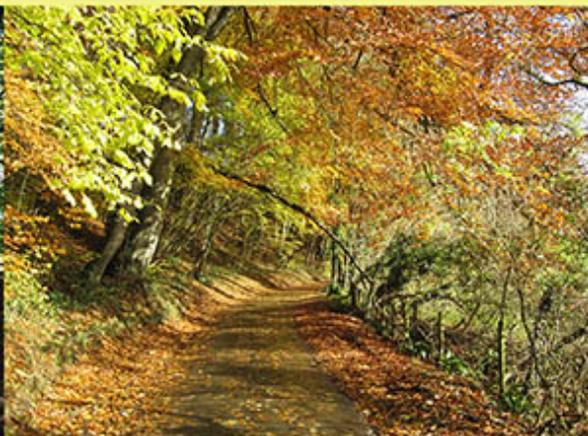


LOVE IS AN OPEN ROAD



Don't Read in the Closet 2015

ALL ABOUT TRUST

D.P. Denman

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Love is an Open Road

An M/M Romance series

ALL ABOUT TRUST

By DP Denman

Introduction

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

What Is Love is an Open Road?

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

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love is an Open Road*.

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

Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

Each year, a dedicated group of Volunteers from the M/M Romance Group work hard behind the scenes to bring these stories to you. Our Editors, Formatters, Proofreaders, and those working on Quality Assurance, spend many long hours over a course of several months so that each Event is a success. As

each and every author also gives freely of their time and talent, it was decided that all edits suggested may be accepted or rejected by the author at any given time. For this reason, some stories will appear to be more tightly edited than others, depending on the choice of the author.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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ALL ABOUT TRUST

By DP Denman

Photo Description

DA request photo: naked young man with his ass to the camera, tied in BDSM restraints and crying.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

His name is Eric B. I never knew his last name. We chatted only online.

Eric was 15 when he thrown out on the streets by his father because Eric was gay. He survived by becoming a prostitute. Eric always said he was a “whore”: “two holes and a cock”.

He was sexually, physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually abused for years by hundreds of different men. He was kept by two pimps for several years, along with other boys.

Eric escaped the pimps, got off the streets with a church’s help. The pastor didn’t like gays though; he told Eric he wished Eric was not in his congregation. He preached being gay, being a whore, were sins. Eric believed he was Damned.

Eric had an 8th grade education. The pastor did not help get him back on his feet. A family man, a congregation member, paid Eric for sex; Eric needed the money.

Eric had to “whore” again for money to live. He charged half of other escorts’ fees because Eric felt he wasn’t worth it. Eric began to starve. He was 20.

Eric wouldn’t let me help him; I tried!!! He became the kept-boy of a truly sadistic “Daddy”. The man broke all of Eric’s ribs, and put a huge vibrator in Eric’s ass for hours—and worse.

Eric wasn’t allowed to leave the apartment. “Daddy” stopped Eric contacting anyone. I was the last.

Eric wanted “Daddy” to kill him.

I want Eric to find love.

Sincerely,

Franklin

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: barista, dark, homeless, recovery, interracial, hurt/comfort, no sex

Content Warnings: mention of violence, sexual and emotional abuse

Word Count: 38,631

ALL ABOUT TRUST

By DP Denman

Chapter 1

Daddy was mad. He could feel it in every kick, every slap. Pain screamed through his body, tumbling out his mouth. Daddy hated it when he screamed. A whore was supposed to suffer quietly, but sometimes he just couldn't.

"Nothing but a worthless dog," Daddy growled. "A cur that should have been drowned at birth."

"I'm sorry," he sobbed. "I'm sorry, Daddy."

"How many times do I have to tell you not to answer the fucking phone?" Daddy punctuated each word with a kick to his stomach, ribs, hip, thigh, whatever presented itself.

Daddy had rules. So many rules. Don't answer the phone. Don't touch the computer. Don't go outside. Don't speak without permission, eat without permission, wear clothes without permission. He belonged to Daddy, and Daddy was a jealous man.

Not a lover. The word didn't fit. Whores didn't have lovers. That word was gentle, kind, romantic. Daddy had never been gentle. Kindness came in degrees. Daddy was kind when he let him put on clothes because it was raining outside and the house was cold. He was kind when he let him eat. He was kind when the things he put inside him weren't meant to cause pain.

He wasn't kind or gentle today. He was angry. Angry enough to kill him, and soon it would be over.

Thank God.

The same being that had damned him to this life of misery and pain, by refusing to remove the defect, the depravity, the gay, was finally going to let him die so he could go where they said a worse fate waited. He couldn't imagine such a thing. What was worse than Daddy or the men who came before him? The grunting, grabbing, slapping, fucking masses that had never seen anything in him but a place to jam their cock. He was worthless in this world. He would be worthless in the next.

Just another demon's whore and it would never end. It would never fucking end.

He looked up at the man looming over him, rage in his face, his hands, his feet, and did the unthinkable. He slapped Daddy's hand away, sobbing from the

crushing pain of a broken body that matched his broken soul. He had to be sure. Daddy had to kill him this time because he couldn't take it anymore.

He heard the rage in Daddy's voice, felt it renewed in each kick, in the hands clamped around his neck, blocking his air and his sobs. This time it was over.

Finally over.

Chapter 2

Marcus Chen stepped into the silence of the room, eyes on the equally silent boy in the bed. They said he slept a lot. He hadn't said a word since they found him dumped in the parking lot outside the Emergency entrance like a McDonald's bag tossed out a car window. Someone had thought he was dead and hadn't wanted to deal with the body. Someone who hadn't checked his pulse closely enough.

Lucky for him.

Awake or not, the kid with no name was the talk of Vancouver General Hospital, a story that would reverberate through the Emergency staff for years. They called it the worst gay bashing in the history of the city, though no one knew what really happened. It assumed a lot about his extensive injuries, but if it wasn't an attack, he couldn't imagine an alternate explanation that covered it. Someone had obviously wanted the kid dead.

With his temporary identification dangling from his neck by a lanyard and a pair of books under one arm, Marcus stepped to the bed and sat down in the only chair.

"Hi," he said to the sleeping boy. "It's me again. I brought another book this time in case you didn't like the first one. That end of the world stuff can be a little heavy, and I get the feeling you've seen enough drama. I brought zombies instead." He smiled. "It's more disgusting, but not as intense. At least, it isn't to me. I mean, it's not like it's real, right?"

The sound of the ventilation system pushing air into the room was the only response. He hadn't expected anything more. He sat forward in the chair and rested his elbows on his knees.

"Let me know if you need anything. I can get you some water or ice chips or something if you're thirsty."

He watched the boy's slack face for a response and saw nothing but bruises. They didn't know if he qualified as a boy. They didn't know anything really. He looked young, so the staff assumed he was a teenager. A beat-up, torn-up teenager with no name.

Marcus reached over and rested a hand on top of the boy's, covering his warm, pale skin, watching his face for a reaction.

“Whatever you’ve been through... it’s over. People care about you here. You’re going to be fine.”

Helplessness and sorrow sat heavy and cold in his chest. The boy’s description was all over town, the police looking for his family. So far, no one had claimed him. Marcus clung to the belief that the kid’s parents were out there somewhere. Maybe on vacation. Maybe they lived outside the province and the kid was the one on vacation. How he had managed to find a pit of depravity capable of reducing him to a broken heap was anyone’s guess, but a holiday gone wrong was easier to take than the thought that no one had claimed the boy because no one cared enough to. He didn’t deserve to be abandoned like an old car. Nobody did.

He let his hand slip from the boy’s and sat back in the chair, opening one book and setting the other on his lap.

“I’m going to start with the zombies. If you want me to go back to the other one let me know, okay? Okay. *Chapter one. It’s impossible to describe the smell of Kansas,*” he began.

He read as if his audience of one was actually listening, occasionally glancing over at him, hoping to see his eyes open. They stayed closed all through the first chapter, which was long enough for a nurse to stride into the room with a syringe and a thermometer.

“How’s he doing?” the woman in bright pink surgical scrubs asked.

“I was going to ask you the same thing.”

“He’s not on a ventilator or a heart monitor. That puts him in better shape than almost everyone else in the unit, doesn’t it, baby.” She patted the boy’s leg through the blankets as she stepped to his IV stand. “We’re just a little tired and perfectly willing to sleep until doomsday because reality is a bit overrated. If I were him, I’d do the same thing.”

She injected something into the port on his IV tubing and then took his temperature. When a second nurse strode into the room, Marcus knew it was time to leave.

“We’re going to change his bandages. It shouldn’t take too long.”

“That’s okay.” He pushed to his feet. “I should get going anyway. My shift is almost over.”

He gathered his books and headed for the door with a glance back to see them pull the blankets down the boy’s body, revealing a scrawny frame covered

in a blue patient gown. Morbid curiosity pushed questions to the tip of his tongue, and he carried them into the hall. He wasn't supposed to ask about patients' conditions. In this case, he didn't need to. The basics were whispered common knowledge on the floor, and half of them made him shudder in sympathy. He didn't need details.

He rode the elevator down to the main floor and walked the maze of halls to the volunteer coordinator's office. The place had a cave-like quality to it. One door. No windows. Harsh fluorescent light cast random shadows across the two cluttered desks. Tall shelves lined every wall, crowded with boxes of donated clothes, fat resource binders, books, and stacks of magazines. He signed out on the clipboard pinned to the wall just inside the door, took off his lanyard, and headed back through the maze of halls toward the hospital entrance.

He walked to Willow Street and up to Broadway, shedding the surreal drama of the hospital as he went. All except for one bit of it. The silent kid in the bed had haunted him for the past two days. The bruises on his face, one advertising a cracked bone underneath. The marks clustered at his neck in the vague outline of human hands. The eyes that never opened.

That would all change eventually. He was hurt, but he would live. The bruises would fade. The breaks would heal. His eyes would open and the truth, whatever it was, would pour out. Marcus hoped it came with contact information for his family so the hospital could send him home. Something inside said it wouldn't be that simple.

Chapter 3

The television burst to life at precisely four a.m., filling the room with the cheerful chatter of a news anchor. Marcus rolled over and shoved the blankets further down the bed amid details about upgrades to a miniature amusement park across town. He pushed to his feet to shuffle and yawn his way to the bathroom.

Sometimes he hated working the opening shift. His body wasn't a fan of pre-dawn hours no matter how early he went to sleep, but it was the only schedule he could stand. The midmorning shift made it too easy to sleep in and he didn't want his life to be only about work. He needed fun and friends and a chance to meet someone. Starting early was a pain, but also left him most of the afternoon to play.

He considered himself the black sheep in a family of workaholics. His grandparents had a shop they had opened in Chinatown after immigrating to Canada when his mother was young. They had worked seven days a week to survive in their new country and barely scraped by, or so went the family lore.

His mother met a fellow workaholic and fell in love. How she found time, he would never know. His parents married and ran a food cart that eventually became a truck before mutating into the coffee shop that demanded someone be awake enough to unlock the place and set up for the groggy morning crowd by 4:45.

He stepped out of the shower and dried off, leaving the towel behind to walk naked through a loft that had taken him years to afford. Prices were high, and places were scarce even in a city that considered a shoebox spacious. He saved for a house while others saved for college. Those were the options in Vancouver.

His place was uncluttered and compact. Some called it cramped, but he didn't mind the lack of space or the way it discouraged him from buying things he didn't need. He had nowhere to put them in a microloft. It barely had room for his bed, and since sleeping was all he used it for, it fit him perfectly.

His life wasn't in that single-room apartment. It was downstairs on the city street with his friends and family and a café that needed to have coffee brewing in the next ten minutes. He tugged on his clothes, combed his hair, shut off the television, and stepped into the hall, locking the door behind him.

His commute was a two-minute ride in the elevator and a half-block walk to the corner. He hadn't planned that part, but he didn't mind it either. When construction began, his father had seen the chance to open a coffee shop on the first floor of a high rise of new customers. Who wouldn't want coffee in the morning when it was only half a block away? It all fit together: his new start and the café's. Life was like that sometimes.

His dad was a smart man. Inner city lofts didn't come with parks or dog runs. The owners needed a place to walk their miniature furry children. Why not a canine playground in the corner of his café with a counter that served dog treats? Barks and Beans was the neighborhood gathering spot for most of the tenants, and he had no doubt his father had envisioned it just that way.

Marcus opened the front door to the jangle of bells and a dark café. He followed the sound of the alarm beeping a warning that would become a piercing shriek if he didn't reach it soon enough. He shut it off, turned on the lights, and locked the front door. The grounds were ready for brewing, set up by his father on the closing shift last night. He started the machines and filled the space with the scent of coffee.

He unlocked the front door one more time to greet the deliveryman from the bakery a few blocks away and filled the small case at the counter, chewing on a moist bran muffin while he worked. Free breakfast and unlimited coffee were perks of the job that kept him on his feet most of the day.

It was hours before he thought about the boy in the bed, wondering if he was awake enough to tell anyone what had happened. Marcus couldn't imagine living on his own without someone nearby to care if he went missing. He couldn't imagine suffering such violent cruelty over something his family and friends didn't consider noteworthy. In his world, family was everything and being gay was only a side note that guaranteed he would never marry in a panic over a pregnancy. He could take his time and choose the right man.

He anticipated the moment a guy got so far under his skin he was smiling over nothing, preoccupied with daydreams, unable to get him out of his head. Sometimes anticipation over that moment became an outright craving, but for now, the only person he couldn't seem to get out of his head was a boy with no name. It was odd the way that kid stuck with him, haunted him. He didn't know why he cared. He only knew he did.

The hospital was supposed to be his punishment. He wasn't volunteering out of a desire to help his fellow man. His grandfather had ordered him to,

penance for helping his friends spray-paint the Canucks logo on a section of the street near the stadium after a game last week. Too many beers and a moment of poor judgment had turned him into a drunken fool. Antics that reflected on their business hadn't amused his father. Antics that reflected on their family had amused his grandfather even less. Wai Gong had assigned him fifty hours of community service to repay the city for his disrespect. Nobody had argued. Not even him.

He had expected to be bored, wandering the hospital trying to entertain equally bored patients. He had anticipated silent lectures to himself about not whining over it when he deserved every excruciating hour. He hadn't expected to feel anything more than a random pang of sympathy for the temporary residents of the hospital. For the first week that's exactly what happened. He went. He ordered himself not to hate it and resolved never to behave like a drunken idiot again.

Then the kid with no name had appeared in Intensive Care and changed everything. The catalog of injuries had tightened his chest. Things broken, torn, ruptured. The assumed reason had brought tears to his eyes. He'd heard stories of such cruelty but had never been that close to it. Never seen the pale skin and sunken eyes of a victim of irrational hatred. Now he couldn't get it out of his head. Not until he knew someone would take the kid home, shelter him, love him, and never let it happen again.

He wanted a happy ending. Without it, that story would haunt him forever, burrowing into him and living under his skin like an insect, infecting him with its cold reality. It already was.

Hours flowed by, his thoughts drifting from tiny yapping dogs to the hospital and back again until his shift ended. He stood for a moment outside the café's door, debating a choice that seemed inevitable. He was only scheduled for two days a week at the hospital. He wasn't due back until next week, but by then the boy could be gone, and he would never know how the story ended.

The nurses would probably tell him. He argued that point as his feet carried him down Hastings Street toward the bus stop. The story would reach an inevitable conclusion whether he was there to witness it or not. He didn't have to spend all his free time at the hospital.

He climbed on the bus and took a seat several rows back. He didn't have to, but he probably would.

Chapter 4

Marcus didn't bother stopping at the volunteer office that afternoon. He wasn't there as a volunteer. At least not officially. He rode the elevator to the second floor and stepped onto faded, clean tile. He followed the hall halfway down the building, past rooms with glass walls and no privacy.

He waved to nurses beginning to recognize him by sight and strode to the small room at the end of the hall, tucked in a corner with an uninspiring view of the parking lot. He expected the same sleeping kid, the same silence. It was a bit startling to have eyes immediately open, regarding him with more suspicion than curiosity.

"Hi." He froze just inside the door. "You probably don't remember me. I've been here the last couple of days reading to you while you were sleeping."

The boy continued to stare.

"Post apocalypse? Zombies? Sound familiar?"

More staring.

"My name is Marcus."

He stepped closer, noticing the red-rimmed eyes, the boy's wrists tethered to the bed by restraints. Something more than his level of consciousness had changed.

"Mind if I sit down?"

Hazel eyes tracked him to the chair a few feet from the bed.

"It must be pretty strange waking up in a hospital with a bunch of strangers. I'd probably be freaking out. Have they been able to reach your family?"

"What family?" The words were a quiet rasp barely heard over the rush of the ventilation system.

He understood the message even if he couldn't comprehend a life alone. "You're on your own?"

The boy jerked his chin an inch toward his chest in a single nod.

"That must be rough."

For a moment, they stared at each other in a silence Marcus was content to endure. Silence had its place. He saw no reason to fill it with meaningless chatter.

“Why are you here?” the boy croaked.

“Because I wanted to see how you were doing.”

“Fine. Can’t you tell?” The boy turned away from him.

“You look upset. Can I help?”

The boy turned back to him, curiosity eclipsing the suspicion a little at a time. “With what?”

“Anything. Are you thirsty?”

He pushed out of the chair, still finishing the sentence, and strode to the bedside table cluttered with a box of latex gloves, tissue, a small pitcher, and a plastic cup with a straw. He picked up the cup and stepped to the side of the bed, the boy watching him. Marcus took the lack of protest to mean he was thirsty and held the straw to his lips. The boy stared back at him with an unwavering gaze, grimacing slightly with each swallow before pushing the straw away with his tongue.

“Thanks.”

“You’re welcome.” He put the cup back down.

“What do you want?” the boy asked as Marcus sat back in the chair.

“Nothing... other than maybe to know your name.”

“Why?”

“Because calling you ‘buddy’ or ‘pal’ or ‘kid’ is a little generic.”

“Why call me anything?”

“I suppose I don’t have to. I can sit here and talk without a name.”

“Why?”

“Why what?”

“Why sit here and talk if you don’t know me?”

“Because the nurses said you didn’t have anyone, and I imagine it sucks being in a hospital alone.”

The boy went back to watching him, and Marcus sat in silence watching him back. He had been meditating daily since he was ten. Silence didn’t bother him. Not even the kind intended to make him uncomfortable enough to leave the room, not that he didn’t recognize the unspoken hint.

“Do you want me to leave?”

The boy shrugged. In his current grumpiness, that was as close as Marcus expected to get to an actual request to stay.

“I didn’t bring any books. I kind of expected to find you still asleep, but I could go downstairs and get something to read if you want.”

He got another shrug.

“I’ll be right back.”

He pushed out of the chair and strode back into the hall. He waved at another familiar face at the nurse’s station, and she motioned him over.

“I’m just headed downstairs to get a book. I didn’t think he’d be awake.”

“Good. He could use some cheering up. Just don’t let him talk you into removing the restraints, okay? If he wants to get out of bed, call one of us. We’ll take care of it.”

“Yeah, I was wondering about that.” Marcus left the question unspoken.

“He was a bit upset when he realized where he was. For now it’s better to leave him restrained until he has a chance to calm down.”

“He seems pretty calm now.”

“Looks can be deceiving.” She raised her eyebrows and strode a few steps away, pulling a thick patient binder from the midst of an identical collection on top of a credenza.

He considered the comment as he continued down the hall and pushed through the door to the stairs. He could understand being upset about the attack and certainly upset at the person who had done it, but that picture didn’t fit with them tying him to the bed. Maybe he had tried to leave the hospital, afraid his attacker would find him or something. It seemed a bit overly melodramatic, but then no one had ever beaten him almost to death or sodomized him so violently it had torn him apart inside. That kind of thing had to mess with a person’s mind.

The door to the volunteer coordinator’s office was standing open, and he strode inside. Melanie sat at her desk in a pair of bright teddy bear surgical scrubs, surrounded by clutter.

“Hello there.” She smiled when she saw him. “Wait. You’re not on the schedule today, are you?”

“No. I dropped by to check on the kid in the ICU. He’s awake, and I thought I’d read to him for a while, but I didn’t bring my books.”

“Sure.” She pushed back from her desk and stood up. “Anything you can do to settle him down would be appreciated, I’m sure.” She walked to the bookshelf. “Graphic novels might be more his speed, but that’s a little hard to read to someone.” She pawed through the stack of books.

“They said he was upset. He seems pretty calm now, though.”

“Good. Maybe he wore himself out.”

“Was he that bad?”

“Upset enough to tear out his IV. Thankfully, they caught him before he got to his catheter. He is not a happy young man right now.” She handed him a book. “Try this one.”

“Thanks.” He took the battered paperback from her. “Do they know why?”

“Other than not liking hospitals, I’m not sure. They called in a psych consult. Maybe the counselor said something to calm him down. Then again, maybe he’s biding his time waiting for them to take off the restraints so he can do it again. Sometimes combative patients can be tricky.

“He’s about ready to leave the ICU,” she continued. “If they transfer him to mental health, you won’t be able to visit him. You need to be prepared for that.”

He nodded and held up the book. “Thanks. I’ll bring it back before I leave.”

