

LOVE Has NO Boundaries



Don't Read in the Closet Event 2013

VOLUME 3

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Love Has No Boundaries

An M/M Romance Collection

Volume 3

Introduction

The stories you are about to read celebrate love, sex and romance between men. They are a product of the *Love Has No Boundaries* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and these anthologies are published as a gift to you.

What Is Love Has No Boundaries?

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

Nearly 190 stories were submitted and have now been published as a twelve volume set with two additional bonus volumes, titled *Love Has No Boundaries*; this edition is Volume 3.

Written descriptions of the images that inspired these stories are provided along with the original request letters. If you'd like to view the photos, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love Has No Boundaries*.

Whether you are an avid M/M romance reader or new to the genre, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

The stories in this collection may contain sexually explicit content and are **intended for adult readers**. They may also 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.

These stories are 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.

Dedication

As you can imagine, coordinating nearly 190 authors, proofing their work and publishing it both online and in eprint involved hundreds of hours of volunteer work. Nearly two dozen members chipped-in to help; the *M/M Romance Group* would like to extend a special thanks to the volunteers of the event team for their unwavering commitment and enthusiasm.

Ebook Layout and Navigation

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

The **story titles link** back to the original posts in Goodreads M/M Romance group. The author names also link back to their **Goodreads author profiles**.

The written description that inspired each story, along with the letter that inspired the tale is provided. If you would like to see the actual photo, you can view them at: www.goodreads.com/group/show/20149-m-m-romance.

Enjoy.

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PER ARDUA AD ASTRA

By Gil Cole

Photo Description

Two Royal Flying Corps Officers look out at the night before one of them goes on a dangerous mission the next day...

Story Letter

Dear Author,

**coughs* Excuse in advance some very fetish points in my request.*

Possible name: Lost Planes

Possible plot line: Incest - father and son (if not then age gap)

Genre: Historical, Military. HEA

They never dared admit their true and mutual feelings. Until the war brought them together. Closer than ever, they must survive and become clear about their relationship. The decision may free them or destroy them.

Please, let sex be at the highest level!<3<3

PS: I mean an adult man and his father, not an underage boy.

Sincerely,

Vessto

Story Info

Genre: historical

Tags: military men, BDSM, age-gap, oral, anal

Word count: 13,383

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PER ARDUA AD ASTRA

By Gil Cole

“Listen a moment, Freddy.” Hugh gently pressed his hand across the younger man’s mouth, just now set with apprehension. “I’m right here. There’s no need for any fuss.”

Freddy inhaled as he shut his eyes, taking in the familiar mixture of Hugh and a trace of soap with—what, lavender? yes, that was it—and his nerves settled. When he opened them, he looked into Hugh’s eyes and nodded. “I know. It is—it is simply that I’m frightfully attached to you, you know. I can’t—”

“Then we won’t. Look.” Hugh pointed to the night sky outside the window of the small, tidy room at the King’s Arms that had been their sanctuary, their secret, their kingdom, their solace, since their Corps Wing was stationed at Larkhill for training. Though not at its fullest, the moon shone brightly on them. “Listen to me carefully. Do you see how the light falls on us now?”

Freddy gazed through the window a moment and saw how the moon silvered the village. “Yes.”

The older man said, “Be here with me, now, boy. Look at me. There is only this moment.”

The younger man tightened his grip on the man he held. He leaned down and kissed him.

The orders had come down that morning. These last six weeks, their Wing had flown reconnaissance missions deep into occupied France. Their skills had been duly noted. Most noteworthy was the fact that their Wing took the lightest burden of casualties. Of course one wants to demonstrate one’s backbone and serve one’s King and Country, but the result of showing that one has the steel to put on a good war was that Command seemed determined to test that steel even further.

Hugh Penderby was a man everyone thought would rise in the ranks, to Colonel easily, and beyond. He was to lead this first sortie. Freddy Llewelyn-Jones had just made Captain. Both were first-rate pilots. From his very first flights, Hugh showed an instinctive skill for new feats, things that no men had attempted before, that it was uncanny. While some dared call him reckless, none questioned his valor. Lately he was valued as a man with an eye to sort out the weaker fellows, those who sought glory but hadn't enough stuff in them, and train them for missions that demanded more than ever of His Majesty's airmen. He had spent the last year training the best of the new flyers at Larkhill. Freddy served there with him.

