continue the kiss, and I feel myself losing the battle once more, not that I was putting up much of a fight, I just don't want to hurt him. "I'm not asking you to fuck me, Jake, just please, I need you to touch me. I need to touch you. I need to know you're still here, and this is still real after everything that happened today."

I bury my face in his shoulder with a sudden gasping sob. “Cal,” I murmur. “My beautiful Cal.”

He pushes me away when he realizes I’m crying. I didn’t even know until I felt the wetness of my tears. But his words called back the terrible moment when I’d seen him fall to a heap on the ground by my feet and thought he was dead.

“I thought I’d lost you.”

He wipes my tears, whispering softly to me, “You haven’t, you won’t ever. I’m here always. I’m yours, Jake, forever yours.” I give a soft cry as I kiss him again.

“And here I thought I belonged to you.” I smirk. He chuckles.

“You do!” His expression says this should be duly understood and noted. “Just as long as you realize that everything will be just fine.”

“Cocky bastard!” I hiss, but I soften the words with a kiss that makes him moan and shudder and tells me that he is at least a little at my mercy. I’m going to enjoy showing him just how much I can make him mine, but just for good measure I add, “Now how about you show me just how much I belong to you.” Cal groans as I suck wet kisses down his neck and over his shoulder, his T-shirt discarded without a second thought.

“Oh god yes, Jake,” he calls out desperately, as I push my hand down into his pants and he throws his head back in pleasure as I wrap long, practiced fingers around his erection. “God,” he hisses, then lifts his head to look at me with those damn gorgeous blue eyes. “Make me smile, Jacob Reuben, make me smile.”

That’s all I’ve ever wanted to do, Cal.

The End

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Author Bio

Hi there, I'm Dawn Sister. I live with my family (husband, two kids) on the North East Coast of England, (UK).

I have been writing forever, and I mean forever. I started off on a proper old fashioned typewriter that was missing the letter 'B'.

Nothing ever seemed to sit right in my stories though. Then I watched a film that changed everything: "Brokeback Mountain".

That was just about the saddest film I ever watched. I hate sad endings. I couldn't get it out of my head so I wrote a happy ending for it instead. Then I discovered I wasn't the only one. There's about a million alternative endings for this story, all of them with varying degrees of happy.

So then I tried writing my own stories, not fanfiction, although I write that still too.

So this is me, writing as Dawn Sister. The name is a tribute to my favourite Author: Anne McCaffrey.

I write M/M or Gay Romance. Sometimes it's a bit racy, but mostly it is just cheesy. I hope you like cheesy.

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My other work may be found at:

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If you enjoyed these stories and want more, be sure to look for the seventeen volumes in the Love's Landscapes Anthology series, as well as the other four special bonus volumes, available for free download at M/M Romance Group.com

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