Marcus went back to the second floor, wondering about the kid who had seemed so helpless a day ago and was now turning the ward upside down with his antics. Maybe he really was afraid. He couldn’t think of any other reason to walk out of the hospital half-healed. He wasn’t in any condition to take care of himself and certainly not on the street if he had nowhere else to go. He was still broken and bruised.

He wondered what they were going to do when the boy was well enough to be released. The street was probably where he’d been attacked. Marcus couldn’t imagine wanting to go back to that and risk a repeat performance. Of course, if he had no family and nowhere to stay that meant he also had no choice.

Slightly less wary eyes watched him stride back into the room and settle in the chair. He began reading about a man living in a city under a dome on a

barren planet. It was a perfect metaphor for a kid finding a brief reprieve among caring professionals, the harsh environment of the streets waiting just outside the window. He wondered if the kid with no name realized it too.

Next time he was bringing the zombie story. It was less depressing.

He closed the book at the end of the second chapter. "It's getting late. I guess I better go."

The kid nodded.

"They say you're almost ready to leave the ICU. Do you mind if I visit you in your new room? I mean, you'll probably be able to read your own books and stuff, but if you want company..."

"What do you want?" Confusion had replaced suspicion over the last hour.

"Nothing." He shrugged. "I thought with you being awake you'd need company. This place isn't exactly a day at the arcade. You know?"

The boy nodded.

"I have to work tomorrow morning, but I'll drop by in the afternoon." He held up the book. "With a better book."

"That one's okay," the boy said.

"Good. Then we'll stick with this one." He smiled. "I'll see you tomorrow." He strode to the door.

"My name's Eric." His voice was timid and small as if he were afraid to say it.

"See you tomorrow, Eric."

He strode into the hall grinning to himself for reasons he didn't quite understand.

Chapter 5

At six o'clock the next morning, Marcus' mother strode into the coffee shop, greeting the small gathering of people that would become a steady stream.

"How has it been?" she asked, stepping behind the counter.

"About average," Marcus replied.

There were few surprises that early in the day. A chain of regular customers strode through the door and ordered the same thing they ordered every day as part of their morning ritual. She took over working the cash register, and he focused on the drinks, moving the customers along, earning a brief break before the six-thirty crowd started a flow that would last for over an hour. It was a chance to restock and drink a little coffee of his own.

"How was the hospital last night?" she asked, peering under the counter to check their stock of milk for the dairy alternative customers.

"Good. How did you know I went to the hospital?"

"Your father saw you head toward the bus. Call it mother's intuition." She smiled and patted his shoulder. "You don't have to do the hours all at once, you know," she added as she walked to the storage room and disappeared around the corner. "I think Wai Gong will be satisfied with once a week."

"You realize that could take months."

She emerged with rectangular containers of milk in her arms. "I don't think rushing to get it done as quickly as possible was the attitude he was hoping to see."

He swept aside the strands of shame that still clung to the topic. "Last night wasn't about logging hours. In fact, I wasn't even on the schedule."

He told her about Eric and his troubling situation. One made even more so now that he knew Eric was alone in the hospital because he was alone period.

"He must have had a life of some kind before this," she said.

"I'm not sure it wasn't spent begging on the corner. I doubt he wants to go back to that."

"If he's homeless, does he have an alternative?"

“Not unless someone gives him one, and I don’t know many places that hire people who don’t have an address.”

“Is he looking for work? Not all of them do.” She wiped the counter.

“I don’t know. His injuries and his name are the only details I have.”

She stepped from behind the counter to wipe already clean tables. “If it turns out he isn’t an addict and wants to work, what do you want to do about it?”

“I don’t know that either. Something.”

She nodded and cast an appraising glance around the café. “Perhaps your supervisor at the hospital has some ideas. He can’t be the first patient they’ve had with that kind of problem.”

He doubted any aspect of Eric’s situation was new to them. Vancouver Memorial was a major trauma center. He imagined they had seen everything.

“That’s a good idea. I promised Eric I’d drop by to visit tonight anyway. I’ll ask her what she thinks while I’m there. Thanks, Mom.”

She draped the towel over the edge of the sink behind the counter and smiled at him. “There’s the boy I have always been so proud of.” She patted his face. “No more unsanctioned artwork, eh?”

“Right.” He smiled back.

“Good. I’ll tell Wai Gong. He’ll be pleased.”

His grandfather wasn’t cold, but he was strict. Rules from the old country still applied in the new one, and that included family honor. He was a wise old man, gnarled and stooped by life, but not dulled. He still worked every day in his shop on the outskirts of Chinatown, dispensing advice along with tourist trinkets.

Marcus’ biggest regret over the graffiti wasn’t the community service hours or the stern lecture about responsibility, pride in his community, and finding better friends but that he had disappointed a man whose opinion he valued above even his own parents’. The memory of the look on Wai Gong’s face still made him cringe.

Even if his grandfather approved enough of his actions where Eric was concerned to reduce his punishment, he refused to risk disappointing him again by asking. Besides, the hospital had its own expectations. He had agreed to fifty hours, and he intended to honor the commitment even if it meant he was still

working there twice a week long after they released Eric. There would be other patients with other catastrophes.

He needed to find better books, though.

The morning rush poured through the door, harried people picking up lattes and pastries on their way to work. He had never worked in an office. All he knew of cubicles and staff meetings was what he had seen on television, and it didn't appeal to him. He preferred coffee to paperwork. He didn't earn as much as they did, but he didn't dream of wealth, power, and a corner office. His vision of the future included modest success and the love of a good man.

It also included expanding the family business, a vision he shared with his father. High-rises full of microlofts like his were the new thing. Developers would build more and with them came the opportunity for new cafés. He could easily see his father expanding to recreate Barks and Beans on another corner somewhere in the city. He was talking about it already.

Love was harder to find than rental space. At least the kind that lived past the initial blast of infatuation. For him, relationships were like the Canucks during the playoffs. Things started out great, high on possibility only to fall apart, leaving a pile of disappointment behind.

He settled into the routine of customers and coffee and let the topic evaporate. Things were bound to come together at some point. Until then, he could focus on his career and making the café a big enough success to earn the chance to run one himself.

Chapter 6

Eric stared at the ceiling, visually wandering the curtain track that circled his bed. The tinny chatter of a portable television drifted through the room, sprinkling canned laughter. Tall windows offered a view of gray skies somewhere on the other side of his privacy curtain. He could tell they were gray because the somber color seeped into the room, dulling everything it touched.

Not that it mattered. He would have been depressed anyway.

Despite broken bones and pains, he had been conscious long enough to earn his freedom from the smothering attention of the ICU nurses. Freedom was overrated in a room with no privacy. Three of the four beds were occupied, his neighbors forever coughing, moaning, chattering, farting, and wheezing on the other side of the useless curtain.

Tethered to the bed, the hospital was slightly less aggravating than the place he had expected to see when he opened his eyes. Less aggravating. More depressing.

He was supposed to be somewhere testing the theories of the afterlife. Instead, he was here, bored, hurting, and chained like a dog. He should have been dead. A hospital full of professionals said so. Daddy's vicious anger had said so. He couldn't explain why he wasn't.

Yes, he could. Daddy had failed him. Yet another broken promise, another fantasy spun at his expense, another lie. They all lied. It had started with his father, who had proudly beamed about his place on the varsity soccer team and then disowned him because he kissed a boy.

T-man and Steve took him in with promises of a warm bed and regular meals only to pimp him out to anyone with a buck and a dick. Westfall Community Church of Light had promised to get him out of hooking and into a real life. Until the pastor turned out to be homophobic and the only job he could get was whore to a church council member. An upstanding, devoted man of God who liked to have his dick sucked in the church parking lot after services. On special occasions, he liked to fuck on the padded pews and talk about Satan taking it up the ass. He seemed to know a lot about Satan's ass.

They hadn't lied about everything. He had learned the truth at that church, something he might not have figured out anywhere else: salvation wasn't for

everyone. Only the people God liked, and God didn't like fags. Whores could find redemption if they gave up hooking, but there was no hope for fags. It wasn't much of a revelation, but it was the first time he'd seen it so clearly. His purpose in life was to suck and fuck and put up with whatever people wanted to do to him. He didn't deserve anything better. It was his punishment for the sickness that made him prefer men.

Eric thought he'd found a solution in a man who always delivered what he promised. Stern, controlling, violent Daddy gave him what he deserved. Whether smacks with the paddle until his ass glowed when he fell asleep without permission or a rough introduction to fisting when he threw up during violent sex. He got what he earned, and the last bit of disobedience was supposed to have earned him a ticket out of this nightmare and into the next. Daddy had promised to beat him until there was nothing left.

He glared at the ceiling. Maybe it had been a play on words. Daddy had beaten him, and now he had nothing. Just a temporary bed that led right back to the street. Food out of trash bins. Cold nights sleeping on concrete. Blowing random guys for a few bucks. Letting them fuck him for a few more.

He rolled his head to the side to glare at the dotted pattern of the curtain. That was his problem. He kept looking to other people to rescue him from his festering disaster of a life. Not anymore. He would play along with the hospital's game and as soon as they took off the damn restraints, he was leaving. He would get drunk, throw himself on the SkyTrain's electrified rail, and fry in an instant. Let's see the doctors bring him back from that.

He heard the zing of the curtain as someone pushed it open, revealing the foot of his bed to the rest of the room. He didn't bother looking at the source of the interruption. It was probably time for his pills.

"Mr. Doe, you have visitors," an almost friendly voice informed him.

They had asked for his name a least a dozen times since he woke up. They weren't getting it. What was a name to a whore... or a dead man? If they needed a name, they could make one up.

A large figure stepped into the edge of his vision, and curiosity turned his head. Two men in dark pants stood smiling at the end of his bed. One in a light-blue button-down shirt, the other in white, glinting gold police badges on their belts.

"Good afternoon, sir. We're here to talk to you about what happened."

He stared at them in silence for a long moment. One man looked at the other before both pairs of eyes landed back on him.

“Can you understand us?”

He returned to staring at the curtain. The man in the blue shirt stepped between it and the edge of his bed. He stared at the blankets instead. The other pulled the curtain closed again as if the flimsy material would provide protection from the ears on the other side.

“You’re not in any trouble, Mr. Doe,” Investigator White Shirt said from the foot of his bed. “We understand someone assaulted you. We’re just here to get your statement so we can catch the person. Do you know who hurt you?”

“I fell,” he muttered.

Daddy deserved to go to jail for failing to keep his word. The chicken shit. The only reason he was lying there listening to this guy pretend he wanted to help was because Daddy had obviously lost his nerve. He should have dumped his body in the woods, not taken him to the hospital.

“I understand this can be intimidating, but if you help us, we can catch this person and make sure they never hurt you or anyone else again,” Investigator Blue Shirt said.

They were careful not to assume it had been a man. How open-minded of them. He had never met a woman as violent as Daddy, but he supposed it was possible. Meth heads went nuts sometimes.

“I told you. I fell.”

“You have four broken ribs and hand prints around your neck. Nobody is going to believe that,” White Shirt said.

“So I fell four times.”

Blue Shirt crouched in front of him, knees snapping. “I get it.” The man tried looking him in the eye. “You’re scared, and that’s perfectly understandable. Whoever this was obviously tried to kill you, but if we catch them it won’t happen again.”

“Like there’s only one sick bastard in the city.” His ribs gave a warning twinge at his huff of humor.

“It was a man?” Blue Shirt asked.

The guy was quick. “Okay, yeah. It was a man. So?”

“Do you know him?” White Shirt asked.

“Don’t know him. Didn’t see him. Didn’t hear him.”

“What were you doing when it happened?” Blue Shirt asked.

For a moment, he considered telling them. *I was sucking his dick, officer. I’d be happy to demonstrate.* “Nothing.”

“Were you sitting somewhere? Sleeping? Drinking coffee? What?” White Shirt pressed.

“I wasn’t doing anything, and I don’t remember what happened, so you’re wasting your time.”

“What’s the last thing you do remember?” Blue Shirt asked.

The room going dim. The feel of denim as he dug fingers into his legs, refusing to reach for the hands crushing his neck. Relief that Daddy was about to end his miserable life. Fear that the next one would be worse.

“Nothing. I don’t remember anything, and I never said I wanted to press charges.”

“The Crown is pressing them for you.”

“Then you don’t need my help, do you? I’m tired. I’m supposed to be resting.”

He didn’t care what they said. Once they knew the story, they would be a lot less willing to help. He had an agreement with Daddy: sex for room and board. It wasn’t as if he’d been kidnapped. He’d just decided not to do his hooking on the street anymore.

Blue Shirt stood with a quiet sigh. “All right. We’ll let you rest. If you think of anything you want to tell us, we’ll leave our number with the nurses.”

He went back to staring at the curtain, the sting of tears building in his eyes along with a sudden desperate urge to tell them everything. Police were supposed to help people, but they couldn’t help him. What could they do for a guy with no job, no friends, and no work experience that didn’t involve sex? They could take him out back and get a free blowjob, that’s what. It was Westfall Community all over again.

He rolled a little further to press his face into his pillow and tried not to cry. Tears wouldn’t help, and sobbing would only hurt his ribs.

Chapter 7

Marcus stepped off the elevator with the requested sci-fi book tucked under his arm. Two men strode toward him in dark blue pants and crisp shirts. The badges on their belts glinted in the light. He nodded acknowledgement at them. They nodded back and passed him, headed toward the elevator bay.

He continued down the hall past the nurses' station and into Eric's new room; one more crowded than the last. The two beds on the left side were visible. One was empty and one held a chunky man staring at a twelve-inch flat-screen television suspended from the ceiling by a moveable arm, its chatter floating through the otherwise silent space.

He could see the foot of the bed closest to the window on the right, but not the patient. Still, he suspected Eric was in the bed hidden behind a curtain of pink and purple dots. There was nothing to knock on and no bell to ring, so he tugged on the material instead.

"Knock, knock. It's Marcus."

A mumbled "Come in" answered. Eric was almost exactly the way he had left him last night: tethered and somber. Except this time, there were tears on his face.

"Are you okay?"

Eric nodded. Marcus hadn't expected enthusiasm. The poor kid had nothing to do all day but stare at the ceiling and watch the hours roll by. He couldn't read because he couldn't hold a book. He couldn't watch television because those came with a daily rental fee. Where was a homeless kid going to get the money? Eric was destined to have a miserable stay. Marcus didn't blame him for dissolving into tears.

Space between beds was limited. Even more so with the privacy curtain pulled. He ducked out of the enclosure and dragged in a chair, wedging it between the bed and the wall. Before he sat down, he tugged a tissue from the box on the nightstand and reached toward Eric to wipe tears from his face. Eric jerked back from him and pressed his head into the pillow. Startled fear paired with the lingering tears on his face.

"Sorry." He pulled his hand back. "I should have asked first. Do you mind?"

Wide uncertain eyes watched him from the depths of a hard scowl. He gently dabbed the moisture from Eric's face and wiped mucus off his upper lip from a formerly running nose. He understood why they had restrained him, but it was cruel that the kid couldn't even blow his own nose.

"I brought the book." He held it up and plopped into the chair, trying to regain a less tense mood in their bubble of pretend privacy.

He started reading chapter three, glancing at Eric every page or so. Eric stared at the ceiling in silence as the words painted a different world around them. It wasn't a perfect illusion. The person in the bed near the window had a persistent cough, and the sound of the television infected the room like a noxious cloud. Unfortunately, it was the best he could do until the nurses decided Eric had suffered long enough and removed the restraints. He assumed it would be possible to take him on a trip around the unit when they no longer had him confined to his bed. He would have to ask.

He was a single sentence into chapter four when Eric interrupted.

"Why didn't you tell them my name?"

He looked up to find Eric studying him instead of the ceiling.

"Tell who?"

"Anybody. They still call me John Doe, so I'm assuming nobody knows."

"I didn't think about it," he admitted. "I assumed you'd told them only your first name so they were calling you Eric Doe." He twitched a smile that faded when Eric didn't share the humor. "The first thing they taught me when I started here was that patient information is none of my business. I'm supposed to keep what I hear to myself. That's what I did." He shrugged. "If you can tell me what your name is then you can tell them. If you don't tell them, I guess that's your business."

Eric nodded.

"Why haven't you?"

"They don't need to know." Eric went back to looking at the ceiling. "It's just a name. It's not as if it means anything. 'Eric', 'John Doe', what's the difference?"

"One is real. One isn't. Well, I guess that's assuming Eric is really your name."

“I’m whatever people want to call me.”

“What did the guy who hurt you call you?”

Eric’s gaze slid back down from the ceiling to his face. A small smile twitched to life and was gone.

“That’s clever,” Eric said.

“You don’t have to tell me.”

“Mutt,” Eric said. “He called me Mutt. Kind of like pup, but more fitting for a piece of trash.”

“You’re not a piece of trash.”

“How do you know?”

“Because you’re a human being.”

Eric raised eyebrows at him. “You wouldn’t say that if you knew the whole story.” They slid back down.

“I’m listening.”

“So is everybody else.” Eric nodded at the curtain. “It doesn’t matter. I am what I am and nothing can change it.”

“People can always change. Nothing in life is permanent.”

“If you’re going to try to save my soul you’re wasting your time.”

“Souls aren’t mine to save.”

“Skip the God lecture, okay? I’ve heard it.”

He smiled. “I wasn’t talking about God. I’m Buddhist. God’s not really my thing.”

“You mean you worship that guy with the fat belly?”

“No.” He chuckled. “Buddha was a wise man ahead of his time, but we don’t worship him. We don’t worship anyone.”

“That’s weird.”

“And Christianity isn’t?”

“Maybe some of it.” Eric settled back against his pillow. “The part about the guy living in a whale or multiplying pieces of fish like some kind of Criss Angel impression. That’s weird.”

“Weird or impressive, depending on your point of view.”

“I guess. They never impressed me much. At least not for long.”

“Why not?”

“Because they don’t mean it. God doesn’t save everybody. Only the straight ones with houses and respectable jobs. You can pay for a whore and be saved. You just can’t be one.”

“Who said that?”

“Who hasn’t said that? I don’t want to talk about it anymore. Let’s just go back to the book.”

He finished chapter four and stopped. It was dark out already thanks to the clouds, and he had to get home.

“I’ll read some more tomorrow.”

“You don’t have to keep coming back.”

“I know.” He got up. “See you tomorrow.”

“See you.”

He strode out of the room and stopped at the nurses’ station.

“Excuse me,” he caught the attention of one of a handful of unfamiliar faces. “How do I order a television for a patient?”

She told him what extension to dial, and he arranged to have one hooked up for Eric. For him twelve dollars a day wasn’t a huge investment, and if it gave Eric something to do besides lie there in pain and think about what had happened, maybe it would improve his mood enough for them to unstrap him from the bed. It was worth a try.

Eric wasn’t the gay-bashing victim they thought he was. He was just a kid who had agreed to have sex with the wrong guy. From the sound of it, Eric had a history of running into the wrong people. He didn’t understand how they could look in the face of a homeless kid and tell him he was worthless.

He amended the thought as he strode toward the elevators. He didn’t know how young Eric actually was. He looked like a kid, but that didn’t mean he was one. Regardless of his age, it didn’t change much. Even if he wasn’t actually a minor, he couldn’t be older than his mid-twenties. That made him young enough to be a helpless victim at the hands of a monster who saw him as trash. One of many from the sound of it.

He rode down to the main floor while the implications of their brief conversation erased some of the mystery. Eric was homeless, gay, and hooking to survive. That explained the injuries. The less-than-kind nickname from the guy who had done it explained the severity. When Eric left the hospital, he would go right back to that life and the danger it represented for a kid no one was willing to protect. A kid with an endearing dimple in one cheek when he smiled.

He tucked the book under his arm, stuffed his hands in his coat pockets, and marched toward the bus stop, disturbed by the prospect of Eric's return to that miserable existence. He had barely survived the last attack. A second chance at life deserved something better than a cardboard mattress on a dirty sidewalk, newspaper blankets in the rain, and sex with people who didn't respect him.

Melanie might be able to get Eric into a program to help him rehabilitate his life, but to do that she had to know his name and his story. If Eric refused to tell anyone, they couldn't help him. If he told the story for him, it would destroy the tentative trust, and he doubted Eric would ever tell him anything again. He didn't like that option. There had to be something else.

Chapter 8

Marcus stepped into the room the next day with a book in one hand and a milkshake in the other, hoping to see at least an improved mood in Eric. He found more than that. The restraints were gone, and he had a collection of graphic novels in his lap. The television hung from the ceiling in silence.

“Wow. They turned you loose, eh?”

Eric looked up from the page, his stoic expression unchanged from the day before.

“Yeah. The doctor didn’t want me on a catheter anymore so they had no choice. It was either untie me or change the sheets every few hours.”

“How does it feel to be a free man?”

“Surprisingly confining.” Eric glanced at the privacy curtain.

“You could always open it.”

“Trust me. It wouldn’t help.”

“I brought you something.” He changed the subject and held out the large cup. “Vanilla milkshake. It’s a little dull, but I didn’t know what flavor you liked.”

“You didn’t have to do that.”

“I know. Go ahead. Take it.”

Familiar suspicion flowed across Eric’s expression as he took the cup, eyes never leaving Marcus’ face.

“Thanks,” Eric muttered.