They'd been at the same school, nearly together. It would be most accurate to say that Freddy had idolized Hugh from afar, when Freddy was a snout-nosed first former, and Hugh was going up to Oxford the next year. Hugh had all the graces, including the grace not to lord it over the other boys who lacked what he'd been given. He even wore the coarse nickname his awe-struck mates had given him—Huge Pendulous—with aplomb. That nickname fascinated Freddy long before he understood precisely why it was so appropriate. And when finally his innocence was disturbed, he was overjoyed.

That happened on a halcyon summer's day, two years before the world and everything in it went to pieces.

Freddy was rowing in the Summer Eights for Balliol. Hugh, in his day, had rowed for Magdalen, and never missed a chance to exhort his college on to glory in the races. Neither college's crew managed to make Head of the River in any of the five races so far, getting bumped each day. University College maintained their position as Head of the River and was looking very strong to take the laurels altogether. After a raucous commiseration with his fellows, Freddy felt the familiar wish to get away, his usual urge for solitude. He was not a morbid fellow, not one to shun the company of the good men in his college, but there were times when nothing would do but to seek out the quiet he found in the woods. He put some provisions, a blanket and a bottle of ale, in his rucksack and set out along the wooded track by the river. The afternoon light sifted through the pale green canopy of early summer. The heat of the day was past, and a breeze set the forest to whispering.

At that hour most would be taking their tea. Freddy didn't expect to encounter any other seekers after solitude. His path ran close along the bank of the river where he spotted Hugh, standing in the aft of a punt, pushing along, for all the world as if surveying his own domain. Freddy scanned the scene around them before turning his gaze back to the man on the boat. Though it had been several years since he saw this man's silhouette, sufficiently long ago that it was before Hugh attained the zenith of a man's maturity, Freddy knew he'd seen him before.

The first impression Hugh left on the younger man had persisted so strongly that, from time to time, and always with the wishful promise of something more, he had intruded into his dreams. Chins like Hugh's can have that effect. And that profile, like the charioteer of Delphi. Heroic traits like these can be a burden. They mark a man, and force something on him that may be welcome or not, but demand to be contended with. Hugh contended with his gifts with modesty and confidence, for it was in that spirit that he accepted them. It wasn't but a moment before Freddy realized just who that strapping figure on the punt in the river was, only a few yards from where he stood. He stopped, wondering whether he ought to call out.

His indecision hardly mattered. Hugh had the acuity of a hawk, and the moment his gaze fell on Freddy, he steadied his boat in the water. The golden light was on the verge of turning a soft mauve. There was no one else on the river. This mattered only somewhat to Hugh, who had the confidence openly to admire a beautiful youth he came across in the woods near college.

He pushed the punt toward the riverbank and called out. "I say, weren't you rowing today? What college was it? Wasn't it—Balliol, I want to say."

"How extraordinary. Yes, I was among that unhappy few today."

"Yes, bad luck. Still, you put a good face on it. It's the bump that will sort things out."

"And we've been sorted, worse luck. My last year, too."

"Ah, well. It's the spirit of the thing that counts."

“I hope you won’t mind my saying so, but I know you. Not that we’re acquainted. I mean to say that I know who you are. Weren’t you at Harrow? Aren’t you Hugh Penderby?”

“Well I’ll be blown. Yes, I am. But how on earth do you know that?”

“I was a first former the year before you came up to Oxford. You were, how does one put it? You were the chap one aspired to be.”

Hugh smiled with appreciation. His afternoon was proving to be of great interest. “How is it we didn’t meet until now—?”

“Freddy Lewellyn-Jones. Sorry. Don’t know why we would have met, really. You took your firsts several years ago, I imagine.”

“Quite right. Longer ago than I care to mention. “He grinned. Freddy’s interest seemed genuine, so he continued. “I found my way to what was called the Air Battalion Royal Engineers. The Sappers. Never cared for that term, I must say. The Royal Flying Corps, now, which suits. I’m at Chatham. A bracing life, doing one’s duty and all, but one misses certain particular pleasures that won’t easily be found in such surroundings.”

“But you’re not in—”

“No, left the khaki behind. I’m in mufti for the weekend. And what of you, young man? What particular pleasures do you seek? What brings you to linger alone in a mystical wood in the summer twilight?” Hugh grinned at the absurdity of his poetic effusion.

Freddy blushed. Hugh tied his punt to a slender tree and lightly jumped up to the path. It was not lost on Freddy that this handsome man had just purposefully interrupted his river voyage to move closer him. There had been no lovely girl at Hugh’s feet in the boat, no basket with champers and sandwiches, no parasol to shield coy lovers’ kisses. Freddy quickly formed a distinct impression of what Hugh may have sought that afternoon away from the throng.