“No problem. I’m taking a chance that you’re not lactose intolerant or something.”

“What’s the catch?”

“No catch.”

“First you rent me a television and now you’re bringing me milkshakes. Seriously. What’s the catch?”

He had told the hospitality department to keep his name anonymous so Eric wouldn’t feel obligated, but he was a bit too smart for that to work. He supposed in his situation Eric had to be cautious.

“What makes you think the television was from me?”

“Because they said it was from an anonymous Samaritan, and you’re the only one of those I know.”

“Really? Because the hospital is full of them.”

“I don’t see anybody else sitting by a stranger’s bed, reading them books.”

“It happens.” He sat in the chair still wedged between Eric’s bed and the wall.

“And you didn’t mention the television when you came in.”

“Maybe I didn’t see it.”

Eric raised one eyebrow, looked at the television dangling conspicuously from the ceiling and back at him.

“Nobody is that oblivious. You didn’t put your name on it and didn’t mention it because you’re not an attention-seeking douchebag. I respect that, but the milkshake has bribery written all over it.” Eric captured the straw between his lips and sucked. “So... what’s the catch? Are you hoping to be first in line when I’m healed enough to suck cock? I could probably do it right now if you don’t mind an audience.”

“I appreciate the offer, but no.”

“I won’t be able to fuck for a long time.”

“I don’t want that either.”

“Then what?”

“Nothing. You were alone and chained to your bed. I thought you could use some cheering up.”

“Oh, so it’s pity.”

“More sympathy than pity, but yes, I felt bad for you. I thought it was long past time someone did something nice for you just to be nice.”

“People aren’t nice just to be nice.”

“Not any of the ones you’ve been around, apparently.”

“You can’t afford to be picky when you’re desperate. Besides,” Eric paused to take another drink, “when even a church pastor can’t find a reason to be nice, you start to take the hint.”

“Pastors are only people. Some are good. Some aren’t.”

“And some are bastards pretending to be human.”

“Some are.” He nodded agreement. “Was yours one of those?”

“He wasn’t mine. He was just an asshole running a church with a program that claimed to help get people off the street. He meant women he could fuck as payment for his generosity. I didn’t fit the description, but he couldn’t exactly say that in front of his followers so he smiled for the audience and left it at lectures about how all gay men go to hell.”

“That’s a very twisted idea of helping people.”

“Most people have a twisted idea of helping people.”

“That still leaves room for a few exceptions, right?”

Eric stared at him and took another drink of milkshake. “Let me put it this way. If we weren’t in a hospital with witnesses, I’d suspect this thing was drugged,” Eric said. “I don’t trust anyone because nobody deserves to be trusted. Everybody has an angle. I just can’t figure out yours.”

“I suppose that’s true. My angle is that you’ve been through some terrible things. The thought of you going back to the street to live through more bothers me.”

“Why?”

“Because nobody deserves that, and the fact that so many people have treated you so badly bothers me even more.”

“The world’s like that.” Eric shrugged. “Fags don’t deserve respect. Fags on the street deserve even less.”

“I don’t believe that.”

“It’s true.”

“No it isn’t. People mistreat you because they’re sick inside, not because you deserve it.”

A quiet squawk filled the near silence as Eric pulled the straw in and out of the hole in the lid of his milkshake. “I can’t afford to think like that,” he said.

“If it’s the truth, why not?”

“Because the street is all I have, and it hurts less if I think I deserve being kicked around.”

“What if you got off the street?”

“Don’t bother.” Eric took another drink. “I’ve heard that line before, and the last time I fell for it I ended up the personal whore to a guy obsessed with fucking demons. It’s a scam.”

“I’m not talking about a church. It’s a government program to teach you job skills and help you start over.”

“I don’t want to owe anything to anyone. If I have to fuck to survive, I want to at least get to choose who and when. I appreciate the milkshake and the television and the books, but it’s not going to be you, okay?”

“I’m not queueing up to be the first in line when you’re healed.”

“Then what do you want?”

“I want to prove to you that not all people are sexual deviants.”

“Why?”

“Because you shouldn’t have to go through life thinking they are.”

“If it’s the truth then why not?” Eric parroted back to him.

“Because it’s not the truth. Even if everybody else in the city is like that, I’m not. You have options. It’s not all smoke and mirrors and people trolling for free sex with empty promises.”

“What, are you running for Pope?”

“No. I’m just a guy who thinks all people are equal even if some are more screwed up than others. You don’t deserve less just because you’re gay.”

“You’ve obviously missed a few meetings.”

“There are thousands of gay men in this part of the country, and most of them live normal lives like everyone else. Gay isn’t an exception. Not here.”

“Says the man who has a place to live and a job and a respectable life.”

“Yes, says the gay man who has a place to live and a job and a respectable life.”

“So you really are after my ass.”

The dimple reappeared with Eric’s smile, and a jab of desire hit him in the gut. He wanted to reach out and caress that dimple. He mentally slapped the thought out of his head. Who hit on a guy still recovering from a violent sexual assault?

“I don’t want to be your lover. I want to be your friend.”

“‘Lover’? I hate to break it to you, but street whores don’t have lovers.”

“You’ve never had sex with someone just because you wanted to?” he asked and realized he was prying into things that weren’t his business. “Sorry. You don’t have to answer that.”

“I had a boyfriend once,” Eric said to his milkshake before taking another drink. “I also had a life once. None of that matters anymore. Now I have this bed and this milkshake and three meals a day, kind of like death row before they fry you like a chicken in the electric chair in the States. It won’t last, and when I leave here, that’s the end of it.”

“It doesn’t have to be the end of it.”

“Yes, it does... and I’m okay with that. If this lasted forever, I’d get bored. A few days living like royalty is long enough. A happy send-off, you know?”

“A send off to what?”

“Nothing.” Eric shook his head. “Why don’t you read me another chapter?”

He didn’t know if “nothing” meant Eric didn’t want to get into it or meant literally nothing, a blatant warning that he wasn’t going back to the street because he didn’t intend to live long enough for that to happen. He wanted to press for an answer, but Eric’s tone and suddenly blank expression said he wouldn’t get anywhere if he did. He had at least a couple more days to get an answer and find a solution that didn’t put his reluctant new friend back on the street. It didn’t have to happen right that minute.

He opened the book and began to read while Eric slurped the last of his milkshake.

Chapter 9

Marcus stepped through the door and out of the rain, unzipping his coat as he scanned the small restaurant. One of his trio of friends waved to him from a corner table, and he walked across the room, a cacophony of smells dancing around him, making his stomach groan.

“Sorry I’m late,” he offered as he shrugged out of his coat.

“No one’s complaining. The last one here pays the bill, remember?”

Every Thursday night he and three friends in the building got together at a Vietnamese restaurant down the block and had dinner. Microlofts didn’t allow room for entertaining more than one guest at a time. That was part of their charm. The neighborhood was your living room. He doubted there was a single homebody in the entire building.

He ordered a bowl of pho and listened to them talk about their jobs, their families, their plans for the weekend. Sam, Erin, and Tony were regular customers at Barks and Beans. That’s how they had met; chatting over the counter while he made their drinks.

“I’m going to the new Manet exhibit at the art gallery. I’ve been trying to get there for a month, and this weekend is the weekend,” Erin announced. “Anyone want to come?”

“I might be able to go Sunday if I can figure out how to help a friend by then,” he said.

“What’s the problem?” Tony asked before taking a bite of flat noodles smothered in sauce and vegetables.

He told them about Eric. The hospital wouldn’t keep him much longer. He wasn’t critical and with the restraints gone, they obviously weren’t worried about him hurting himself. He wasn’t sure they were right.

“He needs a place to stay and a job. I might be able to talk my grandfather into hiring him to help at the store, but that doesn’t make much difference if he spends every night on the street.”

“Let him sleep in your closet,” Sam teased.

“Or the tub,” Tony added.

“My unit only has a shower,” he said.

“Can he sleep standing up?” Tony asked.

“The problem isn’t space.” He ignored the jokes. “An air mattress on the floor would work. The problem is he doesn’t trust anyone. He gets suspicious over a milkshake. There is no way he would agree to stay with me.”

“Then why bother? I mean, if the guy doesn’t want help why is it your problem?” Tony asked.

“Because if it was me, I’d want someone to help. He has nothing. He considers the hospital a luxury hotel because he gets regular meals and has a warm bed.”

The conversation dwindled for a moment as the picture sank in.

“So you need to sweet-talk a woman into letting him move into their spare bedroom,” Erin said.

“Or onto their couch. I thought about asking my grandfather because I doubt Eric will see him as a threat, but I don’t want to dump this problem on him.”

“Except if the guy will be working for your grandfather, won’t it make sense to have him stay out there near the store?” Sam said. “If he’s down here he’ll need a metro pass, and that just adds to the expense.”

“You have a point.”

“And isn’t your grandfather the one who ordered you to volunteer at the hospital in the first place?” Erin asked. “It seems fitting that he help resolve a problem you only found because you were at the hospital serving his punishment.”

“That’s not really the way it’s supposed to work.”

“Maybe not, but it did,” Tony said as he chewed.

It offered a tidy solution, but it also put most of the responsibility for rehabilitating Eric on the wrong person. It was his idea to get involved. He needed to be the one making most of the sacrifices. Otherwise, it wasn’t fair.

He carried the problem home with him after dinner and spent several hours lying awake in the dark trying to figure out how to help someone who didn’t want help. Somewhere around midnight, he realized that wasn’t true. Eric had never said he didn’t want help, just that he didn’t believe anyone actually wanted to help him. They wanted to help themselves.

The next morning, he put an extra shot of espresso in his latte in an attempt to make up for lost sleep so he wouldn't yawn his way through the rush of customers. It did nothing for the bags under his eyes.

"It looks like someone was out a little too late last night," his mother said when the early morning wave of customers died down.

"No, just couldn't sleep."

"Is something bothering you?"

He told her Eric's story. "Do you think Wai Gong can use him at the store?"

"Perhaps, but he wouldn't be able to pay him a full wage. Rent at the store is going up. Customer demand isn't. He may have a housing crisis of his own before long."

A job was nice, but if it didn't pay at least minimum wage, Eric would never be able to rent his own room somewhere. Keeping him dependent on someone else wasn't the goal.

"Do we know anyone who can afford to pay him?"

"Does he have any work history?"

"No. Nothing he could put on a resume."

"You're right. That's a problem," she said as she wiped the tables clean. "And what about a room?"

"That's the other problem. It needs to be someone old enough not to pose a threat or better yet, a woman."

"Or a shelter. I mean, he is homeless after all. That's what they're for."

"I hate the thought of that. To be honest, I'm not sure he'd do it. Sleeping in an unsupervised room full of strange men... I doubt he'd think much of that idea after what he's been through."

His mother shook her head with a quiet sigh. "I'm proud of you for wanting to help this boy, but if he doesn't want help..."

"I think he does. He just doesn't trust people to be honest with him, and he's only known me for two days. That's not much of a foundation."

"And he won't talk to the people at the hospital?"

"The last program that offered to get him off the street only turned him into someone's sex slave. He isn't eager to try that again."

“Was it a government program?”

“No. A church.”

She went back to shaking her head. “Unbelievable.”

“I was a little shocked, myself.”

“Let’s see if your father has any ideas when he comes in this afternoon. Maybe he knows someone who needs a new employee. That will at least solve one problem. I’m not sure what to do about the other. It isn’t the type of thing you can ask friends to do for you.”

“I agree.”

“And there’s no chance you can talk him into staying with you?”

“I doubt it. Everything I do for him only makes him more suspicious. He doesn’t want to owe me any favors because he’s certain he knows how I’ll want to collect.”

“What if he owes me the favors?”

“I honestly don’t know.”

“Do you think he would stay with you if I was the one making the offer and promised him you would behave yourself?”

“I doubt he’d believe I would. If I forced myself on him, it would be my word against his and you’re my mother. I don’t think that idea would appeal to him.”

“He’s that paranoid?”

“That paranoid and that scared. He doesn’t think he can take anyone’s word for anything because when he does it turns out to be a lie.”

“We’ll talk to your father.” She patted his arm on the way to the sink to rinse the towel. “There has to be a solution that doesn’t mean this poor young man continues to believe everyone he meets is a liar.”

“I hope so. Melanie thinks they could release him as early as tomorrow afternoon.”

“As hurt as he is?”

“It’s nothing they can fix. They’ve patched up what they can. The rest has to heal on its own, and it can do that just as well outside the hospital.”

“Except he’ll be on the street.”

“If he refuses to let them help, she says there’s nothing they can do. He won’t even tell them his name.”

“Can you tell them?”

“He told me in confidence. He might not trust me with his body, but he trusts me with his secrets, and that’s more than I can say for anyone else who has tried to help him. He won’t even talk to the police.”

The jingle of the bells on the front door announced customers and the end of their conversation. It would keep until his father showed up with a new perspective and hopefully a brilliant idea.

Chapter 10

Eric turned off the television and picked up a graphic novel with a rumpled cover and torn pages. He hadn't read Spiderman since he was a kid, back when people still called them comic books. Things weren't perfect then, but they had been easier, his sexuality a dormant disease not yet capable of turning him into an outcast.

He flipped pages, refusing to surrender to boredom. He had spent the morning watching news shows, talk shows, and game shows until he had most of the commercials memorized. He wasn't in the mood to read, but there was nothing else to do in his shared suite at the Vancouver General Waldorf, where the maids brought him drugs and food.

There was talk of them kicking him out later that day because only the truly sick patients stayed over the weekend. They didn't think he qualified anymore even if he still looked and felt like a truck had run him over. He didn't know if they were serious or trying to scare him into cooperating. Anticipation knotted his stomach every time he heard shoes approach the door. Scared or not, telling them his story wouldn't change anything. He had nowhere to go and they couldn't fix that. Whether on the street or in a shelter, he was obviously damaged goods and that made him an easy target. Unless the city wanted to give him a free apartment somewhere, he was better off taking care of himself. He knew a few filthy dens that would keep him safe until he decided how to end this.

Days after Daddy had left him for dead, he no longer had the same resolve to let someone beat him to death. He didn't want to feel that kind of pain again. He wanted it to be instant, whisking the agony away with his final breath so he didn't have to deal with the aftermath. That wouldn't happen unless someone shot him in the head, and he had yet to meet a monster with a gun. He was short and skinny. Who needed weapons when they could just pick him up and carry him off? No one ever threatened him with anything more than torture or a return to the street where they'd found him slowly starving to death.

If the windows in the hospital opened, he would have taken the elevator up to a higher patient floor and thrown himself out one of them. A ten-story drop wouldn't leave much to clean up. Just a pile of broken bones and thus would end the saga of the faggot whore.

The sound of feet on the floor sent his heart pounding like the bassline of a rap song. This was it. They were going to make one last pitch for his life's story and throw him out. He wanted to curl into a ball and hide under the covers, but several stitched and broken places cringed at the thought.

Marcus appeared through the door, and he was tempted to be relieved until a woman walked into the room a step behind him. They were both Asian, but he didn't know if that meant they were related. Marcus was also several hours early. Something was up.

"Hi, Eric," Marcus smiled. "How's it going?"

He looked from Marcus to the woman. Whoever she was, he knew a setup when he saw one.

"You told them." Disappointment seeped through him like sludge. "I thought you were different." He turned his back on them, rolling onto his side.

"Will you let me explain before you get into a snit?"

"I know. You were just trying to help. You only want to do what's best for me. Blah, blah, blah. I've heard it before. Save your breath."

"Yes, my son is trying to help you, but it's not what you think," the woman said from somewhere behind him.

Confusion rolled him back a few inches. "Your son?"

"Eric, this is my mother, Ellen Chen."

"It's a pleasure to meet you." She held out her hand.

He shook it, no less confused. "I don't understand."

"That's what I've been trying to tell you." Marcus smiled.

"May I sit?" Mrs. Chen asked.

He nodded and rolled gingerly onto his back while she settled into the only chair.

"I have to be honest. I've told a few people a little of your story, but only so they could understand why I want to help you," Marcus said.

"Did you have any luck with that, because even I don't understand why you want to help me?"

"You have been the topic of conversation for most of the day, I'm afraid," Mrs. Chen said.

“And we think we have a solution, but it’s going to require a little trust on your part. I know you’re not big on that,” Marcus added.

“What solution?”

“We want to offer you a job,” Mrs. Chen said.

The news did nothing to loosen the knot in his stomach. “Doing what?”

“What are your feelings about coffee?”

“It’s a great hand warmer. Why?”

“Our family runs a coffee shop on West Hastings. It’s actually part café, part dog playground. We’re probably going to be opening a second store in the next few months and need someone to make coffee, clean up tables, that sort of thing,” she said.

“What makes you think I know how to do that?”

“We’re assuming you don’t,” Marcus said, “but it’s not complicated. We can teach you.”

He looked from Marcus to Mrs. Chen. “A real job with a real pay cheque?”

“Yes.” She nodded. “You’ll be expected to be clean, tidy, and on time. Do you think you can do that?”

“Clean and tidy might be an issue.” Life on the street didn’t come with showers or closets. “Look, I appreciate what you seem to be trying to do, but it’s pointless.”

“We are also trying to find you a place to live for a few months,” Marcus said. “Assuming you would trust strangers to do such a thing.”

The words crushed the fragile bit of hope struggling to breathe in his chest. He knew what it meant when things sounded too good to be true. He thought Marcus was different.

“Free room and board and what?” He glared. “I make coffee and other domestic chores as assigned by the guy who so graciously saved me from the street? I’ve heard that story before. I already know how it ends.”

“This is a different story with a different ending,” Marcus said. “Trust me. No domestic chores. No strings. The new café will leave us short-handed at the current one. Once you’re fully trained, you would take my place on the early shift, working with my mother.” Marcus rested a hand on his mother’s

shoulder. “You could sleep in my loft and I can stay at my parents’ house or the other way around, whichever appeals to you more.”

“You’re offering me a loft?”

“Loaning,” Mrs. Chen said. “The job is permanent if you want it, though it won’t pay more than minimum wage. The loft is temporary to give you a chance to save for a deposit on a room somewhere.”

“I know how you feel about staying with strangers, and I knew there was nothing I could say to convince you this isn’t a ploy to make you feel obligated to do things you don’t want to do,” Marcus said. “Involving my family is the only way I could think of to make you understand it isn’t a trick.”

Confusion and fear wrestled inside, alternately pinning each other to the floor of his stomach.

“You’re giving me a job and a rent-free place I share with who?”

“If you decide you want to sleep in the loft then no one.”

“But it would be your loft and you would have a key, right?”

“Yes.”

The idea that someone else had stepped forward, offering to rebuild his life as a ploy didn’t surprise him. The elaborate plan did. People weren’t usually so creative.

“Why would you do any of this for someone you hardly know? It’s a bit over the top, isn’t it?”

“Because many years ago my father came to Vancouver with a dream and a bedroll and little else,” Mrs. Chen said. “If it weren’t for the kindness of strangers in his neighborhood he never would have survived. They gave him food and shelter when he had neither. It would be hypocritical and ungrateful to turn our backs on someone else in the same position, wouldn’t it?”

“I guess.”

Mrs. Chen reached across the bed and rested a hand on one of his for a brief moment. “I understand your reluctance, especially considering what you have suffered so far. The offer is genuine. No tricks. No deception. We need help at the café to allow us to keep up with our current business while my husband arranges the new one. You need a job and a safe place to stay. We can help each other.”

“People don’t do things like this,” he told Marcus. “They don’t just adopt people.”

“Sure they do,” Marcus replied. “People take in friends every day. That’s why they invented couches.”

He fiddled with the blankets, letting the silence stretch between them, fighting the instinct that told him to run from whatever they really had in mind. A warm bed wasn’t worth the nights spent servicing Marcus or his father or both.

“I appreciate the offer, and I’d like the job as long as it’s real. I work and you pay me and that’s all, but I’ll find my own place to sleep.”

“On the street,” Marcus said a hint of something near annoyance in his tone.

“I’m not trying to be ungrateful,” he met Marcus’ gaze, “but in my experience accepting charity never leads anywhere good.”

“We understand.” Mrs. Chen patted his arm and stood. “They tell us you have nothing but the soiled clothes they cut apart in Emergency downstairs. Will you let me bring you a few clean things to wear? Nothing fancy, just enough to keep you warm.”

“Okay.” He nodded with a shrug. “I guess. Thanks.”

“You are quite welcome.” She headed for the door.

“We’ll be back,” Marcus said and followed her out into the hall.

He stared at the empty bed across the aisle and wondered if a small, steady paycheck would really change anything. He couldn’t imagine loving the new job enough to want to hang around. If Marcus and his mother were telling the truth, they were extraordinarily kind people, but they didn’t understand. His life didn’t come with a happy ending where he had a steady job and a room to himself somewhere. It ended in misery and blood and, if he was lucky, a minimum of pain.

Chapter 11

A biting chill rode the breeze as Eric wove between cars in the hospital parking lot. He imagined Marcus watching him but refused to turn around to check. This wasn't a tearful farewell in some sappy movie. It didn't warrant an emotional good-bye despite Marcus' clear disappointment over not getting his way.

Marcus wanted to save him like a stray puppy. He wasn't helpless. He knew the street, and he knew where to hide to keep from becoming someone's entertainment for the evening. The only time he ever got into trouble was when he was foolish enough to let someone try to rescue him.

He stood with the cluster of people waiting for the bus and, for an instant, felt like a normal person. They let him take a shower yesterday and wash at least a week of filth and grime from his body, not to mention the last traces of Daddy. He had a new hooded coat and jeans that were still stiff and pristine. The one-day bus pass, the jeans, and a couple of shirts came from the hospital along with the drugs to get him through the next week. The shoes, coat, and backpack to carry his new wardrobe came from Mrs. Chen.

People had chipped in to get him on his feet whether he liked it or not and none of them had been Marcus. He felt better about that. It wasn't impossible for Mrs. Chen to be orchestrating this to woo a new sex slave for her son, but she didn't seem the type. She wasn't full of that fake compassion that came with quoted scriptures, public posturing for a congregation, and a hungry leer when no one was looking. She helped because her family knew what it was like to have to depend on others for survival.

Of all the people he had met over the past several years, she might be the only one that understood. He wouldn't know until he had a chance to test her, watch her, learn a few of her secrets.

He stepped onto the bus, slid his pass through the card reader, and took the first available seat. The doctor said he was healed enough to leave, but not all of him felt like it. The march across the parking lot and up the block to the bus had drained him of most of his energy. He needed a place to crash for a while and the bus was as good as any.

He rode to the end of the line, climbed on a second bus, and rode back toward the center of town before switching to the SkyTrain. He didn't look like

a street kid. The transit police wouldn't hassle him as long as he had a valid pass, so he settled into a seat with his backpack in his lap and rode it out to Surrey and back again, dozing.

When the sun began to set, he traded the train for another bus that traveled Hastings Street until tidy West Hastings became grimy East Hastings. A street lamp lit a chunky historic building on the corner decorated with gang tags, a long-standing home to addicts and dealers.

Across the street was an equally grand structure that served as low-income housing. Rumor had it the building with regal columns at the entrance once belonged to the Vancouver Police Department. It didn't anymore, and from the look of the block, half the businesses had moved out with them. Shuttered and painted windows dotted the street. A ghost town at the fringes of the city.

Clean and dressed in new clothes, he was a target here at the hub where poverty and addiction met. He would have to take care of that or risk being rolled by a junky, hoping to find something valuable in his pristine backpack.

Half a block down East Hastings he stepped into an alley crowded with shadows. He hadn't been on the street for months, but that didn't matter. Time moved slowly in that world. Little other than the faces changed. People died, went to jail, attempted rehab, but the haunts and steady demand for them remained the same. He didn't need to see to know where he was going. An odd feeling of coming home settled over him as he scurried through the shadows. He belonged here with the rest of the human refuse, a thought equally comforting and depressing. He tugged a piece of plywood away from the building, grunting at the scream from his ribs. With the backpack worn against his chest, he squeezed inside.

The stench of urine, feces, and humans slowly wasting away shoved him back toward the opening. He had forgotten how bad that rat hole smelled. He tugged the collar of his T-shirt up over his nose and crawled on hands and knees through a tunnel of fallen boards. Grit and sharp bits dug into his skin, coating him in muck that would keep him from looking so obviously out of place.

He emerged from the shallow tunnel and shuffled across the floor. Dim light from the street lamps struggled through dirty front windows of what used to be a bookstore and was now a rare haven. The entrance limited the size of the people using it to those scrawny and wasted enough to get through. Most of his roommates were users riding a high. When they crashed, they crawled out to

score again. The worst he'd ever experienced in that pit was someone going through his pockets while he slept, looking for cash, desperate hands tugging at him, weak from days without food or water. No one had the energy or craving for sex. They only craved the next high. Most were like him: whores who sold their asses for whatever they could get.

He wasn't an addict. He'd never had the money for drugs, but he was one of them nonetheless. Desperate. Exhausted. Alone.

He curled up on a bare patch of floor near one wall and used his backpack as a pillow. When the sun came up tomorrow and he could see more than varying degrees of shadow, he would figure out how to scuff it and his shoes up to look a bit less obvious.

He stared toward the ceiling he couldn't see and wondered if he could use the backpack to hang himself. An errant question that lacked any real passion. He was back to nothing. No bed. No food. No future, and if the coffee shop job didn't pan out, no money with which to fix any of that. He might as well be dead. The only thing keeping him going was a mild sensation of freedom.

Among the list of things he didn't have was the presence of a cruel man making him beg for pain and telling him all the reasons he deserved the abuse. The euphoria wouldn't last long. It would be gone by tomorrow when he learned his new job came with so many conditions it wasn't worth the effort. What if he had to go a week without food because they weren't paying him until Friday? What if they demanded he repay the cost of the shoes and coat out of his first check? A demand for sex wasn't necessarily the worst of it.

For now, it was a fairy tale, a fantasy that made it easier to sleep, and he drifted off wondering if he could swallow his bottle of pain pills and die while he was relatively happy. He didn't know if prescription-strength ibuprofen was lethal, and in the silent smothering stench, it seemed a poor risk. It might not do anything other than make him throw up, and he didn't want to annoy his ribs for the sake of a failed suicide attempt that left him without any drugs to shut them up again.

He would think of something later.

Chapter 12

The front door jingled with the arrival of a new customer, and Marcus jerked his head that direction, hope bubbling inside only to be smothered by the black tar of disappointment. For the past hour, they had battered him in alternating waves every time someone came through the door.

They had told Eric to be there by nine. He was almost an hour late, and Marcus didn't know what that meant. Had he slept in? Had he changed his mind about the job? Had something happened to him?

He pressed a lid onto a steaming vanilla latte and handed it to the customer with a smile he hoped didn't look too distracted. He was tense and tired after a sleepless night, imagining Eric sleeping in a doorway somewhere with busted ribs and nothing but a coat to keep him warm.

He wished Eric hadn't been so stubborn about accepting help. He also understood why he was. In Eric's place, he wouldn't have trusted the offer from a total stranger either. Not after so many others with selfish motives. Caution would keep him alive longer... assuming he wanted to live.

Part of him had spent the night trying to conjure an image of Eric hanging from a beam somewhere, and he'd been batting it away half-formed ever since. He had no proof Eric was dead. It was just as likely he had changed his mind about the job and was off somewhere begging for change. He certainly looked battered enough to earn a few sympathy dollars.

The door jingled again, and this time he refused to look, his eyes glued to the gathering foam of heated coconut milk.

"Take care of the till. I'll get this," his mother said.

"Okay. Get what?"

He looked up as she strode away from him to the end of the counter. Eric stood in the open door, leaning heavily on the handle, almost as pale as the milk. His new jeans were already filthy, his hair clean but disheveled, his eyes sunken and dark. He looked worse than he had in the hospital, and a heavy ball of something cold and fearful rolled into Marcus' stomach.

Marcus glanced at the customer on the other side of the counter and flashed a smile, hoping he looked less disturbed than he felt. He handed her the latte,

and she walked toward the door watching the same scene he was: his mother leading Eric to a chair at a table near the door.

He wanted to help, but they had made an agreement that morning, and he needed to stick to it. As far as Eric was concerned, all men were predators. He would never stay long enough to earn the money to get on his feet if he had to deal with men. His mother was the only one with any chance of winning Eric over.

“Will you make him a large mocha?” she called over her shoulder. “And toss me a wet towel.”

He rinsed a towel in the sink behind the counter and tossed it to her across the almost empty café. Thankfully, it was the midmorning lull, and they had time to deal with the drama without neglecting anyone. He fixed a latte with whole milk, glancing at his mother every few seconds as she wiped Eric’s face and hands as if he were a little boy roughed up on a school playground.

He walked the mocha over and set it on the table.

“Thank you,” his mother said. “Here,” she turned to Eric. “Drink this. It will warm you up. Where are your pills?”

“In the pocket,” Eric mumbled, patting at his backpack.

His mother picked it up, turning it this way and that, inspecting a bag that looked significantly different than it had the day before. The handles were gone. So were the exterior pockets. It was inside out. She unzipped it and pulled out a bundle of clothes to get to the pockets now hidden inside. She found his pills, glanced at the label, unscrewed the cap, and poured out two fat caplets.

“When did you take these last?” she asked.

“I don’t know. I don’t have a watch.”

That explained why he was late.

“Was it dark?”

“Yes.” Eric sipped at his mocha.

“Then you’re probably due for another dose. Honey, get him some water and grab one of the muffins. I’m sure he’s starving.”

He strode back to the counter while she talked to Eric about cleaning his now filthy clothes. As with most things, Eric protested. As with most things, he

had a good point. He couldn't sleep on the street in clean clothes without encouraging people to hassle him. The most effective camouflage was grunge.

"After you finish breakfast, why don't you go into the washroom and change into your clean jeans. Then you can put the dirty ones back on before you leave," she offered. "We should probably do the same thing with this coat. You're a sight. You know that?" Marcus heard the smile in her tone even if he couldn't see it with her back to him.

He set a plastic cup of water and a large muffin on the table with a napkin and retreated behind the counter, giving Eric plenty of space. He wiped the counter and checked the stash of inventory in preparation for the lunch rush and let his mother handle Eric, who devoured the muffin in ravenous bites, cheeks bulging as he chewed.

From the look of it, Eric hadn't eaten since he left the hospital the day before. He shook his head as he organized the boxes of milk under the counter. This would be much easier if Eric would just agree to sleep on the couch.

By the time his mother ushered Eric off to change his jeans, he looked less miserable and had more color in his face even if he still shuffled like an old man.

"Do you think the hospital released him too soon?" Marcus asked, the door jingling as more people drifted in, dogs in tow. "Good morning. What can I get for you today?" He slipped instantly into his cheerful barista persona.

They ordered lattes and dog treats, and he started working on the first drink. His mother grabbed a couple of specialty canine snacks from the far end of the counter. The yap of small dogs bounced around the café while the groomed bundles of fur bounced around the indoor play yard.

"I think he's well enough to be out of the hospital but not well enough to be on the street," his mother answered quietly on her way to the cash register near him. "He's still healing, and he's going to be easily exhausted for a while."

"It's too bad we can't wedge a cot into the store room."

They had already discussed and rejected that idea. If Eric saw anything resembling a bed anywhere in the café, he would get the wrong impression and probably walk out. Never mind that they weren't zoned as a residence and could be fined if anyone reported them. The best they could do was add extra towels to the stack they used to dry off dogs coming out of the rain, and

casually suggest he use some of them as a nest on the floor during business hours.

They didn't expect him to go from a hospital bed to working a full day. She assumed they would be lucky to get a few hours out of him, and even those would be broken up into smaller chunks. For the most part, they expected him to sit at a table and rest, intending to let him learn the job by observing from a distance. With the way Eric looked that morning, they would be lucky if he could manage to sit upright.

It was a good thing they were still looking for a space for the second store and weren't to the point of trying to stretch their minimal staff over two cafés. Eric was barely more than an invalid. He wouldn't be able to do the job until he could stand on his feet for hours at a time. He watched Eric shuffle across the floor from the washroom and slide gingerly back into his chair in clean jeans and a sweatshirt. They'd never get him to stand long enough to learn anything. For now, they had a silent half-starved observer.

They couldn't make him heal any faster, but they could fix the half-starved part. That was something.

Chapter 13

Eric sat on the floor propped up by a stack of towels, half a twelve-inch sub sandwich disappearing from his hands one bite at a time. Marcus had brought him a toasted pile of cheese and vegetables for lunch. He could have gone for something with salami or turkey, but Marcus' family was vegetarian. It was just as well. The other half of the sandwich was wrapped in plastic and tucked in his backpack for dinner that night. Cheese was less likely to spoil before he had a chance to eat it.

Mrs. Chen sat on a stool just inside the storage room entrance, eating her own lunch of Thai noodles. They smelled incredible, though the one noodle he tried had been spicy enough to practically burn a hole in his tongue. He couldn't imagine sitting calmly, eating bite after bite as if it was no more caustic than spaghetti. His stomach would curl up and die.

The rest of him felt much better than it had that morning. Achy and weak, he'd been sure he was minutes from death. He had dragged himself to the café because he hadn't wanted to die among junkies or in some random doorway like a sick cat. He wanted to die near people who might care a little that he was dead.

It had shocked him once his mind cleared enough to think. A few days ago, he'd been ready to step in front of a SkyTrain and end it all. Shouldn't a guy who wanted to be dead stay in his hovel and expire in peace? Something inside obviously didn't want his last moments to be as lonely as the years before. He wanted someone to care.

A few hours ago, he would have said that was asking too much. He didn't know anyone who cared about gay men. They were sexual objects and nothing more, *two holes and a dick* as his former pimps had been so fond of saying. Gays weren't people. Not really. Men like Mr. Collins from the church board and Daddy after him were only successful because they hid what they really were and kept sex an ugly little secret.

He had finally figured that out early one morning, kneeling on a padded church pew with Mr. Collins digging fingers into his hips and pounding into his ass, grunting about Satan. If he ever wanted to be happy again he needed to do what his father had insisted all along: stop being a faggot.

No more sex. No more sucking cock. Definitely no more of the thing that had caused his downfall in the first place: kissing cute boys. It was too bad he

couldn't find any other way to survive on the street. If he didn't put out, he would starve, and if he kept putting out, he would never be happy. It was an impossible situation.

He chewed his sandwich and scowled at the supply shelves across the room. In theory, he finally had the real job he wanted, which could lead to a real life, but the meager pay required a roommate. How did a person live in an apartment with a stranger and not end up that stranger's prisoner? He would have to choose his roommates carefully. If they weren't as short and scrawny as he was then forget it. He needed at least a reasonable chance of fighting them off. If this was the start of a new life, he wanted a total remake, not a new kind of nightmare.

"I didn't realize a cheese sandwich could make a person so pensive."

He looked over to see Mrs. Chen watching him.

"It's not the sandwich. It's really good, though." He held it up before taking another bite.

Mrs. Chen had been his sole companion all morning. Marcus worked with the customers and kept his distance. Mrs. Chen did all the mothering and tending, making sure he was comfortable and fed. He doubted the arrangement was accidental. They wanted him to stay. He wasn't sure why yet, but for the moment, he appreciated the kindness.

He had been without a mother for a long time. She had died when he was nine, leaving him and his father to figure out how to take care of each other. He used to wonder whether her presence would have made a difference the afternoon his father found out that he was gay. He didn't wonder that anymore. It didn't matter.

Unfortunately, Mrs. Chen's kindness was part of a deal, and he wasn't living up to his end. Somewhere around the appearance of the free sandwich to go with the free muffins and coffee, his lack of energy had started to worry him. This wouldn't work if he was too sick to do anything more than sponge off them because it would leave his debt unpaid.

"I was just thinking," he pretended that topic was the only one in his head, "you took me in with the condition that I work for you and so far I haven't done much."

"You will. The hospital warned us you would be weak and tired for several days. Healed or not, you suffered a life-threatening trauma, Eric. It takes time

for the body to recover. Our need for a cashier isn't so great we can justify ignoring your health. When you're well enough you'll work, right?"

"Aren't you afraid I'm going to leave as soon as I'm better?"

"No."

"Shouldn't you be?"

She chuckled. "No. I don't get the impression you enjoy being homeless enough to purposely choose it. Why would you walk away from a chance to build work experience and earn money in favor of returning to something you don't like?"

"I probably wouldn't," he said.

He took another bite of sandwich. She was a smart woman. He didn't know whether that also made her a bigger risk. A kind, smart woman could still be a ploy to get him to trust her so she could turn him into Marcus' personal whore. Or it could be that she was just an extraordinarily kind person. The thought didn't make him any less suspicious.

"I know it's easy to say, but not everyone is someone to fear," she said.

His stomach clenched around the sandwich, and his skin bunched into cold bumps at the thought that she was reading his mind somehow. He didn't really think she was psychic, but it was creepy nonetheless.

"Who says I'm afraid?"

"Let's just say you don't have a face for poker." She smiled. "I don't blame you for being cautious, and I don't blame you for assuming everyone has a nefarious motive. From what little I've heard, you have an unfortunate knack for finding the people who do. Give yourself time to heal and give Marcus and me a chance to prove not everyone offers help only as a lure."

He stared back at her. "And if you can't prove it?"

"Then I guess when you're strong enough you'll look for work somewhere else."

"And you'll hunt me down and do what?"

"Nothing. We're a small family supported solely by this business. I'm more concerned with finding time to sleep while running two coffee shops than tracking you down if you leave. You're not obligated to stay. However, if you don't think the job is right for you, I hope you'll tell me so I can start interviewing and training someone else."

“I didn’t say that.”

“No, you didn’t.”

He felt like a jerk for accusing her of something she hadn’t done yet.

“I didn’t mean to insult you. I just... I don’t know what to do with someone who follows through on a promise. It’s new territory.”

“I’m taking a chance here, too. At some point, I’ll have to leave you alone in the café and trust you not to steal from us. What I know of the homeless says that isn’t a wise choice, but I hope that when the time comes, we will both have proven enough to one another that we can trust each other.

“I want to be your friend, Eric, because you look like you need one. That’s all. And at some point friends learn to trust one another, right?”

“Right.” He swallowed tears he refused to cry.

“Then let’s not worry about what comes next. Let’s focus on learning to be each other’s friend. And the doctor says you, my friend, need food and rest.” She got up from her stool and carried her lunch to full-length shelves that lined two walls of the room. “There’s something we kept in case we ever got to this point. Expansion has been a dream for a long time.” She pushed boxes of napkins, cups, lids, dog treats, and coffee syrup around. “Ah! Here it is.” She slid two thin laminated cards from under a box of toilet paper and handed them to him.

“What are these?”

“One is a basic breakdown of the different kinds of coffee drinks. The other is our café menu. If you want to do something, you can start learning these. That way when you’re able to help behind the counter you’ll already know some of what we do.”

“Thanks.”

“You’re welcome.” She shoveled the last bite of noodles into her mouth with her chopsticks and chewed. “Marcus needs to take his lunch, so I’ll be up front working the counter. If you need anything let me know,” she said striding toward the cutout in the wall that served as a doorway.

“Thank you.” He tried to convey the full impact of those words with a look.

If she really did everything for him that she promised to do, he would owe her a lot more than friendship when it was over. What was the proper compensation for jumpstarting a life?

“You’re welcome.” She smiled down at him. “Be sure to finish your sandwich. You need to build up your strength.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He smiled back and settled into the towels to eat and read.

Chapter 14

Marcus stood at the espresso machine whipping milk into warm foam. Eric sat on a stool several feet away, watching.

“Can you see okay?” he asked.

“Yeah,” Eric replied.

It was Eric’s second day at the coffee shop and their first time working together. He had smelled just as terrible that morning as he had the day before. A side effect of sleeping in a doorway or under a dumpster or wherever he went that left his clothes covered in things he didn’t want to think about. Thankfully, a few minutes in the bathroom got rid of most of it, his dirty clothes bundled into a thick plastic bag to wait until he was ready to leave.

He didn’t know how Eric could stand going back to that every night, but maybe the stench was less impressive when you’d lived with it for years. He assumed Eric had been on the street awhile, but he didn’t know. Eric’s life over the past few years was still largely a mystery. He didn’t talk much.

“When it’s nice and foamy like this,” he showed Eric the metal cylinder of warm milk, “you pour the milk into the cup that already has the syrup and espresso at the bottom. The milk churns it all up as you pour so there’s no need to stir.”

Eric nodded along.

“Since this is a skinny mocha, we’ll just dust it with cocoa powder. If it had been a traditional mocha, we’d add a chocolate syrup drizzle to the top. I’ll show you how to do that later. Now you put the lid on. Make sure it’s on tight and hand it to the customer and you’re done.” He smiled at the woman on the other side of the display case full of pastries. “One tall skinny soy mocha. Have a nice day.”

“Thank you,” she replied and headed for the door, cup in hand.

He greeted the next customer in line and restarted a process he repeated too many times a day to count. The man ordered a white chocolate mocha and a bagel. He let Eric handle the bagel.

Eric slid gingerly off the stool and stepped closer to the counter. “What kind of bagel?” he asked in a timid voice.

“Onion if you have it. If not, a plain one is fine.”

“Those come with a choice of cream cheese or butter, toasted, or not toasted,” he instructed.

Eric parroted the options to the customer while Marcus’ mother appeared at Eric’s elbow to show him how to get something out of the trays of pastries and bread without using his hands. She walked Eric through coating a bagel with cream cheese and tucking it into a small paper sleeve with their logo printed on it.

Eric handed it to the customer and earned a gentle pat on the shoulder by Marcus’ mother. “Well done.” She smiled. “You’ll get the hang of this in no time.”

It was a difficult balance to encourage him without treating him like a six-year-old. By his own admission, this was his first real job. Eric knew nothing about food service, customer service, or even working a cash register. They wanted him to be good at it. They wanted him to like it enough to keep showing up each morning, so they praised every step.

It was also difficult, letting Eric come to them like a timid animal. Marcus would have preferred Eric sleep on the couch where they could watch over him, keep track of him. That wasn’t an option, and the topic of where Eric slept was closed. Any further conversation would inch too close to badgering. They could be nice, but they couldn’t sound too eager about it. It was frustrating.