So he turned to Hugh and squared his thick and graceful shoulders and met Hugh’s frank eagerness with an invitation. “I have no other commitments this evening. The clamor of the crowd was a bit much for me. This always has

been one of my favorite walks. From this day forth, it will be my ne plus ultra, for I can't think of a fellow I'd rather meet here than you."

Hugh took in Freddy's level gaze, dipping deep into the blue pools of his eyes, and noted an acceleration of his pulse. "By Jove! You are a chap of direct and economical means. And handsome."

Hugh put his hands on Freddy's shoulders, drew him close, and kissed him. Freddy's mouth had the clean salt taste of an active youth, untainted by any use of tobacco, and he'd refused the consolation of the loser's cups. He still had the fresh alive scent of an athlete who'd exerted himself manfully that day.

Their mouths met easily, comfortably. Freddy felt the older man's broad back as he slid his hands up inside the striped blazer, to the damp warmth of muscles well used and ready. They drew themselves tightly together for a moment then broke away to scan the forest around them.

"Well, Mr. Lewellyn-Jones, I'm not about to let this moment pass without more, much more. Do you—?"

"Yes, I do. This way. We'll retrace our steps later. Your punt will be fine as it is."

Down the path, beyond a bend in the river, a smaller path led away, deeper into the forest, to a tumbledown shack, no more than an enclosure now, overgrown with bracken and ivy, its roof half fallen away, but sufficient to shield the men from the view of any passersby.

Freddy unfastened his rucksack, drew out the blanket, and tossed it on the ground. He turned to Hugh. "I have something to drink if you—"

Hugh stopped his mouth with a kiss, drew Freddy into him forcefully. The younger man clasped his neck, then his torso, then his face, as if in his excitement he couldn't decide how to feel this man's power swiftly and deeply enough. Freddy broke away and peeled Hugh's blazer off. Hugh unbuckled his belt, the dove-grey flannels dropped, and he stepped out of them. He lifted Freddy's jersey over his head and knelt to untie the knot in his crew shorts. Freddy slid his hands across Hugh's shoulders and kneaded the muscles that were lightly furred with gold. Freddy was standing at full attention, and Hugh

buried his face in the ginger bush before him, took in the young man's scent, and his hands cupped the full ivory spheres of Freddy's bum. Hugh looked up.

Freddy stammered, "I—I—you have no idea—"

"Oh, my young friend, I believe I do. I have a very good idea."

With that, Hugh turned his eyes back to the proud prick that already bore the glistening proof of Freddy's joy, and he licked it off, flashed another crooked smile, and then took all of Freddy deep into his throat so swiftly and firmly that Freddy nearly lost his balance. His knees buckled and he fell softly backward onto the blanket. Hugh stayed wrapped around Freddy's body and after hungrily taking all of Freddy into his throat, he explored each ridge and fold of his young manhood with his tongue. He snorted with joy as he licked his way around the ballsack, deep into the musky groin, tasting the salty bittersweet of his sweat as he found his way to Freddy's hole. Then Hugh straightened up. He knelt above Freddy, helped him to remove those remnants of clothing that remained—a sock, his own undershirt.

Freddy spoke again, "I mean it, Hugh, you have no idea what this moment is for me."

"My boy, if I can read a man by the way he makes love, then I think I do. This is a rare day, a rare moment."

His own cock, thick and arching upward, conveyed his excitement clearly. He looked down at Freddy, whose breathing was so quick and whose face was nearly frantic with joy. He was stricken a moment. Tears, suddenly tears. He brushed them away and fell on top of Freddy again. Their wrestling kisses stopped when Freddy, now atop the older man, slid down to take Hugh into his mouth. He could manage only part of the huge cock, but the taste of Hugh so inspired him that it required no effort to leave it dripping and glistening, and then the rising frenzy newly kindled inside allowed Freddy to produce enough slick wetness to prepare his hole.

He straightened up, straddled the big man beneath him, and knelt poised to take all of him deep inside of himself. He looked into Hugh's eyes, sparkling now with amazement.

Hugh murmured, “Well, you’re a fellow who knows what you want, aren’t you? Take it. By all means, take it. That’s for you. Take it.”