He stuck to safer topics, like teaching Eric how many pumps of syrup to add, what it meant when customers asked for things like a double shot, and walking him through the barista lingo one order at a time. Eric made it almost forty minutes before he disappeared back into the storage room to rest on his pile of towels.

“How is he doing?” his mother asked when Eric was out of sight.

“Pretty well. I think I can start teaching him the milk part tomorrow, maybe even let him make a drink.”

“That’s good.”

“He’s picking it up so fast. I hope that doesn’t mean he’s going to be bored with it in a few weeks and stop coming in,” he said.

“I don’t think boredom with the job will be a major factor, considering the few alternatives he has.”

“Hopefully not.”

“I think the biggest obstacle will be convincing him to look for a room to rent. I get the impression he would prefer to sleep in whatever decrepit place he’s using now than take a chance on another stranger.”

“We’ll have to find someone we can vouch for.”

“Getting him to agree to sleep in our house will be difficult enough,” she said. “Moving him somewhere else might take a while.”

“A year or two at least.”

He had meant it as a joke, but he wasn’t sure it was one. If not for the relative security of the hospital, he would still be trying to convince Eric to accept a milkshake. As much as he wanted to see Eric self-sufficient and in a more stable situation, Eric moved at his own pace, and they had no choice but to let him.

It was an hour before Eric reappeared to continue his training. Marcus showed him the cheat sheet under the counter that detailed which flavors and how many pumps of each went into creating their unique specialty drinks. He put Eric in charge of loading cups with espresso and flavor for each order. He decided to train him on making the espresso shots the next day rather than steaming milk. That way Eric could handle that half of the process by himself.

When his ribs were better, they could show him things that required more movement than pulling shots and pumping syrup. That would take a few weeks. It would probably take at least that for Eric to stop tensing up each afternoon when Marcus’ father showed up to work the closing shift.

Eric was pouring sweetened condensed milk into a cup for their coconut cream pie latte when Marcus’ father walked through the door. He wasn’t an imposing man. Wiry, balding, and no taller than Eric, he didn’t have a stature that commanded attention. It didn’t matter. Eric pinned him with a wary stare that tracked him across the shop as if he were a bulky tattooed gangster.

Marcus took the cup from Eric, exchanging it for a damp rag and let him flee from behind the counter, retreating out to the café floor to study the new arrival from a safe distance. Eric wiped tables and tidied the condiment station, casting regular glances at Marcus’ father.

“How are things today, Eric?” Mr. Chen asked from the other side of the counter with his most charming smile.

“Fine,” came the mumbled reply.

“You let us know if we’re working you too hard. We addicts sometimes forget not everyone likes to put in sixty hours a week.” Mr. Chen turned his attention to a bundle of new customers jingling through the front door without waiting for a response.

Marcus smiled at the comment. His father had the work ethic of a generation that had scraped to survive. He worked every day and had since Marcus was a child. Once a month he took an afternoon off to relax. Each of them did, but that was as close to a vacation as they came. Years ago, they hadn’t made enough to pay for one. Now that they did, they couldn’t afford to take one.

A family vacation meant closing the coffee shop for several days, and in a market where every corner had a latte stand, that was exceptionally bad for business. The last thing they wanted was to encourage their customers to go somewhere else even if that somewhere didn’t have a dog playground and even if it was only for a day or two.

At some point, the business would be successful enough to allow for more employees. Maybe then, they could each take a weekend off. For now, they had one new employee, a skittish kid who jumped at each jingle of the front door. It was a start.

Chapter 15

Eric stood watching amber liquid dribble into a clear shot glass. As of that morning, he had an official list of duties. He was in charge of wiping tables, mixing the right flavors for each drink, and making espresso.

He corrected himself in his head. It wasn't making espresso. It was pulling shots. If this was his new career, he needed to start thinking like a barista. He preferred a title that didn't sound so much like it was only for women, but that's what they called it so that's what he was. A dealer to the caffeine junkies.

It struck him last night as he lay listening to wheezing, coughing, and the scurrying of rat feet on filthy tile that it wasn't just a job. Working at a coffee shop wasn't like flipping burgers or delivering pizza. It was far more involved. Marcus had to know all about coffee bean quality, which country supplied what kind of bean, how to mix them to create unique flavors, how to roast them without burning them, and how to find affordable suppliers in a market where the price of beans kept rising. It sounded more like running a vineyard than a café.

The dog side wasn't nearly as difficult. They ordered dog treats from a bakery in West Vancouver. All they had to do was arrange them in the case and keep the playground equipment clean.

The ache in his ribs grew to an insistent whine he tried to ignore as he poured a shot of espresso into a nearly empty cup. He wrapped an arm around his chest, taking shallow breaths, prepared to wait for a lull in the customers before he abandoned his post.

"I think you're about ready for another dose, aren't you?" a gentle voice muttered near his ear, an equally gentle hand landing on his shoulder.

For the first time in years, he didn't flinch at the contact. He was learning that sound, that touch.

"I can wait," he said.

"No need, *chu huzi*. Go lie down. I'll take over," Mrs. Chen said.

She started calling him that last night: *chu huzi*. She said it was a term of endearment that meant timid cub in Mandarin. The tenderness in her expression and her tone made it seem unlikely she was privately insulting him.

He stepped away from the espresso maker and let her take his place while he strode around the corner into the relative peace of the storage room. His pills and water waited in an empty space on one of the shelves where he had left them. He opened the bottle, dug out two caplets with a finger, and swallowed them with a gulp of water.

His ribs were a little less cranky each day, though they still screamed every morning after a night on the cold, hard floor of his hovel. His outlook was a little less bleak, as well. He hadn't thought of suicide at all last night. Instead, he'd thought about coffee and dog treats and how a guy reading random books in his room at the hospital had led to a new career.

It wouldn't pay much, and he would never be able to afford a place of his own anywhere, but his dreams were smaller now than they had been when he was a kid. He didn't need a successful job, fat bank account, and a house. He only needed a warm bed someplace safe, regular meals, and the freedom to call his body his own.

He settled on the floor in the supply room, curled on his side against the towels and picked up the laminated cards to continue memorizing the limited menu. He knew it almost by heart already, but it was better to focus on that than the idea that his life had finally changed. He was afraid to put any confidence in the thought that whoring was over. He had believed that once before and having to go back to selling his body for food had devastated him. He'd cried for two days.

He couldn't afford to be that broken again. Not if he wanted to survive. He was too close to giving up already. He rested his head against the towels and stared at the wall, sucked into the topic despite his resistance. Maybe it didn't matter. If the Chens changed their mind about him and the opportunity evaporated, he wouldn't survive no matter how little attachment he had to the dream of a new life. The only alternative was hooking, and he would rather be dead than go back to life as a whore.

This was his only chance. His last chance. If it fell apart, he was lost. He lay pinched between two equally disturbing ideas, fear sitting like a rock in his chest, stress buzzing in his head. He couldn't afford to make the Chens mad, but he couldn't risk going along with their suggestion to make their couch his temporary home. If he gave in, he could become Mr. Chen's new hobby. If he resisted, they could fire him for showing up at work every day filthy and smelly. He didn't know them well enough to gauge how far their patience went.

He decided to start taking sponge baths and washing his hair in the café's washroom sink. They wouldn't mind him working with wet hair if it was neatly combed, right? The rock in his chest crumbled a little at the decision. If he did the job and was neat and tidy like they'd asked, they couldn't really find fault with him. It was a theory.

He went back to studying the menu. When his ribs settled down again, he returned to the front and took over pulling shots. The stream of customers dwindled to nothing, and he took a towel out to the tables to wipe the vacant ones, cleaning and drying the seats of the chairs, smiling at customers sitting nearby.

The coffee shop was like a different planet. People noticed him here, and when they did, they smiled. He never got that on the street. Out there, he was invisible. People walked by as if he didn't exist. Rare glances always came with suspicion and fear as if he were a walking disease they were afraid to catch. He remembered the precious few who were different. The ones who saw a human under the dirty clothes and skin. It didn't happen often.

Here he looked at people from across the counter and they looked back almost every time. He approached to wipe a nearby table and they didn't shrink from him, clutching bags to their chests. They treated him like a real person.

He cleaned the last chair and scooted it in before moving to the next table. He hoped this job never ended. He hoped even more that there wasn't an ultimatum at the other end of all this kindness.

Chapter 16

A week later, Marcus yawned his way down to the lobby in the elevator of his building and strode through the foyer into cold misty darkness. Stuffing his hands in his coat pockets, he walked to the end of the deserted block and around the corner. Streetlights lit the way under a sky still considering sunrise.

A lone hooded figure stood leaning against the front window of the coffee shop, facing the empty street. Anxiety didn't have a chance to wrestle past his fatigue before he recognized the coat.

"You're early," he said, digging keys out of his pocket.

"Didn't want to be late," Eric said.

"I hope you weren't waiting long."

"No, not long."

He unlocked the door and pushed it open to the warning beeps of the alarm.

"Go ahead and get changed. I'll start the pots," he said, striding across the shop piled with shadows to the alarm keypad near the storage room.

He entered the code, and the café fell silent. Flipping on a few of the lights, he strode back to the front door and locked it. Behind the counter, he pressed the button on each machine to start the drip coffee brewing for those who preferred their beverage without milk and syrup. While Eric was still in the washroom, he crouched to the floor and rolled back the rubber mat to reveal a safe. He unlocked it, tugged the top open, and pulled out the thin zippered bag that held the morning's cash for the register.

He closed and locked the safe, rolled back the mat and glanced at the clock. Eric had been in the washroom a while. He walked around the counter toward the back of the café.

"Everything okay?" he called.

"Yeah. I'm almost ready," Eric replied over the muffled sound of running water.

He pulled the chairs off each table where they dangled upside down and set them back on the floor his father had mopped last night as part of the closing ritual. Eric stepped out of the washroom at the same time a truck rumbled up to

the curb outside. He glanced at Eric's clean face, fresh clothes, and damp hair as he strode to the door. That explained what had taken him so long.

He smiled. "Why don't you check the stock under the counter while I get these?"

He pushed through the door and accepted a stack of large pastry boxes, carrying them back inside. He set them on a table and locked the door one more time.

"Breakfast is here," he said, carrying them to the counter.

"Good. I'm starving." Eric popped up from below.

Marcus set the boxes on the minimal counter space and flipped the lid open on the top one, releasing a puff of warm sweetness from the collection of muffins. He plucked a banana nut from the middle, peeled off the top, and took a bite. The warm, rich taste of banana and walnuts hugged his tongue. He purred his appreciation before rounding the counter to turn on the sound system that filled the space with quiet music from a local oldies station.

He whipped up a couple of lattes to go with their muffins while Eric restocked the supplies under the counter. Then he unlocked the front door one last time, and the day officially began.

A dribble of early risers became a steady stream of groggy, hungry customers. He worked the espresso machine, and Eric took care of the pastries and payments, too focused on customers to be tense. It was the most relaxed Eric had been around him since they'd met.

Sometimes he wondered how long it would take before Eric trusted him. A day or two was all Marcus usually needed to determine whether someone was a decent person, but then he wasn't the suspicious type. He had never had reason to be. Eric came from a very different life of liars and predators, some in the guise of people he should have been able to trust.

He and his mother would win Eric over at some point. Enough time would pass without any lies or tricks and Eric would see they weren't running a scam. It was inevitable even if he couldn't say when it would happen. Maybe weeks. Maybe months.

One day he would be able to pat Eric on the back without him going rigid under his hand. One day he could tell Eric how much he admired his strength and courage without worrying Eric would translate it as a pickup line. One day

he could reach out and cup his face, brushing his thumb over that adorable dimple that appeared when he smiled and not have Eric run from him in terror.

Today wasn't the day. When the rush dwindled, Eric would remember he was supposed to be wary of his co-workers, and the wall would go back up, at least until Marcus' mother arrived. Eric liked her. In fact, if it weren't for her, he didn't think Eric would still be risking his safety by showing up every day. They would have had to lure him in with food like a wild animal, working for weeks to earn enough trust to get him to stay when the snack was gone.

When the morning rush dwindled back to an empty café, Eric fled from behind the counter and busied himself wiping tables and chairs no one had used. He let Eric have his space and restocked the supplies under the counter for the midmorning crowd. This group would bring dogs, so he refilled the single shelf of dog treats and made sure the play area was tidy.

New customers chased him and Eric back behind the counter, and they continued the cycle of coffee orders that would carry them through the rest of the day. His mother arrived and gave both of them an inconspicuous pat on the back as a greeting before she sent Eric to the storeroom to rest.

Four hours on his feet without a break proved his ribs were improving. Showing up with enough energy to wash in the sink before work proved the rest of him was, too. Soon he would be back to perfect health and all they would have to worry about was calming his heightened sense of suspicion.

Marcus stood at the espresso machine warming milk and plotting. They could invite Eric to the house for dinner, but he would think it was a trap. Besides, that would require them to close the shop early one night so they could actually eat as a family. That only happened on Thanksgiving and Christmas.

Since grand gestures made Eric suspicious, his only alternative was small, simple ones. He decided to bring Eric along each day when he picked up lunch. His mother could handle things on her own for a few minutes and a couple of weeks of the two of them chatting during the walk would help Eric see he wasn't a monster waiting for an opportunity to strike.

Assuming Eric chatted and didn't spend the entire trip mute, hands stuffed in his pockets, walking as far away from him as he could without standing in the street. He frowned at the thought. He should probably lower his expectations. They could pick up lunch together. At some point, they could exchange a little conversation while it happened. That seemed more realistic.

Chapter 17

Eric walked beside Marcus, consciously refusing to walk a step behind in order to maintain a minimal distance in case he needed to run. He was trying to trust them even if it scared him.

His routine was different that morning. Instead of showing up when the sun woke him, he arrived before first light to learn how to open the café; his new job when Marcus began working at the family's other one. He had slept in a nearby alley under a cloudy sky to make sure he wasn't late, checking the watch Mrs. Chen had loaned him often enough to feel paranoid. The drizzle had started half an hour before the café was due to open, so he'd wandered over to stand under the awning and tried not to look too much like a burglar.

Tagging along to pick up lunch was part of the new routine, and it wrapped a fist around his stomach. He didn't understand why everything was suddenly different. Marcus didn't need any more help carrying lunch back to the café than he had for the last two weeks. They were pushing him a little, and Mrs. Chen was once again trying to talk him into sleeping at the house.

Ellen. He was supposed to call her Ellen.

He didn't know how things worked in the Chen family or the expectations that came with the bed. Free room and board was never free. The promise of clean sheets and regular meals is how he'd ended up a prisoner to the long list of monsters in his past. Everybody wanted to help him out, pressuring him into it if he didn't immediately jump at the offer. Beds were limited. Applicants were piling up behind him. If he kept stalling, his place would go to someone who wanted it more. They needed an answer now. Now. Now.

The Chens didn't treat him that way. They didn't demand an answer any more than they demanded repayment. Marcus had saved his life, and instead of using that to pressure him, they kept giving him more. If they were conning him, they weren't in a rush to reel him in. They could take some unsuspecting newbie off the street with much less effort.

Still, he had a doubt, and that tiny bit of uncertainty was killing him.

Marcus stopped at a Thai place, and he followed him inside to pick up the order Ellen had called in. Five minutes later, they headed back to the coffee shop, each carrying a bag of takeout. One more time, the Chens were treating

him to lunch despite the bills tucked in his pocket, his pay from the few hours he'd worked last week. His debt to them was stacking up and each bit of generosity made him look like a jerk for keeping them at a distance.

"So, um, your mom offered me your old room at the house," he said as they walked.

"Yeah, she mentioned that. The bed's a little old, but it's better than the lumpy couch," Marcus said. "What do you think? Do you want to take it?"

He walked a few steps in silence, watching the sidewalk pass under his feet. "It was a nice offer."

"None of us like thinking about where you sleep at night. I think we'd all feel better if we knew it wasn't in an alley somewhere."

He nodded.

"We care about you, Eric. I know you're not used to that, and I get that it freaks you out, but it's true."

"Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why do you care? I'm nothing." He tossed a quick glance at Marcus.

"Not to us... Not to me."

He couldn't help staring at him and the disturbed bit of something wrinkling Marcus' expression.

"I'm your friend." Marcus stopped walking, holding his gaze and his attention. "I know it's been a while since you've had one of those, but this is what friends do for each other... even if one of those friends doesn't quite know what to think about it." Marcus offered a small smile.

"Yeah, but why me?"

"Because under all that paranoia you seem like a nice guy... and sometimes you make me laugh. Besides, my mother likes you, and if a guy's mom likes someone that's pretty much the end of the discussion, isn't it?"

He twitched a smile. "I guess."

"Look," Marcus started walking again and he followed, "it's not a trap. If you're going to keep working at the shop, you need a decent place to sleep. Mom will worry less. You'll have somewhere to hang out that doesn't come

with a risk of being beaten up or robbed. We'll all sleep better, and if it helps change your mind, I'll put in a lock so you can keep everybody out of your room when you're sleeping."

Pushing his bed against the door would accomplish the same thing, but it wouldn't protect him from what really scared him. Locks didn't silence coercion. An ultimatum about repaying the kindness by servicing Mr. Chen or an uncle or the neighbor next door had no trouble making it past a lock.

Generosity always came at a price, and he owed the Chens a lot, several years of servitude at least. He hadn't met a helping hand yet that didn't turn into an open palm looking for payment. At the same time, he'd never met anyone like the Chens.

"I'm serious." Marcus strode through the door of the coffee shop, holding it open for him. "The worst demand my mother will ever make would be to rinse your dishes and put them in the dishwasher."

"What about your dad?"

"I've been bringing friends home since I was six. He's never made so much as a pass at any of them. He is a fan of bad jokes, though. You have to watch out for that."

He ignored the attempt at humor. "How many of your friends were whores?" He kept his voice low and followed Marcus past the counter and into the storage room. "Guys are always interested in what a professional sex toy can do for them."

Marcus set his bag of food on an empty spot on one of the shelves and turned to look at him. Brown eyes held his for a moment.

"Maybe cold, heartless men who care only about themselves. I could tell you what kind of man my father is, but you've met him. What do you think? Is he like the ones who used you?"

"Everyone acts nice when they're running a scam."

"I suppose." Marcus nodded. "It's up to you. You can keep sleeping on the street or you can be someplace comfortable with a shower."

He liked the idea of a real shower and a room without rats and junkies.

"Think it over." Marcus patted his arm and strode back across the room. "I'm going to give Mom a break. Go ahead and eat."

He put his bag of food on the shelf next to Marcus' and opened it to unearth his Styrofoam container of non-spicy noodles and chopsticks he was still learning to use. He took a bite and thought about running water and pillows while he chewed. They probably had a television and everything. It was tempting, but a lot of things he regretted now had been tempting at one point.

It was the same risk. Hope wouldn't protect him from reality, whatever it turned out to be.

Chapter 18

Late that afternoon, Eric agreed to follow Ellen home and let her show him the house. Panic prickled in his chest the entire two blocks to the bus stop. Mr. Chen was still at the coffee shop handling the light evening crowd. Marcus had already gone home to his loft. Theoretically that meant the house would be empty. He wasn't as willing to cling to assumptions as he had been at lunch.

"Who else shares the house with you guys now that Marcus is gone?" he asked, trying to sound casual despite his sweating palms and queasy stomach as he stepped onto the bus, his backpack tucked under one arm.

"No one." Ellen slid her pass through the card reader in the bulky payment console near the driver.

She walked down the aisle while he dropped a small collection of coins into the designated slot and took the temporary pass. He hadn't made up his mind about anything other than a tour. If he didn't like the place, he was heading back to his filthy hovel. He walked the narrow aisle and slid into the vacant seat beside Ellen.

"Now that Marcus has his own place it's just me and his father," she continued. "We considered taking on a renter, but with neither of us home that leaves a lot of opportunity for someone to make trouble. Since we wouldn't know that person very well before they moved in, it didn't seem the best option. See," she patted his knee, "your needs and ours fit quite well together."

"I guess they do." He tried to smile, wondering what other needs would spring up.

Stores and cars flowed past while the bus drifted down the street. He held his backpack of dirty clothes to his chest and tried to think of a polite way to say he had changed his mind.

The coffee shop was different. Witnesses walked through the door every few minutes. There was little privacy and no real opportunities for anyone to abuse him. The house was another story. Once the front door closed, anything could happen and despite Ellen's calm assurance, he had no guarantee he would ever walk back out. He had only her word no one was waiting inside for him.

"This is our stop." Ellen reached up to pull the yellow cord that ran the length of the bus, sounding a chime to tell the driver they wanted off.

He slid out of his seat and stepped to the side door across the aisle, still hugging his backpack. The bus stopped, and he pushed the door open, emerging into relatively fresh air. A deep breath did nothing to still the prickle that had turned to pounding, something heavy and spiked using his stomach as a trampoline.

He followed Ellen for two blocks, arguing with himself about whether he would actually go into the house. Proper etiquette said he should at least take a tour before he made up his mind. Paranoia said there wouldn't be any tour. All that waited inside was a nightmare.

The house perched near the center of a street lined with trees and similar houses. Tiny untended yards and faded paint gave the block a worn look that stopped short of disheveled. The Chens' minimal yard was fenced with waist-high metal bars painted white. The same bars lined both sides of the steps leading to the front door on the second floor. A small porch offered minimal privacy for the window that stretched almost the length of the wall.

He stood on the bottom step looking up at the front door, his heart ramming a shoulder into his ribs trying to break free. He didn't care that it didn't make sense for an entire family to lure one person in. He didn't care that he'd agreed to take a tour. He didn't care about spending another night on a filthy concrete floor. Wisdom said if he had any brains left in his head, he wouldn't go into that house. How many times did a guy have to be tricked into playing a sex slave before he got smart enough to see it coming?

"Eric?" Ellen rested a hand on his back, and he jumped. "It's okay. Here. Sit down for a minute." She motioned to the steps.

He gladly turned his back on the front door and sat hugging his backpack, rocking with the need to get up and out of the neighborhood. Ellen rubbed a hand across his back with a slow, steady motion.

"It's okay," she soothed. "No one will hurt you here."

It was a nice thought, but he didn't have enough faith left to believe it. He couldn't trust people anymore. He just couldn't. The finality of that thought pressed against him like a granite wall, making it difficult to breathe. Tears stung his eyes. If he couldn't trust anyone, he might as well stop pretending he could survive. He would never make enough money to afford his own place. He'd spend the rest of his life sleeping on the street, a piece of trash that could almost be redeemed. Almost be a real person. Almost.

When Ellen started stroking his hair, the tears stopped stinging and began leaking from his eyes.

“It’s okay, *chu huzi*.” She put an arm around his shoulders and kissed the side of his head.

Leaking became sobs he gasped into his backpack to muffle the sound. Ellen pulled him closer and cooed well-intended words at him, trying to mend something no one could mend.

“If the idea of a house is too scary, we can try something else.”

She sat rocking him, murmuring words in a language he couldn’t understand until enough of the terror leaked out to stop his tears.

“We pushed a little too fast, didn’t we?” she asked, her voice soft and low as she stroked his hair. “I just don’t like the thought of you sleeping on the street.” She let go of him to hold his face in her hands, kiss his forehead, and brush away his tears. “Let’s think of something else, a compromise between the house and an alley, okay?”

He nodded and wiped his face.

“We can’t let you sleep in the store because it’s not zoned for that. Besides, you can’t wash in the sink forever.” She patted his knee. “A hotel is out of the question. The affordable ones are as filthy as the alley.” She stared at the sidewalk for a moment. “What about Marcus’ loft? That’s still a temporary option.”

“I don’t want to kick Marcus out of his own loft. That’s not fair.” He sniffled.

“I’m sure he won’t mind if it helps you realize you have nothing to fear.”

“You don’t have to do that. I’ll be fine on my own.”

“We can’t have you living on the street indefinitely. That’s unacceptable.” A hint of that stern tone all mothers had crept into her voice. “One day you will have to figure out how to live in the same space with other people again. You might as well start now.”

He didn’t bother arguing that he had junkie and rodent roommates already. He knew what she meant. He couldn’t spend the rest of his life having panic attacks at the thought of walking into a house. It was either theirs or kick Marcus out of his.

“It’s still not fair, though.”

“He won’t mind.”

Marcus probably wouldn’t. He was a selfless kind of guy, but it still didn’t feel right. Neither did assuming this woman who had been kinder to him than anyone had in a long time would lead him into a trap. Sitting with him on the front step, she was willing to let him walk away from the house and try something else. Someone desperate to get him inside wouldn’t do that.

He turned around and looked up at the front door. Would it hurt to go in? They could leave the door open, and if anything spooked him, he could run right back out. Besides, if the Chens really were monsters in disguise it was better to learn it now than waste months letting them deceive him into thinking decent people existed.

“Maybe we can just look for a second,” he said.

Ellen smiled and ran a hand down his back. “If you think you’re up to it.”

He nodded and pushed to his feet. This was it. Either he had found the human version of a myth come to life or he had spent the last two weeks kidding himself. It was time to find out which.

Chapter 19

Eric climbed the front stairs a step at a time, hugging his backpack with one arm, fingers curled into a fist. He felt the tremble in his legs and hands, countering the ache in his stomach while a panicked discussion volleyed in his head. Was he being an idiot? Was Ellen telling the truth?

She turned back to look at him every few steps, but her expression wasn't what he expected of someone trying to snare him. She looked concerned, not eager. At least that's what he hoped that look meant.

He reached the front porch and stood several steps away while she unlocked the front door and pushed it open.

"Come here." She waved him closer.

He shuffled that direction, flinching when she rested a hand on his arm.

"You can see inside from there, right?" she asked.

He nodded.

"Good. Okay, that is the living room." She pointed to a faded sofa and chair in a traditional setting near the fireplace. "You can probably see better through the window." She ushered him past the door to the picture window and pointed out the kitchen in the distance. "Our bedroom is down that hall. There is an office upstairs... the stairs are around the corner so you can't see them. Marcus' bedroom is downstairs, and it has its own entrance through the laundry room."

She rubbed his back as she talked, soothing the panic. If anyone waited inside to grab him, they weren't easily visible. It didn't look like a house run by maniacs. In his experience, that type was messier. Probably because most of them had been more interested in sex than tidiness.

"What do you think?" she asked.

"It looks nice."

"Do you want to take a closer look or would you rather stay out here?"

Not many people gave him choices. They offered only ultimatums: do what they wanted or go back to the street. He clung to that thought and stepped through the open door.

The sweet spice of incense rode the air. Ellen kicked off her shoes, and he toed his off with her, leaving them on a mat near the door. Apprehension

sprinted through him as she pushed the front door closed. He jerked his head toward the hall, waiting for someone to appear at the sound, but the house was silent, empty except for them.

The inside of the front door was red, but not a spooky kind of red. It matched the embroidered wall hangings tacked on either side, done in black, red, and gold. He assumed the Chinese characters on each one spelled something other than a curse or quotes from a horror story.

“Why don’t you leave your backpack here,” Ellen suggested.

He appreciated her letting him put it down rather than taking it from him, another tiny difference he added to the pile. He left the backpack leaning against the wall by his shoes.

“If you decide to stay, I’ll show you how to work the washing machine so you can clean your clothes.”

He nodded. She led him to the kitchen and showed him where to find the dishes. They padded down the hall to her bedroom and peered through the open door. The stairs were on the opposite wall: one set going up, one set going down.

“The office is upstairs. I can show you if you’d like so you can see there’s nothing up there, but a desk and some filing cabinets. I don’t want you lying awake at night wondering what we really hide in the attic.” She smiled.

“That’s okay.” He attempted a smile back.

He was far more concerned with the basement. People always hid the bad stuff in the basement. Ellen followed his gaze down the narrow steps.

“We can get to the basement from the door outside if you’d rather see it that way.”

“No,” he said, his mouth dry. “It’s the same either way, right?”

If it was a dungeon with restraints on the walls and a large dog crate for him to sleep in, he’d see it whether they came from the inside or the outside. He descended the stairs, a firm, trembling grip on the railing, while his heart tried to escape his chest to watch from a safe distance.

The stairs ended in a short hall. On one side, a bedroom door stood open with a neatly made bed. Across the hall was a small bathroom. Straight ahead, he saw a washer and dryer visible through the open door. He could see the

hinge of what he speculated was the exterior door. He stuck his head into the bedroom to make sure nothing was hiding just out of view. Satisfied it was a normal room, he stepped to the laundry room and saw nothing more sinister than a snow shovel leaning against the wall near a large tub sink.

Daddy's house had been obvious. A lock on the basement door. Grim wooden steps to a room of toys, restraints, and leather. A bare mattress. A prison designed by a man who only saw him as a slave.

This house wasn't cold or harsh, and the room Ellen offered him had sheets and a comforter. A real room for a real person. As far as he could tell by the tour, the most likely risk was Mr. Chen paying him a late night visit. He could hold him off by sleeping with his bed against the door and escape through the laundry room as soon as Mr. Chen gave up and went back to bed.

He would be back on the street with no job and no future, but at least he wouldn't spend another night in the hands of someone who didn't care whether he survived.

"What do you think?" she asked from where they stood in the laundry room.

"It's nice."

"Would you like to stay for a night and see how it feels?"

"I don't know," he said, and he honestly didn't.

So much could happen in that time. People he didn't know could show up. What if the house looked so nice because they kept their victims somewhere else? They could drug his food and drag him off or find someone to carry him away. He was scrawny and only five foot five. It wasn't hard to pick him up. People used to do it all the time.

"I know I'm asking a lot." Ellen rested a hand on his arm. "Trust isn't a simple thing, especially not when so many others have broken it. All I want is for you to be safe, *chu huzi*. Whether it's here or somewhere else isn't important."

"I don't know if I can. I mean, it's nice, but..." He ended with a shrug.

"But it's a house you don't know with people you don't know very well either."

He nodded.

"Why don't we talk to Marcus? I'm sure he won't mind letting you stay at his place."

“It feels like I’m asking too much.”

“You’re not. I am.” She smiled and turned back toward the hall. “Come on. We can at least send you off with a full stomach.”

He followed her back upstairs to the kitchen and watched her cook dinner. She cut up vegetables and a block of tofu, adding spices and drizzling sauces without measuring anything. She cooked like a person who had done it half their life and wondered if she had ever dreamed of something besides a coffee shop.

He helped Ellen set the table, talking about cooking and real Chinese food versus restaurant Chinese food, and wondered how likely it was that people who didn’t even own a television were monsters in disguise.

Chapter 20

It was after dark when Eric heard the scrape of feet on the front steps. The quick steady sound of someone approaching pushed him up from the couch.

“It’s okay, *chu huzi*. It’s only David.”

He nodded as he backed out of the room to stand in the kitchen, keeping as much distance from the feet as he could. His fear was much larger than the figure who stepped through the door when it opened. Mr. Chen was only an inch or two taller than he was—nothing like the imagined six-foot, muscled maniac.

Mr. Chen closed the door and kicked off his shoes. David. He was supposed to call him David. That would never happen.

“How is everyone tonight?”

“We’re fine.” Ellen smiled. “Maybe a little jumpy.” For a brief moment, she turned her smile on Eric where he stood in the kitchen before turning back to her husband. “How did things go tonight?”

“A little quiet, but not enough to close early so that’s good.”

Ellen strode into the kitchen and handed Eric a bowl of rice to carry to the table. He tried to be a respectful guest while keeping a wary eye on the one person in the room he felt had the most potential to make his life miserable.

Ellen carried the stir-fried vegetables and tofu, and they settled at a small wooden table in the adjoining dining room. He took timid bites more out of anxiety than his novice use of chopsticks. They ate while Ellen and Mr. Chen talked about the coffee shop and its customers. It wasn’t the gossipy, biting conversation he’d expected. In thirty minutes of quiet discussion, he didn’t hear one derogatory statement. Not even about the yappy little Pomeranian that snarled at everyone.

If he were a dog, that’s what he would be. A cranky, snarling little ball of fur keeping everyone away with a menacing growl and a show of teeth despite being small enough for them to stuff in their pocket. The thought made him smile, and for a moment, he wished he believed in reincarnation. He could come back as a dog rather than spend the rest of his existence in hell paying for his inability to overcome the desire to be with men.

That was almost true. He didn't feel any attraction toward women, but he would rather be run over by a bus than have a man touch him ever again. In a way, he really was cured. He wondered if that counted.

When dinner was over, they cleared the table, and Mr. Chen turned on the radio. The quiet sound of classical music drifted through the room with the fading smell of food. Mr. Chen settled in the armchair with a book. Eric and Ellen sat on the couch while she crocheted. It was a peaceful domestic scene he had heard about but never actually witnessed. It challenged his idea that Mr. Chen was a monster in disguise. Some monsters probably did listen to classical music and read books, but it was difficult to pair that hostility with a man who spoke so kindly of others.

If he hadn't witnessed it, he never would have believed people like that existed anywhere other than urban legends. People weren't that good and kind. They were cruel and selfish with a transparent facade. The only sins they forgave were their own because they had a guaranteed spot in heaven. Everyone else was going to hell.

"Do Buddhists believe in hell?" He didn't realize he'd asked the question aloud until Ellen answered him.

"No. At least not in the traditional sense," she said, eyes on her crocheting. "I think people create their own hell right here on Earth... or suffer one created by others. Why imagine a place of torment and pain when every horror described in the lore already exists?"

"So nobody pays for what they do wrong?" He could think of several people who definitely deserved a hell of some kind.

"I'm not sure that's the right question," Mr. Chen said. "Assigning someone to hell is about retribution, right? Creating a punishment when it seems such a thing is unlikely in this lifetime."

He nodded.

"Does retribution heal the wound they caused?"

He had a point. There was no way to heal the damage past monsters had done. He would be broken forever. Broken and damned regardless of the fate they suffered.

"What if people say you're going to hell because you're a sinner, not because you hurt anybody?"

“How much authority does another human being have to determine your fate when you die?”

He considered the question. Pastors had condemned him within their own churches, making him an outcast. He didn't know how much clout that carried anywhere else.

“I don't know.”

“People judge others for a lot of things, Eric,” Mr. Chen said. “Most of the time it has nothing to do with the person they're judging. I wouldn't pay too much attention to it. Especially not when they use eternal damnation as justification for hurting you. The theory is a bit too convenient to be true.”

“Besides, their judgment isn't important,” Ellen added. “Healing what's broken inside is what matters. You can put all that behind you and move on.”

Despair stung his eyes, anger burning in his chest like a spicy Thai noodle. He didn't know how to get past any of what had happened. He couldn't even imagine it.

“It's not that easy,” he whispered.

“No, it isn't,” Mr. Chen said. “Healing is a difficult journey. That's why most people settle for clinging to anger and condemning people to hell. It's easier.”

Ellen put down her crocheting and turned to him. “We'll help you if you'll let us.” She patted his knee.

“How?”

“By showing you it's possible,” Mr. Chen said. “Overwriting your past with something better a little at a time.”

“I don't know.” He sniffled and swiped at his nose.

“How can we convince you?” Mr. Chen asked.

He decided he had nothing to lose by being honest. “By not visiting me in the middle of the night for sex, for one,” he told Mr. Chen. “If you want me, you have to proposition me in front of witnesses.”

“And?” Mr. Chen asked completely unperturbed.

“No walking in on me in the shower. No telling me I owe it to you because you were nice to me. No loaning me out to your friends or selling me online.

No treating me like a goddamn piece of meat.” His voice broke, the sentence ending in a squeak. “I have sex when I want with whoever I want and you don’t get a say in it,” he cried.

It all came pouring out after that. Pain, fear, and misery in a flood of tears. Ellen put her arms around him and held him close, letting him cry into her shoulder for the second time that night, music flowing around the spaces between sobs until there were only strings and sniffing.

“I agree to your terms on one condition,” Mr. Chen said where he sat.

He lifted his head from Ellen’s shoulder and wiped his face. “What?” he asked, his voice raw.

“You call me David.”

Chapter 21

Eric slipped outside wrapped in his smelly coat and pulled the laundry room door closed behind him. Cold silence hung from the trees as he walked from one puddle of light to the next, following the sidewalk to the bus stop. He was tempted to declare that morning the start of something better than he'd left behind, but doubts lingered like stray bats in a cave. One night didn't prove much other than his ribs preferred a mattress to the floor.

He'd spent the night wandering in and out of sleep, listening to cars pass, sirens squall in the distance, and for any hint of feet on the stairs. He wasn't afraid of someone sneaking into his room. The bed wedged against the door made that impossible. He was afraid to miss the attempt and fool himself into thinking he was safe when he wasn't.

Mr. Chen... David put on a good act, but he knew how clever monsters could be. Daddy had taught him that. He had appeared fully human to those he wanted to deceive. He went to church every Sunday, entertained people in his living room with joyous laughter and empty compliments, waved to the neighbors as he mowed the lawn. All with a body chained to the wall in the basement, naked, hungry, and half-frozen.

One peaceful evening didn't earn David much. It would take months of those. That was the thing with monsters. They couldn't keep that much evil pent up indefinitely. It always spilled out at some point.

He climbed aboard the nearly empty bus and paid his fare, riding back into the city to help Marcus open the café. This was his life for as long as David could maintain his civilized facade. In bed by ten. Up at four to shower and catch the bus.

He liked the showering part. He could get used to that. Aside from the one at the hospital, that morning was the first shower he'd had in so many months he couldn't count them. He forgot how good it felt with hot water running down his body, drying off in a warm steam-filled room with a clean towel. It was even better than a comfortable bed. He would trade a lot of things for access to a shower.

The bus dropped him off a block from the coffee shop. Light gleamed through the front windows and he tugged at the door, knocking on the glass

when the lock rattled against the frame. Marcus popped up from behind the counter and strode out to unlock the door.

“Morning.” Marcus smiled.

“Morning. Sorry I’m late.”

“Not by more than a minute. Don’t worry about it.” Marcus locked the door again.

He didn’t have to waste time changing clothes or cleaning up in the bathroom, so he shrugged out of his coat and tucked it in a garbage bag in the storage room to keep it from smelling up the corner. He needed to wash it, but he wasn’t going to clean off the grimy camouflage until he made up his mind about staying at the house.

He helped Marcus set up for the morning and welcome their first customers of the day. He thought about Ellen and David’s conversation the night before, pointing out the positive qualities in the people who drifted through the door, glossing over the bad. He tried to see them the same way, altering his usual habit of lumping people into two categories: potential threats and less likely ones.

Some people smiled. Some didn’t. Most looked tired at that hour of the morning. Some looked exhausted. He could relate as he took a quick drink of his own coffee. He hadn’t had a decent night’s sleep since he left the hospital. It was impossible to be well rested and vigilant at the same time. He wondered what kept the exhausted customers awake at night. Were they listening for their own monsters in the dark? Maybe they were like him: pretending everything was normal when nothing fit that description. He could barely recall what normal looked like.

It was nearly noon when the grouchy Pomeranian appeared for his daily romp on the dog playground. Other dogs were cuter. Most were quieter, but that disgruntled mongrel was rapidly becoming his favorite. They understood each other even if he got the same display of teeth as everyone else. The hostile yet fragile ball of fur was afraid of everyone but the woman holding him in her arms. He knew how it felt to be small and easily tossed around, to have every unfamiliar face inspire the rush of fear, to live with that constant ache in his chest.

He handed the dog’s owner a small complimentary dog snack without attempting to pet the trembling furball addressing him with a low growl. He understood the rules. People had to earn trust, and he had barely started.

He left the dog to yap its way around the playground and wiped empty tables, pausing to clean stray sugar and cinnamon from the condiment counter. The garbage was nearly full so he tugged the bag of discarded food, napkins, and cups out of the bin and replaced it with a fresh one before walking the load of trash outside. He was out the back door before it registered that tugging and hauling hadn't hurt. Either his ribs were healing or sleeping on the ground inspired more of the pain than he thought.

It took until lunch to realize his ribs and access to a shower weren't the only changes.

"How did it go at the house last night?" Marcus asked as they walked to pick up lunch.

"Fine."

"The place isn't fancy, but nothing leaks and the heat works."

"Compared to other places I've been, it's plenty fancy," he said.

"Do you think you'll stay?"

"I don't know. I'm still making up my mind."

"What about at the café?"

"Yeah. I mean, I'd like to stay if you guys still want me to." He glanced over at Marcus, anxiety doing a tap dance on his stomach.

"Of course we do. As far as I can tell, it's working out great."

"I think so, too."

They walked in silence for several steps with tension he couldn't understand strung between them. He was good at reading body language. That kind of thing was mandatory if he didn't want to end up surprised by a slap or someone's crushing grip on his arm. He knew when something wasn't right even if he didn't understand what, and something wasn't right with Marcus. It made him nervous. He put a little more distance between them as they walked side by side and kept vigilant watch out of the corner of his eye.

They stopped at a sandwich place a few blocks away. Marcus opened the door and held it for him.

"I think I'll stay out here. It's too nice to be inside."

"Okay. I'll be right back."

Marcus disappeared inside, and he considered walking back to the coffee shop without him. It would be rude, but he wasn't in the mood for games or whatever Marcus had in mind. He was afraid he knew and it crumbled his barely hatched optimism that things would be different. The disappointment over one more disguise, one more trap, stung his eyes.

He did what he had always done and weighed his options. Was playing the role of Marcus' sex toy worth the job and the house and the food? It depended on how well Marcus treated his toys, and he wouldn't know that until the first night.

He leaned against the window, hands stuffed in his pockets, head hung in defeat. It was always the same.

Marcus stepped back outside, and he trudged beside him down the sidewalk.

"Everything okay?" Marcus asked.

"Sure," he muttered. "Never better."

"I, uh... I wanted to ask you something, but maybe it can wait."

"Ask me what?" He played along as if he didn't already know.

"Nothing much. Just that you've been working with us for a couple of weeks, and it looks like you've picked up our workaholic ways. You haven't had a single day off."

He kept walking.

"I wondered if you want to do something after work one day. You know. Go out and have some fun."

"What kind of fun?"

"I don't know. We could get dinner somewhere or maybe go to a movie or something."

That sounded a lot like a date. Was Marcus asking him out? He stopped walking and stared at him, catching the almost embarrassed expression on his face.