Freddy rocked back, felt the head of Hugh’s cock at the opening of his hole, the pressure, inhaled deeply, released the air and pushed down onto the big man’s prick. He shouted with joy at the burning acceptance, pushing up deep inside of him. He knew that the way to take a man as large as Hugh was to want it, to want him inside more than anything.

“Oh god, yes. Oh god, to have you inside me. Oh god, yes.”

Hugh held Freddy’s white flanks as the younger man rode him, slowly at first, then as he opened up more completely, faster. And as he rode, he squeezed his muscles around that beautiful big cock, squeezing as he rose up, releasing as he plunged down again, filling himself with the man’s bigness, feeling the strength burning deep within him. He felt the mounting urgency of his own crisis rise, then subside, as he rode. Their eyes locked.

“Oh, you beautiful boy, ride me, it’s for you. That’s for you.”

Freddy reached round and cupped Hugh’s balls as he rode. Hugh had taken each of Freddy’s nipples and pulled. Freddy bounced more frantically the more Hugh pulled.

“Oh god, I’m going to come. You’re going to fuck the come out of me. Oh god, you’re going to fuck the come out of me!”

“Yes, yes, ride me. Ride my cock, boy. Ride me, boy. I’m going to fill you up, boy, I’m going to pour myself into you, boy, this is my hole, boy, I’m going to pour myself into you. Yes. Ride me.”

Their cries rose. Hugh exploded first, emptying himself deep into Freddy, who clamped down onto Hugh as his shout subsided into moans. Then Freddy straightened up and cried out as his jism spurting an arc across Hugh’s stomach, the trail of golden hair down his middle jeweled with the opal juice. Freddy fell forward, his hands on either side of Hugh’s head, and the lovers’ mouths joined again, slowly but each as determined as before to find the essence of the man before him.

Freddy's rooms at Balliol were as shabby as any other college man's. Haphazard towers of books leaned against the legs of a brown leather club chair whose seams strained with wear. A low table was strewn with tea-stained china cups that left their telltale rings on papers prepared for tutorials. A couch hid its old age under an exotic India shawl whose once-illustrious provenance was now fallen into undergraduate obscurity. The men sprawled facing each other on the sagging sofa in the soft glow of candles. They nursed a very dry Spanish sherry in the quiet as crickets scolded in the trees outside the open casements and a faint breeze ruffled the muslin curtains.

Freddy's peace had been disturbed by the afternoon's collision. He was far from an aesthete. No one would identify him as sharing the sensibilities of the infamous Wilde, but none who carried a secret passion for Greek love had been unshaken by that man's fate, and though his death was twelve years past, some, like Freddy, seemed almost haunted by it.

Magdalen had been Wilde's college. Hugh had followed an uncle there—Clive, the younger sibling to his mother. Clive's charm resided in a wicked and mordant wit that could not quite obscure his warm heart. Since Hugh's boyhood, Clive had regarded his nephew with a knowingness that offered an odd comfort. There were times when Clive hinted at his own rather colorful career at Magdalen; sharing with Wilde the brilliance of youth's brash efflorescence. The chill cast by the trials, though it was well after undergraduate carelessness was a dim, fond memory, slipped its icy fingers close. But if it reached into Hugh's confident approach to the world, his solution was as insouciant as Freddy's was earnest.

"You see, I can't quite reconcile myself to my duplicity to Kitty," Freddy confessed.

"You say that as if it were a shameful thing, not to be able to countenance duplicity. But I admire you for it. And I quite understand."

"Duplicity does seem to be demanded. One's survival depends on it. It is the imminence that troubles me, especially now." He looked into Hugh's eyes a moment, then cast them down to his glass. "She expects an engagement, as soon as I have assumed my place in the business."

His family had a large concern capacious enough for the middle and youngest sons to follow the eldest brother into it. Freddy had put off actually considering whether these were his wishes because it had been so terribly unlikely that he would discover himself to have wishes that clashed with those of his family.

Hugh gently pressed his bare foot into Freddy's groin. "Of course she does. And what of it? You don't wish to chuck everything, do you? Now that you've done all that could possibly be expected of you? What do you think will be different once you've married Kitty?"

"Everything! Isn't that the point of it all? How can I, knowing my nature, enter into such an arrangement?"

"One might well ask how, knowing the times and knowing your nature, could you *not*?"

Freddy looked sharply at him and frowned. "That may be all right for you, Hugh, but I don't wish to live that way. And what of you? Have you married?"