"You don't have to if you'd rather not. I mean, I know what you've been through with other people, and I don't want you to feel like you have to just because you work for my father. It's not like that. I just thought... you know," Marcus shrugged, "you don't know many people, at least not decent ones. Maybe you don't have anyone you can just have fun with."

It was the oddest pickup line he'd ever heard. Most guys didn't use such a roundabout method. They got right to the point. *Ten bucks if you suck it.* He stared at Marcus long enough to make him look away.

"Like I said," Marcus started walking again, "it was just a suggestion. You don't have to."

"Are you asking me out?" He finally figured out how to make his tongue work.

Marcus stopped again. "I, uh, I was trying not to make it sound like that." He rubbed at the back of his neck. "But I kind of am. Is that bad?"

"No." He shook his head still frowning at him. "I guess not... but why? You don't owe me anything. I'm the one with the debt hanging over my head."

"It's not about debts." Marcus shrugged. "It's because... well... because I like you."

"You like me?" He raised his eyebrows and resisted the temptation to degrade into the playground antics of a little boy. *You like me or you like like me?*

"Yeah. I know you prefer honesty, so if I'm being honest, I think I have a crush on you."

His tongue stopped working again. All he could do was stare, an anxious little something in his head waving the word around looking for an explanation. He knew what it used to mean to have a crush when he was a kid. Back then, he would have been elated, but this wasn't back then. This was now, and nothing was ever what it seemed.

"Is that okay?" Marcus asked, uncertainty wrinkling his face.

"I guess it depends on what you mean."

"I don't really mean anything other than I want to spend time with you."

"We spend ten hours a day together."

"I mean someplace we can have a conversation that isn't about coffee."

"A conversation about what?"

"Anything. The weather. The Canucks. The price of gas. Whatever."

"And then what?"

"And then I walk you to the bus stop and you go home."

“Without you.”

“Yes.” Marcus took a step closer, and he planted his feet to keep from taking one back. “I know people have been rough on you. I don’t intend to be one of them. I just want to get to know you, Eric. I want to talk to you, laugh with you a little, and...” Marcus stopped talking and looked at the sidewalk.

“And what?”

“And I’m afraid if I say the rest I’ll scare you.”

“What’s the rest?” he asked with his palms already sweating and a nervous twitch traveling his legs.

Marcus looked at him. “One day when you trust me enough maybe you’ll kiss me. I promise not to turn it into something you’ll regret. I’ll just sit there and let you kiss me and think about what a lucky guy I am.”

He swallowed a stray bit of panic.

“‘One day’?” he echoed.

“One day.” Marcus nodded. “You pick the time and place. Until then I won’t try anything. I won’t even touch that little dimple you get when you smile.”

He reached up and rested fingers against his own face, letting them slide away a moment later. People didn’t talk that way to him. They didn’t romance him or tiptoe around what they wanted. They propositioned him, and when that didn’t work, they just grabbed him and took it.

He didn’t know what to do with a guy who asked permission and waited patiently, but the confession cleared a little of his lingering confusion.

“Is that why you talked your parents into giving me the job? You had a crush on me.”

“That’s part of it.” Marcus offered a bashful little smile.

“Bruises and bandages turn you on?”

The smile vanished. “No. It was the guy under the bruises and bandages. You deserve better. You deserve to have someone care about you.”

“If that’s true, you’re the only one who thinks so.” He started walking again, annoyed by the conversation and the uncertainty it inspired.

He was kidding himself if he thought this would actually go anywhere good. What happened when he turned Marcus down? What happened when Marcus’

patience ran out after months of platonic dates that never went anywhere? He'd do what everyone else did. Rape wasn't a shocking event. It was an inevitable consequence of not giving in to someone else's attraction.

"No, I'm not." Marcus followed him. "There are people all around you who want to help. You're just too scared to let them." Marcus grabbed his arm and pulled him to a stop.

He automatically cringed from the slap that usually went with that kind of thing. Marcus didn't look hopeful anymore. He only looked sad.

"I'm sorry." Marcus let go of his arm. "Look, all I'm asking for is a chance. Let me prove things can be different. We'll meet in public with plenty of witnesses. If I do something you don't like you're free to leave and never speak to me again."

"No, I'm not." He sighed. "I work for your father. I live in his house. You know as well as I do what will happen if I tell you to go to hell. I either do what you want or I lose it all."

Marcus' sorrow turned to a scowl. "Even after all this you still don't trust me?"

"Would you?"

Marcus glanced at the sidewalk, the people passing by, the cars in the street. "I'm going to tell you something," he said. "I don't intend for it to scare you. I'm just pointing it out, okay?"

"Okay."

"If I were going to force you to have sex with me, don't you think I would have by now? We're in the shop alone together for at least twenty minutes every morning. A person intent on hurting you would have taken advantage of that, wouldn't they?"

Marcus was right. He'd already had several opportunities to turn sexual assault into a regular part of the morning routine. He'd never thought about that before, too busy getting ready for the day's customers to contemplate the pockets of privacy lurking in several corners of the café.

"There's a difference between sex and love," Marcus said, his voice gentle. "I'm not after sex."

"No, there isn't," he rasped, his mouth as dry as the cloudless sky overhead.

Marcus smiled. “Yes, there is. I’m not interested in your ass. I’m interested in the guy under the bruises and bandages with the dimple I don’t see very often because so few things make him smile. I just want to see you smile, Eric. That’s all. Nothing else.”

Marcus moved his hand as if he wanted to reach out to him, but changed direction and shoved it in his pocket instead.

“I’d better get back to the shop,” Marcus said. “See you inside.”

Marcus walked away, headed back to the café with a bag of sandwiches dangling from the fingers of one hand. He watched him go, the words bouncing through him like a pinball alternately setting off alarms and buzzers. If this was a new ploy to get past his defenses, it was a good one because he was too confused to be scared.

Chapter 22

Marcus hadn't expected his speech to do any good. He returned to the coffee shop feeling disappointed and disheartened over a guy so broken he saw only predators, never people. It wasn't Eric's fault, but the refusal still depressed the part of him that hoped his new co-worker would one day become something more.

That's why the quiet conversation in the storeroom days later was such a shock. Right in the middle of pulling boxes of milk from the shelves, his life acquired a new brilliance.

"Do you still want to go to dinner?" Eric asked.

He knew instantly what Eric was talking about because he thought of that conversation every time he saw him and wondered if he would have received a better reaction if he'd said it all differently.

"Yes." He stood with milk in his arms.

"How about tonight?"

He flew right past a smile to a beaming grin. "I'd love to."

"My treat," Eric said. "I've never taken anyone to dinner before. It might be cool."

"Whatever you want."

He didn't say so because it wasn't the right time, but he'd already decided that would be the central rule of their relationship. Eric got whatever he wanted even if what he wanted was to be left alone.

"Where do you want to go?" Eric rewarded him with a flash of dimple.

"Anywhere you want. I'm not picky."

"Okay. I'll think about it."

"Great... and thank you." He stepped toward the door still wearing a grin.

"No big deal." Eric shrugged.

"Yes, it is." He carried his grin and his boxes of milk out to the front.

He didn't have anything to plan because it wasn't his date, and he refused to anticipate how the night would go. There would be food and conversation

because that was mandatory. Anything else would involve foolish speculation. There wouldn't be a goodnight kiss or a romantic moment over candlelight. Eric was terrified of sex and anything he did that even hinted at that concept would ruin the evening. They were barely friends. He needed to work on that part first.

They left the café together, and Eric led him to the bus stop. They rode down Hastings to Gastown and ended up at a chain Italian restaurant famous for mediocre food. He didn't comment on the choice. There were at least a dozen better places in the city, but if Eric liked that one, he wouldn't complain.

They sat on opposite sides of a booth in a room packed with people. The menu provided a few minutes' distraction, and then they were alone, staring at each other across the table over a basket of bread.

"How are things working for you at the shop?"

"They're fine." Eric turned his water glass in circles.

"Do you like it?"

"Yeah. It's better than I thought it would be. People always talk about working in restaurants and stuff and it never sounds like any fun, but I like the coffee. Maybe it's different because it's not flipping burgers or dodging people with a tray full of food."

"I'm glad."

"Do you like it?" Eric asked. "I know it's the family business, but do you ever wish you could do something else?"

"Growing up I didn't always appreciate spending so much time working when my friends were goofing off, but I'm glad I did. I learned more about running a business watching my dad than most people get out of four years at university. It was worth it."

"You didn't go to university?"

"No. I bought a loft instead." He smiled. "Years of experience trumps years of theory in my opinion. Besides, I don't have to compete with thousands of other people for the job. I already have it."

"Having an in with the boss has its advantages." Eric smiled.

"Yes, it does. What about you? What did you see yourself doing for a living when you were a kid?"

Eric's expression and gaze drooped at the same rate. He took a drink of water before he answered. "It doesn't matter. This is where I am so this is what I do."

"I'm sorry." He kicked himself for bringing it up.

"It's okay." Eric shrugged and brought his gaze back up from the table. "I didn't leave a life's dream behind or anything. I wanted to go to university and study something, but I didn't know what."

He wanted to hear the story of how Eric had ended up where he was, but a first date was the wrong time for soul searching. He wanted it to be fun so Eric would agree to do it again someday.

"To be honest, I'm not sure I had a real life's dream either. It was always expected that I would follow in the family business, and I didn't question it. I guess it might have been different if I'd dreamed of being a doctor or a lawyer or something, but that sounds like a lot of work."

Eric's dimple twitched to life for a brief moment, and he changed the subject. The food arrived and changed it again. It wasn't a profound discussion of life, but he thought they got along pretty well. The awkward silence didn't hit until they were back outside. He wasn't going to get a goodnight kiss and shaking hands seemed silly when they saw each other every day. Instead, he thanked Eric for the dinner, and they walked up the street, parting ways to catch different buses.

He replayed the date in his head that night in the dark. For a first date with a guy who didn't believe in anything beyond sexual assault, he thought it had gone fairly well. He wasn't sure they were ready for dinner dates, though. They needed things to inspire conversation until they knew more about each other than work habits and tragic pasts.

Movies felt too much like a real date with arms around each other, holding hands in the dark. He didn't want Eric to feel uncomfortable. The alternative was something void of romance and full of conversation. They needed a hockey game.

He showed up the next morning with a plan and a story that was only half-true.

"Do you like hockey?" he asked Eric the next morning while they were setting up.

“I guess. Sure.”

“I ended up with a couple of tickets to the game tomorrow night, and the guy I was going to take backed out. What would you think about going?”

Eric took a drink of coffee while he considered the question. “That could be fun. Yeah. Thanks.”

“No problem. I hate going alone.”

He struggled to keep his grin under control. It wasn't easy when every time he saw Eric it tried to wiggle out of his grasp. He barely slept that night, rolling around on his bed while thoughts of Eric and the game chased each other through his head and into his dreams.

He tried to slap himself awake the next morning with a shot of espresso. It didn't work nearly as well as Eric walking through the door. For the first time in weeks his coat was clean, no stains, no grime, no smell. Something had inspired him to stuff it in the washer, and it made him so happy he wanted to hug him. Weeks of careful handling had apparently convinced him he had no reason to hold on to his foul camouflage because he wasn't going back to the street anytime soon.

He bounced around the café like a man running on a full night's sleep, full of hope and anticipation. It wouldn't matter if he and Eric never got past the friend stage. As long as he didn't have to spend any more nights wondering how Eric was surviving among the homeless and addicted he would be happy.

Chapter 23

Marcus sat beside Eric in the front row of the second level at a stadium packed with people. GM Place was always crowded when the Canucks played. It also had a new name, but no one who had been in the city longer than a few years used it.

They cheered, yelled at the players, and during the period breaks stood to stretch their legs. It was entertaining and thoroughly platonic until the final buzzer announced the end of the game. They joined the flow of people trudging up the stairs to the exit and past already closed vendors. The crowd became a solid wall of humanity woven together as tightly as the buzz of conversation when it reached the escalators.

Moving in shuffled steps, they inched toward one that would take them to another and pour them out on the first floor. He felt the tight grip of fingers around his arm and looked back at Eric. His expression matched the desperate hold on his jacket, pinched and panicked, eyes roaming the faces around them in a continuous motion. He rested a hand over Eric's to get his attention.

“Are you okay?”

Eric nodded in unconvincing short jerks.

“Here. Give me your hand.” He pried Eric loose from his jacket and guided his hand down his arm.

Eric clamped onto him, pressing their sweaty palms together. When the second escalator released them on the first floor, they followed the flow of people out the door into the crisp night air. He pulled Eric out of the gush of bodies and off to the side.

“Are you sure you're okay?”

Eric nodded again, trembling with something that had started long before they reached the open air, eyes flicking to passing hockey fans. He either wasn't the type to appreciate crowds or had a valid reason to fear them somewhere in his past. He didn't press for an explanation. Instead, he pried his hand from Eric's grip and wrapped his arm around his shoulders.

“I know it sounds like a cliché from a bad movie, but I won't let anything happen to you,” he said, lips near Eric's ear.

Eric pressed a little closer against him, and Marcus held him tighter, both arms wrapped around him, Eric's back to the stream of people. They stood until the cold gave them another reason to shiver. He let go of Eric, taking his hand to keep him close, and they walked several blocks back to Hastings Street. Eric traded disturbed for something that looked closer to depressed the farther they walked from the stadium. With his eyes on the ground, the space between Eric's eyebrows wrinkled into a scowl.

He had planned to let Eric take the bus back to the house alone, but he'd also imagined Eric being in a better mood. He didn't want to put him on the bus in the middle of the night when he looked that upset even if he was far past the stage of being a helpless kid. He wasn't sure Eric would make it back to the house. It seemed more likely he'd get off at a random stop and disappear into a hole somewhere to hide from whatever had set him off.

He led Eric to the bus stop, and when the bus arrived, ushered him inside. Eric slid into an empty seat halfway to the back, and Marcus pushed him to the window, sliding in after him. He took Eric's hand, and they rode in silence.

Two stops before his parents' neighborhood, Eric rested his head against his shoulder, and he wished the ride could last half the night. With a disappointed sigh, he pulled the cord to stop the bus and slid out of the seat, leading Eric by the hand. They stepped off the bus onto the quiet street and stood at the deserted bus stop as the bus rumbled away.

"Want to talk about it?" he asked.

"It's nothing. I'm just tired of being afraid."

"Have you always been scared of crowds?"

"It wasn't the crowd. It was the people who might be in it."

He nodded at the concept. In Eric's place, paranoid and always looking for bad guys, he might have freaked out over the possibility, too.

"Maybe next time we can watch the game at a restaurant."

"Maybe."

He wanted to tuck a finger under Eric's chin, lift his face, and let whatever happened after that happen, but he wasn't going to push Eric to do anything. Instead, he stroked the back of his fingers across the spot where the dimple hid.

"I'm sorry," he said. "It has to suck having so much to be scared of."

Eric's chin came up on its own, and for a moment, they watched each other in the jaundiced street light. He couldn't read the emotion in Eric's expression and counted that as a win. Attraction was too much to expect. The lack of suspicion would have to do.

"Come on. Let's go home." He stepped out of the moment and hoped at some point that move would earn him a little trust somewhere.

Eric didn't try to take back his hand, so they walked down the street still holding onto each other with a minimal grip. They climbed the stairs to the front door, following the light from the living room window. Eric took his hand back as they stepped out of the cold.

They sat on the couch with his parents, talking about the game until Eric's eyelids began to droop. Eric yawned, pushed up from the couch, offered them all a blanket goodnight, and disappeared. The next morning was Sunday so the café would open late, and Marcus took advantage of the extra hours to stay up talking until after midnight.

His mother brought him a blanket and pillow before they headed for bed, and he stretched out on the couch. He wouldn't have minded staying up in the dark to think about the guy sleeping one floor down, but it didn't work that way. He smiled at the thought of a date that hadn't gone too badly despite the unexpected drama and drifted to sleep to the memory of standing under the streetlight with Eric.

Chapter 24

Morning was a warm glow in the sky when Eric woke. He rolled over to look at the clock and settled back into his pillow with an hour to contemplate last night before he had to start getting ready for work. It felt a bit like a dream except for the pointed spike of shame over acting like a child.

It seemed ridiculous now, but last night the threat of being snatched from the throng and dragged off somewhere without anyone noticing had seemed real almost to the point of being inevitable. With so many people around, anyone could have hidden in the crowd.

The thought of spending the rest of his life searching every mob for potential monsters was as disturbing as the fear. The memory of Marcus brushed away some of the shame and distress. He may have acted like a child last night, but Marcus hadn't.

Opportunities to take advantage of the situation stretched from the moment he had panicked and grabbed Marcus' jacket to standing under the streetlight at the bus stop. He hadn't used any of them. Staring at each other in the privacy of a deserted street, he had been certain Marcus would kiss him and was prepared to let him. Marcus had earned it. Instead, he had walked away. Were it not for the firm grip on his hand leading him down the street, he would have felt rejected.

Marcus wanted to have something with him. More than a fling or a self-serving game of domination and abuse. He wanted something else even if he hadn't defined it yet. The prospect of an actual love affair set things wiggling in his stomach. He wanted the fairy tale romance with a real boyfriend instead of someone who used the title to disguise a situation better described as slavery.

It would never happen because things like that didn't happen to him, but it was a nice thought. He rolled over to look out the window at the trunk of a naked tree, a sliver of the neighbor's house, a slice of sky when it occurred to him that something else had happened last night. He forgot to bar the door to the bedroom.

He'd been so tired and disoriented by things that had and hadn't happened that night he'd forgotten the only security measure guaranteed to earn him undisturbed sleep. Yet there he was alone and unmolested in the house with two men upstairs. That kind of thing didn't happen to him either.

He stared at the tree, thinking about the odd life he'd lived since Daddy. It didn't fit with the nightmare of the past several years. Unlike the last few times people had offered to rescue him, this time involved a man who took him to hockey games and refused to kiss him even when the timing was perfect. A few days ago, Marcus had told him he wouldn't take advantage of the situation, not even when it involved a kiss. Maybe he was serious about not making a move until he had permission.

What kind of guy waited for permission to kiss somebody? He didn't know because he'd never met one. He understood seduction and coercion. He didn't understand romance and tenderness. Those only existed for heterosexual couples. Gays didn't make love or romance each other with candlelight. They fucked or raped. He knew it as well as he knew making coffee was as close to success as he would ever get. He had years of proof to back it up.

He didn't believe the stories about the uber-talented actor who flaunted his perfect life complete with a husband and kids as if it was real. Gays didn't get that kind of success and acceptance. They got abandonment and depression. They lived together in huddled communities because nobody else wanted them, fancy communes of the rejected and abused.

That was reality. Happily ever after wasn't. Could Marcus be that old and not know that romance didn't exist in a picture of two fags? He pushed back the blankets and wondered about a guy who went on dates and talked about romantic things like their first kiss as if it could actually happen.

He got up, gathered a change of clothes, and padded across the hall to the bathroom to take a shower, wondering about the effort involved in pretending gays and romance were compatible. He didn't understand why anyone would bother repainting the stinking pile of truth other than because marriage made it all look respectable. The fancy suits and ceremonies didn't mean someone didn't go home to sleep in the closet and spend his days in restraints putting out on command. Promises to love and honor were only words. They meant nothing.

He rinsed shampoo from his hair and wondered what he would have said had Daddy suggested they get married. Knowing Daddy, he would have promised the ceremony would make them equal partners in the relationship. He snorted out a brief burst of humor. That would have lasted until about the third lash with the whip when Daddy realized sadism was less fun as the victim.

He dried off and got dressed, contemplating Marcus and the fairytale he seemed to think could be real. Upstairs the house was alive with the business of breakfast. Ellen was making pancakes. David was at the table with a cup of coffee and a section of the morning paper. Marcus was stretched out on the couch with another.

“Good morning, *chu huzi*. I was about to send Marcus down to get you,” Ellen said.

“Morning.”

“Breakfast is almost ready,” she announced to the room. “Papers down.”

Marcus and David rustled papers closed, and Marcus rolled up from the couch dressed in rumpled clothes from last night. Ellen delivered a pile of pancakes to the table, and they all dug in.

“I’m going to head back to the shop early today,” Marcus said pouring syrup over his pancakes. “I need to shower and change before we open, but you don’t need to rush if you don’t want, Eric. There’s still plenty of time.”

“I’m ready to go. I might as well head over there. We’ll have a few extra minutes to get set up.”

The topic changed to the new location and the lease David finalized the day before. They had a new store that needed some work before it was ready to go.

“Do you think you can handle things by yourself for a few hours?” David asked Eric.

“Sure,” he said before taking a bite.

He knew the routine and leaving the place in his hands was the whole reason they’d hired him. Soon he would open by himself and Marcus would start working solely at the new store, playing manager to a couple of employees. It was great news for them. Not so great for the part of him that knew what it meant for the doomed romance with a guy who would soon be too busy to do anything but work.

He silently scolded that petulant part of himself for being so naïve and finished his breakfast before following Marcus to the bus stop. The street was as empty as the night before. So was the bus, but daylight made it less romantic. They got off near the coffee shop, and Marcus waited for the bus to rumble down the street.

“Why don’t I let you in, and you can set up while I shower,” Marcus said when the bus was far enough away to be heard. “Unless you want to wait. It’s up to you.”

“No, I’ll be fine. I need to learn to do this on my own at some point, right?”

They walked to the coffee shop, and Marcus unlocked the door, turned off the alarm, and left him the key. He locked the door behind him when Marcus headed off to change clothes and started setting up. There were still things he didn’t know, like the code for the alarm and how to open the cash register for the day. He assumed they would tell him the last of the café’s secrets at some point.

He restocked the supplies under the counter and organized the baked goods. He was ready to go half an hour early when Marcus reappeared with damp hair and clean clothes.

“Everything set?” Marcus asked, relocking the door with his spare key.

“I think so.”

“Great. Let me show you how to work the alarm. That might come in handy if you’re going to take over the opening shift.”

“It might.” He smiled.

He followed Marcus to the control panel and tried to concentrate while the scent of soap and shampoo drifted scenes through his head. He blinked away visions of a kiss and something else he wasn’t sure he wanted. He wasn’t sure he didn’t. It might feel different if he actually had a choice. It might feel different with a guy who wasn’t into tying him up and spanking him into submission with a paddleboard or zapping him with an electric wand.

“Do you want to give it a try?” Marcus asked.

He froze, his heart jumping from curiosity to anxiety. “Try what?”

“Setting and deactivating the alarm.”

“Oh. Yeah... okay.”

He felt like an idiot, daydreaming over a crush when he should be paying attention. Marcus walked him through setting the alarm and then deactivating it.

“That’s perfect,” Marcus said from a step away.

He wondered if the slight hesitation in Marcus' words was only his imagination.

"I, um, I guess we're ready to open." Marcus stared at him.

"Yeah," he replied.

"This is the wrong time and the wrong place, but I really want to kiss you," Marcus confessed, a gentle caress in his tone.

He considered continuing the conversation, letting time leak away from them, giving himself a chance to come to his senses. He didn't. He rested his hands on Marcus' shoulders, leaned close, and kissed him before either of them changed their mind.

It wasn't a romantic embrace, but his heart pounded as if it were. The soft warmth of Marcus' lips kept him there—chest pressed together, his hands on Marcus' shoulders. He opened to him, letting Marcus inside, a fearful bolt zinging through him, ricocheting off desire at the thought of what he'd started. He imagined being pressed against the wall, dominated, mauled, stripped. He shuddered at the image.

Once again, reality didn't follow his imagination. He felt fingers in his hair, the gentle pressure of a palm against the back of his head, a thumb tracking back and forth across his scalp. A second hand landed in the center of his back, keeping him close with the suggestion of a touch. There was no demand in Marcus' hands or his lips. Only a reminder that they had plenty of time and no reason to rush.

The gentle intensity and inflating bubbles of desire pressing against his chest made it hard to breathe. He slid his hands along Marcus' shoulders and wrapped arms around his neck, holding him closer. He felt the smile against his lips, the slide of the hand along his back, around his ribs, holding him gently and wondered why he didn't feel trapped in Marcus' arms. It was the most dangerous thing he'd done in a long time.

Shouldn't he feel trapped?

Chapter 25

Eric stood with his forehead rested on Marcus' shoulder while a hand glided up and down his back. It was hard to catch his breath with Marcus so close, the scent of soap, the warmth of his skin, the body pressed against him. He was dizzy, confused, distracted by the lingering sensation of Marcus on his lips.

"Are you okay?" Marcus stroked his head and kissed his hair.

"Yeah. That was just..." He brought his head up and looked into Marcus' face. "I don't think anybody's ever kissed me like that."

Marcus smiled, his face full of humor and desire. "I don't see how they could resist. You have a mouth people write songs about." Marcus drifted a thumb across his lips before sliding fingers behind his neck and pulling him closer to kiss his forehead.

"That's not usually what they want from my mouth."

He regretted the words even as he said them. He didn't want to smudge the most incredible moment he'd ever had with the grime of his past.

"I guess it's easier for some people to understand sex than romance."

"Something like that." He laid his head back on Marcus' shoulder, smiling when Marcus rested a hand against it, holding him there.

"I wish we had more time," Marcus sighed. "This is what I meant about the wrong time and the wrong place. We have to open in ten minutes, so I can't spend the rest of the morning re-enacting that kiss. Instead, I'll spend the rest of the day wishing I could."

He hadn't thought about that part. Marcus was spending the day across town at the new coffee shop with David. He wouldn't get to see him again until tomorrow, and unless they planned to show up early for a few more stolen moments together, it might be a long time before a kiss like that happened again. Opening early on a Monday morning wasn't likely.

Disappointment rolled through him when Marcus let him go. He felt like a fool for wanting to cry over it.

"We'll have to figure out a way to improve the timing." Marcus squeezed his arm. "Until then, I'll set up the register. Will you check the supplies on the condiment stand?"

“Yeah.” He nodded stomping the regret down as he crossed the floor.

Kisses during random moments might be preferable to hurried fucking, but he saw the downside a lot more clearly than he had an hour ago. He and Marcus wouldn't see each other very often anymore because the new store would dominate his schedule. That kiss wasn't the start of something great. It was the end of something that had never been. One more example of God taunting him with things he couldn't have. Maybe Ellen was right. There was no need for hell when he was already standing in the middle of it.

He swallowed the tears and silently rubbed his nose in the ache, punishing himself like the disobedient mutt he was. He should have known better. He refilled stir sticks and packets of sweetener and then unlocked the front door.

“What's the matter?” Marcus asked when he strode back behind the counter.

“Nothing.”

“You looked a lot happier five minutes ago.”

“It doesn't matter.”

The attempted conversation ended when the first customer came through the door. An hour later, Marcus left to look at the new store, and he refused to watch him go. He hid behind a pleasant smile the way Ellen had taught him and pretended his heart wasn't wounded. He spent the rest of the day trying to decide what to do next. Part of him wanted to walk away from the family, the job, the future just to ensure he didn't have to feel so bad every time he saw Marcus. It was a drastic solution. In any other situation, he might have considered it, but that was a lot to give up over a shattered fantasy.

That's all Marcus had ever been. He had no reason to play the role of disappointed lover when he was only a sucker who had fallen for a mirage. Marcus' suggestion of them meaning something to each other, dating like real people, kissing like real people would never happen. It couldn't. He tried to convince himself he was lucky it had taken so long to find the inspiration to kiss in the first place. It would have been worse to start that little romance a month ago and have to break it off now because of the new store. He'd be moping around like a lovesick fool. This way he could skip the lovesick part.

He left the café late that afternoon with a plan to go back to the house and tear the remains of the idiot romantic from his system with a stern lecture. That life wasn't for him. It never would be. The best he could hope for was blissful

celibacy, and after what he'd been through in the last few years, that was enough.

He strode out the door and marched around the corner headed for the bus stop, pulling up short when he almost ran into someone.

"Sorry," he mumbled, taking a step back when he recognized the shirt.

"I was just coming to find you." Marcus smiled.

He felt his resolve start to melt like snow in the rain. "I was just headed home."

"How about an early dinner?"

"I, uh... I don't know. I'm kind of tired."

Marcus looked at him. "Is something wrong?"

"No." He flashed a smile. "Everything's fine. I'd better get going. I don't want to miss the bus."

He tried to step around him, and Marcus touched his arm. The fact that he didn't grab it stopped him.

"I was hoping we could talk... about this morning," Marcus said. "I want to make sure you didn't misunderstand it."

"I didn't."

Marcus offered a small smile. "I think maybe you did. Just twenty minutes. Please."

He nodded agreement.

"Great. Where do you want to go?"

"I don't care."

"How about my building? We can talk in the lobby."

"Sure."

He followed Marcus halfway down the block and made it a point not to look as Marcus pressed buttons on the security keypad to unlock the door. He heard the click of the lock before Marcus tugged it open, holding it for him. The lobby was small, done in gray and black. Two dark leather benches flanked the concierge desk a discreet distance away. Marcus led him to the one near the door.

“It isn’t much for privacy, but at least it’s quiet,” Marcus said, sitting beside him. “This morning was kind of rushed. I wanted to have a chance to explain before you started thinking the wrong thing.”

He knew what Marcus wanted to explain. The kiss was just a kiss. It meant nothing. Either that or it was a precursor to an offer of a physical relationship that was more physical than relationship. He sat back and folded his arms, digging fingers into his skin to keep from crying.

“I really like you, Eric. I hope you know that.”

He could feel the *but* coming.

“Things are a little up in the air right now and with the new store only a couple of months from opening it probably means we won’t be working together much anymore,” Marcus spelled out what he’d already told himself.

“It’s okay,” he said. “I get it. It’s just bad timing.”

“It is, but that wasn’t what I wanted to tell you. I know we won’t be working together anymore, but I hope that doesn’t also mean you want things between us to be over before they’ve started.”

Here it came, the suggestion they become fuck buddies.

“I want to spend time with you even if it’s harder to do than it used to be. Maybe if we’re both on the same schedule we can meet after work a few times a week and have dinner or something.” Marcus rested a hand on his leg. “I don’t want you to think that was a one-time thing I planned before I walked out of your life. I also don’t want you to feel like you have to do this. It isn’t an obligation. You can tell me that kiss was all there will ever be between us and it won’t cost you a thing.”

He’d expected a different speech.

“So you want this to be what?” he asked.

Marcus sat back. “To be honest, I’d like to fall in love with you and whatever comes after that.”

He stared at the gray marble floor. It sounded great, if unrealistic.

“What do you think?” Marcus asked in response to his stunned silence.

“I think it sounds unreal.”

“What do you mean?”

“People don’t say things like that to me. They don’t want things like that.”

Marcus pulled one of his arms to unravel the knot of limbs locked across his chest and took his hand.

“I know this is new.” Marcus kissed his fingers. “And it’s probably confusing and scary as hell.” Marcus held Eric’s hand in both of his. “But I’m serious. This isn’t about sex. It’s about love and me wanting to repeat that kiss this morning as many times as we can even if it means we don’t get past kissing for a while.”

Tears puddled in his eyes, warping the image of Marcus and the intensity in his face.

“I’m not after your body.” Marcus reached out and thumbed away a tear that tumbled down his cheek. “I’m willing to wait for you to offer it whenever you feel like taking that step. No pressure. No games. No lies. I want however much of you you’re willing to give.”

“I don’t know if I can,” he whispered around the sob lodged in his throat.

“Can what?”

“Do this... trust you. I like you, but it feels like a trap.”

Marcus leaned forward and kissed his cheek. “I know. That’s why we’ll go slowly. We can do dinner with lots of witnesses and no privacy. I won’t follow you home or anything.”

He sniffled, considering the offer.

“Please. Give me a chance to show you not everybody is like the bastards you left behind.”

“But they are.” Another tear broke free. “They always are.”

“Not this time.” Marcus brushed it away. “I’ll prove it to you. I promise.”

He didn’t have a reason to refuse. Marcus’ proposal left no room for affection taken too far or even a repeat of the kiss that was as tender and respectful as he’d promised. In fact, Marcus had been promising him things for months and none of them turned out to be lies.

He thought of that moment under the streetlight and the craving in Marcus’ eyes. He thought about the speech confessing ignored opportunities at the coffee shop. He thought about waking up to a sunlit room and an unlocked door

instead of darkness, a hand over his mouth, and the hot breath of a rapist in his face.

Marcus had chances, dozens, and he hadn't used any of them. He had waited for the invitation in that kiss and still hadn't done what everybody else would have, mangling something tender and sweet into something ugly and vile. He'd kissed him back, touching him with gentle hands, the same hands holding his while he waited for an answer.

“Okay.” He nodded. “We can try.”

A grin shattered Marcus' mask of uncertainty, and he kissed Eric's fingers. “You won't be sorry.”

He wanted to believe that more than he'd ever wanted anything.

Chapter 26

Eric sat across the table from Marcus with an empty plate and a full stomach, wiggling with anxiety. He wasn't used to the tension. Two weeks spent eating, talking, and laughing together had extinguished most of it. Marcus had kept his word about behaving himself because Marcus always kept his word. He was learning that.

Tonight he planned to test the theory. Part of him didn't want to take the risk. Part of him needed to know how far he could really trust Marcus before he got any deeper into something he already dreaded living without.

They paid separate checks the way they always did and slid out of the booth headed for the door. He spent every night wondering how things would have gone if Marcus had enough privacy for anything more than holding his hand. They didn't kiss in public. Sometimes they hugged. Most of the time he stood at the bus stop and imagined more.

Not tonight.

They walked toward the bus stop, passing other people on the sidewalk while he silently lectured himself about not being a chicken. At some point, he had to know how deep Marcus' restraint went. It was better to find out early.

"What are you thinking about?" Marcus asked.

"Nothing."

"Your sweaty palm says otherwise."

Attentiveness had landed on the list of Marcus' better qualities weeks ago. He noticed things like sweaty palms and sluggish conversation.

"I was thinking that instead of going right home maybe you could show me something."

"Okay. What?"

"Your loft?"

Marcus looked over at him. "Are you sure?"

"If we're dating it's probably time for me to see where you live, right?"

"Right." They walked a few steps in silence. "Were you thinking about a peek through the door or do you want a tour?"

“I’m not sure.”

Marcus squeezed his hand. “We’ll start with a peek and see where it goes.”

He shuddered at the vision of Marcus shoving him through the door and slamming it closed, willing it away. Yes, it would be the first time they were alone together with no chance of interruption, but it wouldn’t be like that. Marcus wasn’t a monster in disguise.

He repeated it in a continuous mantra all the way to Marcus’ building and up seven floors in the elevator. They walked down the silent hall covered in gray carpet and stopped outside Marcus’ door.

“You’re sure about this?” Marcus asked.

He nodded. Marcus squeezed his hand before turning it loose to dig keys out of his pocket. He unlocked the door and pushed it open wide, stepping inside so Eric could see.

“This is home,” Marcus announced.

He had expected something more from the loft. A lot more. There was no real need for a tour. He could see the entire glorified closet from the hall.

“It’s smaller than I imagined.”

“Three hundred fifty square feet.”

“That sounds about right.”

“You know how it goes. If you want affordable you have to think small.”

“Or claustrophobic.” He took a step into the room.

“It’s not bad as long as I keep the blinds open.” Marcus followed him in. “Do you mind if I close the door?”

He stepped further away from Marcus. “I guess not.”

“Let me give you the tour.” Marcus pushed the door closed without commenting on his need for space.

Marcus pointed out the half-size coat closet beside Eric that flowed into a kitchen contained on a single five-foot stretch of countertop. The equally compact bathroom hid behind the only door on the opposite side of the room.

In two steps, the foyer mutated into the combined living room and dining room with built-in cabinets, nooks, and a flat-screen television on the wall. The only real furniture in the place was a built-in couch opposite the television.

Everything was white from the tile floor to the cabinets, broken up by the random colors of things on the counter, cyan cushions on the couch, a red and green area rug on the floor. Were it not for the exterior wall of glass and the balcony beyond, the place would have seemed smothering and sterile.

He stepped closer to the sliding glass door, drawn by the view of light and shadow. He took a second tour by turning in place and noticed the conspicuously unaccounted for accessory.

“Where is your bed?”

“In the wall.”

“What?”

“I’ll show you.”

Marcus removed the cushions from the back of the couch and reached halfway up the wall to the handle of a built-in cabinet. One tug brought the wall swinging down from the ceiling to reveal a mattress covered in bright blue sheets. He smiled and shook his head. He had always loved the color blue, but not even that could lure him into Marcus’ bed. Not yet.

“That certainly makes tidying up easy,” he said.

“Doesn’t it?” Marcus pushed it back in place. “Dump everything on your bed, close it up and you’re done.”

Something about having the bed folded up in the wall put him at ease. He knew better. The bedroom wasn’t the only dangerous place in a house, but he didn’t argue when the knot in his stomach loosened.

“Want to watch some TV?” Marcus asked, putting the cushions back in place.

“Sure.”

They sat on the couch shoulder to shoulder for a moment before Marcus put an arm around him. For the first time since the kiss, he was close enough to repeat it. He rested a hand against Marcus’ chest and leaned close, pressing their lips together. It was as tender and sweet as the first time, Marcus’ hand in his hair, caressing him with fingers and tongue, but otherwise unmoving. Marcus didn’t pull him into his lap, force him down onto the couch, or even use it as an excuse to start unbuttoning things. He kissed him, held him, and when they broke apart, hugged him close again.

“I’ve been waiting two weeks for that,” Marcus said.

“Me, too.”

“It was as good as I remembered.”

He smiled and snuggled into him. The tight heated coil low in his belly wanted to do more. He wanted to know how those gentle hands felt on his body, gliding across his skin. He wanted those lips on other things, drawing the heat out of him with each kiss. He wanted to see how Marcus looked under the layer of denim that hugged his body in all the right places, but he didn’t want sex. Several parts of him clenched at the mere thought, turning the heat in his belly to a cramp. He wanted foreplay and nothing else, but foreplay without sex didn’t exist.

“Are you cold? You’re shivering.”

“No, I’m fine.” He shook his head against Marcus’ shoulder.

“Did I scare you?” Marcus stroked his hair.

“I scared me.”

“There’s nothing to be afraid of.”

“I know.” He brought his head up.

Marcus was always honest with him. There was no reason not to return the favor.

“Part of me wants to do more than kiss you. Part of me would rather jump off your balcony.”

“I can understand that.” Marcus took his hand and kissed his palm, eyes never leaving his face. “I want to be with you, too. I want to know how it feels to make love to you and wake up the next morning to that smile, but I’m willing to wait. If it’s anything like that kiss it’ll be worth it.”

He smiled. “That’s almost enough to make me want to fuck you right now.”

“I’ll tell you whatever you need to hear.” Marcus smiled back. “Just as long as when we finally get to it I can take my time. I don’t want to fuck you, Eric. I want better than that.”

He swallowed, his heart and stomach pulsing with the same rhythm.

“No?” He coaxed more details out of him.

“No.” Marcus stared into his eyes. “I want you to understand the difference, to feel it.”

Marcus leaned close and kissed him, the touch of his lips electric, pounding through his body with a jolt of desire that for the first time didn't come with a fearful echo. He wasn't ready to throw his inhibition away. Not yet, but when he was, Marcus would keep his promise. He always did.

Chapter 27

Marcus lay stretched out on the couch, head on a throw pillow and Eric in his arms. The television murmured on the far side of the room. He preferred to find his entertainment in books, but Eric liked the noisy box so they watched it because it guaranteed he would stay longer and kept the tension at a minimum. Sitting in the silence made Eric nervous.

He smiled and kissed Eric's ear, caressing him through his shirt. Weeks after that first kiss, they were making progress. Eric would lie with him as long as it wasn't in bed and they kept their clothes on. He wasn't ready for a physical relationship. He didn't blame Eric for his reluctance.

Since that first night together kissing on the couch, Eric's past had dribbled out. It wasn't like holding a virgin in his arms. Eric needed far more care than that. He had never had sex that wasn't forced, coerced, demanded. Some of what he'd been through was even worse.

The last man to have his hands on Eric had claimed affection for BDSM. He doubted the bastard even knew what it was because nothing Eric described fell into that category. He fed Eric out of a bowl like a dog, making him eat without his hands and sleep in a cage. He kept him collared and tethered, shoved things inside him designed to cause as much pain as possible, and in the end developed a choking fetish that left Eric's neck continually bruised.

The hospital was wrong. His injuries weren't from a gay bashing. They were the marks of a violent psychopath Eric had agreed to pleasure in exchange for food because he had been starving. The church program had rescued him from a pair of pimps who had sold him to anyone willing to pay, ending years of servitude. What it hadn't done was given him the ability to survive on his own. He only had one marketable skill, and they hadn't bothered to teach him any others, so he'd gone back to the only life he knew. It had almost killed him, and he wasn't sure that hadn't been Eric's intention all along.

He lay there often with Eric in his arms thinking about the narrow alignment of things that had led to those moments alone together. One misstep anywhere in the chain of horror that had led him to a chair beside Eric's bed and he never would have known Eric existed.

He kissed Eric's hair, caressed him through his shirt, and smiled. The smile grew when Eric squirmed and grunted onto his other side to face him. He

drifted the back of his fingers across the dimple on Eric's face, the two of them smiling at each other in silence. Eric kissed him. He kissed back. Eric caressed him. He caressed back. Eric wrapped arms around him and he held him tighter.

That's how their relationship went. Eric set the pace, and when he was ready to start taking off clothes and inching toward making love he would follow, but it wasn't his place to suggest it. Eric trusted him. He had even spent the night on an air mattress on the floor a time or two, spilling his secrets into the silent darkness. He saw no reason to push for more. That trust was precious and fragile; something Eric hadn't given anyone else. It meant more to him than quenching his throbbing desire.

He drifted a hand along Eric's back, held Eric's head to his chest, and inhaled the lingering scent of shampoo in his hair.

"I love you," he sighed, happier than he'd ever been.

Eric nodded against his chest. "Me, too."

The End

Author Bio

Award winning author DP Denman writes character-driven contemporary romance about gay men. Her stories are real and intense, but resolve in endings that make people want to read the story all over again.

In her spare time, she is a dedicated LGBTQIA rights activist fighting for those who have been marginalized and abused. To that end, 25% of the royalties from every book go to support LGBT charities.

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