"Fair enough. No, I've not married. But I have an agreement, of quite long standing, with a charming modern girl called Sybil. Marriage between the two of us seems rather like a mirage. It shimmers in the distance to provide some agreeable answer when it is needed, and then it vanishes when the solace such an answer promises is no longer necessary. I sometimes think that I provide for her precisely what she provides for me. And so, it has been an agreeable arrangement."

"And has that arrangement been consummated as we have consummated that which is between us?"

Hugh pulled his foot back. "My dear fellow, I quite agree that this afternoon has been unmitigated delight, but I fear that you are getting ahead of yourself. Certainly you are getting ahead of me."

"I see. You would treat feelings such as we evoke in each other with, how shall I put it, with an off-handedness that seems quite foreign to me. I-I'm disappointed, you see. I thought—I thought otherwise." He disentangled his legs from Hugh's, stood and walked to the windows.

Hugh turned to set his feet on the floor. “Now see here, my boy, I didn’t mean to suggest that I wished to treat you in an off-handed way. Not at all. You’re hardly a man anyone would trifle with, and I’d be a fool to let you slip away. But you seem to be moved to a certainty so suddenly. Can you pardon me if I must plod along a bit more slowly?”

Freddy turned. “I’m the fool.” He put his hand to his forehead. “I’m blushing, aren’t I? I can tell. I beg your pardon. I’m terribly embarrassed.”

“No need to be. We’ll talk of something else.” Hugh’s ease soothed the moment. “Tell me, what are your plans for after university?”

“Only doing what is expected. That is, the family concern—insurance and so forth. In the City. It’s a big concern. Anyone with ambition would want to make a go of it there, and I have, as it were, an engraved invitation.”

“You don’t sound as if you’re honored to be so invited.”

“Being born into it doesn’t make it an honor so much as a duty, I’m afraid. Why do you ask?”

“A feeling I have about you.” Hugh stood and moved about the room as he spoke. “A sense that you’d wish to do something a bit out of the usual line. Possibly even serving your country. All I’ll say is that there are interesting things being discussed in the RFC. Interesting things for men with a bit of daring. A bit of the devil in them. Very interesting things, nothing anyone has done before. Perhaps you’ll look me up. Even come down to Kent?”

Freddy grabbed the older man and held him tight. “Do you need to ask? Of course I’ll come to Kent. Whenever you say. Just give me the word.”

“Gently now. I’ll give you the word, all right. Now, are we all right again?.” He kissed the younger man, holding the back of his head. They kissed, each with his eyes open, looking into the other, knowing that there was more, much more, to come.

The interesting thing to which Hugh referred was the expansion, over the past several years, of the Royal Flying Corps. The story of the Crown’s deployment of power in the air began when the Royal Engineers had

jurisdiction over all the balloon services, ever since those remarkable hot-air inventions proved a natural requirement for the mapping of the Empire. Empire established required an empire governed and the military value of air-bound vehicles was not overlooked by high command. Balloon surveying was adapted to military surveillance in the Boer War, however unfortunate that enterprise turned out to be. Even the most hide bound traditionalists in the high command saw that if England was to maintain her superiority over all her possessions, greater might from the sky than balloons could provide was surely necessary.

Innovation accelerated with the development of the other vehicles of the air: dirigibles, then the aeroplanes whose qualities enabled an entirely new style of martial prowess. Hugh's sparse description to Freddy of just what he did in the RFC was calculated to tantalize. His charge was to recruit the sort of men who might prove valuable to the Corps. He saw in Freddy the kind of mettle that would serve.

When Freddy came down to Kent, shortly before his fall term began, he learned that Hugh was in charge of the training of pilots for the new fixed wing aircraft, like those the Italians had begun using in 1911. Hugh had demonstrated his steely nerves in early tests of the biplanes, and was charged with training other men brave enough or foolhardy enough to want to take to the air.

They were walking from the base at Chatham toward Hugh's billet—a small cottage nearby in the village. It was a glorious late August day. Clouds scudded across a sky that seemed impossibly and insistently blue. Hugh met Freddy's train and he gave him a tour of the grounds, pointing out the new flying machines that were going to revolutionize how England protected her empire, and providing what information he could on the opportunities for a young man seeking something different. Since this meeting was an official one, they had not yet stolen a moment alone. No demonstration of what they had found in each other scant months before was possible. Hugh suggested that they have a quick glass of something at his digs. Freddy jumped at the chance. Perhaps, he thought, he could manage to miss his train back up to town.

Hugh asked, “So, what are your impressions? Is this something that might be in your line?”

“Rather,” Freddy said instantly. “And not only because you’d be my commanding officer.”

“Well that’s a good thing, because chances are I wouldn’t be. I’d be your training officer, but you’d be under command of another man, at least as far as I can make out. How do you think you would manage that—having to be trained by me?”

“I can think of no man I’d rather be trained by, sir.” Freddy used the honorific with no hint of satire. In fact, the idea of Hugh training him was at once so serious and so exciting that he felt his cock stirring as they walked. He looked across the meadow on their right in an effort to calm himself.

Hugh felt warmth spread across his chest. “I think we may have to consider very seriously just what kind of training will be best for you. Here we are—”

Hugh guided Freddy up the path of a tidy cottage that sat behind a waist-high hedge of boxwood. Once inside, he lit a lamp, and found a couple of glasses and a bottle of whiskey.

“Can I offer you—?”

“Yes, thanks. That is, may I, sir?”

Hugh grinned, then collected himself. He poured two fingers for himself, one for Freddy and handed him the glass.

“Drink up.” They tossed off the whiskey. He drew the drapes across the windows of the room. There was a sturdy looking settee along one wall and a cabinet on the other. “Now, boy, I think some training is in order this very afternoon. I am correct, am I not?”

“Yes, sir, you are correct, sir.”

“Good lad. Now, first, clothes come off. Get to it.”

“Yes sir.” Freddy put his glass on a small table and swiftly removed all his clothes. When he’d finished, he stood at attention in the middle of the room. His cock was stiff and pointing nearly straight up.

Hugh opened the cabinet and took several items out: four coiled lengths of hemp rope, a strip of fabric, and a leather crop. He turned and looked at Freddy.

In the lamplight, Freddy's pale flesh glowed. He was breathing fast, trembling but standing straight, ready to do as he was told. His eyes were fixed on Hugh's.

"What do you call me, then?" Hugh demanded.

"Sir, I call you sir, if you please, sir."

"Very good." He took the crop and traced the inside of Freddy's thigh up to his balls, then slapped gently with it as he spoke. "Now, you are in need of good training, boy. But I think you are man enough to be trained quite well. Yes, I think you will be a very good boy. Is that right? Are you prepared to be a most excellent, good boy?"

"Oh, yes, sir."

"What was that?" Hugh slapped the young man's scrotum with the crop. Freddy cried out. "What was that?" Again, he slapped, and Freddy struggled to stay standing upright.

"Yes sir, I am prepared to be trained, sir."

"Very good." Hugh took Freddy's cock in his hand and gently stroked it as he looked deeply into his eyes and kissed him. "Yes, very good indeed. I think you are going to be very good."

Hugh slid the leather crop down Freddy's back to the alabaster miracle of his bum and began lightly to slap. Freddy moaned as Hugh hit a little harder, ever so slightly harder, harder with the crop.

Freddy could not contain himself. "Yes, sir, thank you sir, yes sir, harder sir, thank you, harder, sir."

"You surprise me, boy. Did I bid you speak? I don't think I did."

"No sir, you didn't sir. Please excuse me, sir. I could not contain myself. I've never—I've never—"

“You’ve never known something like this before, is that it, my handsome boy?”

“Oh, yes sir. I’ve never known anything like this. Please, please more, sir,” he begged.

Hugh smiled and kissed him tenderly, then turned and applied the whip to that beautiful bum, gradually striking him a bit harder and harder until he began to sweat. At this point he stopped, dabbed at his brow with a kerchief, then turned and took off the rest of his clothing.

Freddy was swaying as if in a swoon, struggling to maintain his balance.

“Good boy. You stand still until I tell you when to move.”

Hugh placed a straight-backed chair in the middle of the room.

“Come, sit, boy.”

Freddy did as he was told. Hugh stood over him, kissed him, then held his face between his big, calloused hands.

“Look at me, boy. Eyes on my eyes. Look deep. Look at me. Do you see me? Do you truly see me? I see you. I’m taking you in. Take me in. With your eyes. Look, really look, boy. Now, I’m going to blindfold you. I’m binding your eyes as I’m binding myself to you, as I’m binding you to me. Can you see me? Can you see me in your mind? Do you, boy? Do you see me?”

“Oh, yes, sir. I do. I see you.” Tears ran down Freddy’s cheeks from under the blindfold. His chest rose and fell as his breathing grew faster and faster. “I see you. I feel you. I feel you, sir, around me, in me. Oh, sir, I see you inside me.”

“Good boy.”

“Sir—may I, may I take you in my mouth? Let me—let me suck your cock, please.”

“On your knees, then, boy, if you think you can manage it.”

Freddy slid to his knees and waited, his mouth open. Hugh stood in front of him and grasped the back of his head, sliding his erect member slowly into Freddy’s warm mouth.

“Let me in, boy. Let me down into your throat, that’s it, you must want it, you must not think of anything but how much you want it, and your throat will open.”

Freddy felt the moment Hugh’s cock hit the back of his throat, then let his muscles relax, felt the urge to gag, and let it go, let Hugh all the way in, down his throat, not able to breathe, tearing up with the insistent swollen flesh filling him. Hugh slid his cock in and out as he held Freddy’s head and neck in his hands.

“Excellent, boy. You’re a rare one. You have a rare talent. Oh, my boy, this is very good indeed.” He shook his head briefly, as if to clear it. “Not too much, too fast. I want this to last. Now, stand. Up, boy.”

Hugh walked around him admiring the swelling muscles, burgeoning with young manhood. He caressed his chest, dusted with red-gold hair, then slapped it, raising a pink flush. He moved down Freddy’s belly with his open handed slaps, smartly, leaving it aglow. Again and again he slapped, saying, “My good boy, my beautiful good boy.” He pulled on Freddy’s prick, now dripping with sweet, clear juice. He licked it from his fingers.

“Oh, my beautiful boy tastes so sweet, so good. So like an excellently well-trained boy ought to taste.”

Hugh took a length of rope and wrapped first one of Freddy’s wrists three times with it, then the other, as he whispered into Freddy’s ear. “Now I’m going to test my excellent good boy. I’m going to truss you up like the prized specimen you are. You know how I prize you, boy? Do you? You can speak, now, boy. Do you know?”

At first Freddy could hardly manage to form the words through his moans, but once he began to speak, the words cascaded forth. “Oh, sir, yes, sir, I do, I feel it. I feel it in your care, in your training. Train me. Sir, discipline me, sir. Please. Please make me the excellent good boy who can please you best. Please, sir, show me how, train me to please you sir.”

Once Hugh had bound Freddy’s wrists, he looped the rope over a hook in a beam in the ceiling above them. He pulled the rope so that Freddy’s arms stretched over his head. He pulled tight so that Freddy had to strain on his toes,

then he released the rope so that his boy could stand easily on his feet, squarely. He tied off the rope and drew a leather flog from the cabinet.

He pressed his face against Freddy's and breathed in his ear, "How's my handsome good boy? Are you learning, now? Are you learning about yourself, now, my boy? And about me, too? About how I can show you how much I love a boy I can train?"

"Oh, sir, yes sir. I am learning. Train me—I want more, sir. I want more. Please, give me more, sir."

"This young man has depths of power only hinted at before. You make me very happy, boy. Very happy indeed."

Hugh drew the bunched strands of leather across Freddy's shoulders, across his chest and down his stomach. He flicked it gently across his thighs, and then drew it up against his cock. Then he took a step back. "Ready, boy?"

"Yes sir. I'm ready, sir."

"Can you see me? Look inside yourself, and see me. Recall every detail of my face. Can you see me?" And with that, gauging just how much strength to put into the first blow, he struck Freddy's back with the flogger.

Freddy gasped and shivered. "Yes, sir, I see you. I feel you. Thank you sir. Oh, thank you."

Hugh drew his arm up and struck again, harder.

"Yes, this boy is an excellent boy, an excellent good boy." He struck again and again, harder each time, each time gauging the increased intensity of the blow, feeling what the strike would be like inside of himself as he flogged the reddening flesh of Freddy's broad muscular back. He struck lower, across the marble mounds of Freddy's backside, again and again, until they glowed pink. And with each stripe, Freddy moaned his pleasure, his joy, and his relief. His cock throbbed as it oozed his juice. Again, Hugh stroked it, then greedily knelt to take him in his mouth.

Freddy called out. "Oh, sir, I'll come, sir, I'll come!"

Hugh grunted his assent, and worked his throat around the young man's cock, bobbing up and down, so hungry had his exertions left him, so eager to

drink the young man's juice, to take this handsome youth deep inside in every possible way. He hungrily sucked at him as he pulled on his own cock. Yelping helplessly, Freddy shouted his frenzy and he spurted all of himself down Hugh's throat, as Hugh grunted like an animal as he shot his jism up across his belly, panting to catch his breath, he fell back on his haunches and looked up at the youth strung up for all the world like a work of art, like a young god and an offering to a god at the same time.

Machinations that required deftness and charm kept them together, part of the same squadron. Charm came easily to Hugh, his reputation was founded on deeds no one could question, and so their lives were knit together. Then innovations for the possible turned into preparations for the inevitable. When, that terrible August, war was declared, an Air Corps was nearly ready to do all it was meant to. Nearly is the operative term here.

Danger was a daily companion. In the early days of the war, Freddy chafed at simply flying as Hugh's observer; that is, the man in the second seat in the plane. But he did no flying, only sighting of landmarks and potential targets. This was not enough for Freddy. He wanted to prove himself. He was determined to have a good war too. Hugh's plan had been to keep Freddy with him as far as was possible, and that meant delaying the time Freddy flew his own plane. But the need for flyers as skilled as Freddy was great and so Hugh screwed his courage to the sticking place and swallowed his apprehension that his young lover might find himself overmatched in the skies over France. After all, it was just that heedless courage that landed Freddy so thoroughly in the deepest recesses of Hugh's mind.

The new orders they'd received from command were clear, but the repercussions were hard to foretell. They had been reassigned to covert operations, and so the risk of being part of an all-out dogfight over Germany was greatly reduced. But the dangers inherent in an operation no one had tried before were precisely what these men were going to learn. These men were the first to fly this sort of mission.

That was the glory of the RFC. They had been inventing war in the air all along. By this time, what would turn out to be late in the war, the fact that no one had done what these men were to attempt was routine. The tales of glorious invention were many. Captain Louis Strange, of Number 6 Squadron, fashioned his own bombs of petrol, and with these managed to destroy two of Jerry's fully loaded supply wagons. Lieutenant Conran of Number 3 Squadron simply dropped hand grenades out of his cockpit, dismantling two columns of troops when the explosions provoked a stampede among the horses.

Now the commander of the RFC, Trenchard, had a new strategy. The most skilled flyers, those who could come in low and nimble, were assigned to deliver agents deep behind the lines. All they had to do then was to hightail it back to Dover in time to elude notice. This was far more risky than the reconnaissance missions of the last six weeks. This meant coming much closer to ground fire. And even with the recent additions of parachutes, light enough now to take along on their flights, no one wanted to find out how the Hun would treat prisoners that fell into their territory.

The first agent was to be delivered by another ace pilot, Captain Mulcahy-Morgan. It was mid-September. He was to fly deep into German occupied France, near Mons, low and quietly enough to allow the agent to parachute into a field near a farmhouse where he was expected. Hugh was to fly another route, carrying another agent, further to the east, penetrating deeper. Freddy was going to be left cooling his heels, awaiting word as to the success of these missions.

The silver light of the waxing September moon was all the light Freddy needed to see each button on Hugh's tunic as he pushed each through its hole. He set to his task in silence. Hugh lay back and watched him. Freddy got down to Hugh's belt buckle. Hugh started up, and Freddy firmly pressed him back. Freddy gave him a steady look in the eye, but remained silent.

"My young captain is grave this night," Hugh breathed, trying to smile.

Freddy unlaced Hugh's boots, stood to remove each, then the socks. He reached up and pulled the trousers down and off his lover's legs. Standing, he

carefully lined up the creases and hung them on the back of a chair. He came round and worked the tunic off, shook it slightly and hung it over the trousers. then he pulled off Hugh's undershirt, slung it over one shoulder, and then his drawers. These he held to his face and inhaled deeply. He stood and regarded Hugh's nakedness in the silver light.

Hugh began to speak. "I'm not sure I—"

"Shhh. I know. I know, love. Nor I, neither. Just let me hold you. Will you let me do that? Through the morning? That's all I want."

Freddy swiftly undressed, shook out the quilted coverlet, and crawled next to Hugh in the narrow bed, a bed that they'd used in many ways for activities other than sleep in their time at Larkhill. But at sunset on the following day, Hugh was to fly across France into enemy territory, and this time neither man could turn his thoughts from the risk that reared before them.

If the flyers were not back by sunrise, that was sign enough for alarm. Freddy hardly slept and was at the landing field well before dawn. He paced off its width again and again, his ears straining for the sound of engines through the light wind that blew, through the early morning bird song, through the rushing of the blood in his veins, the thumping of his heart as the sun edged over the horizon, strained to hear the faint buzzing that would signal his lover's return, and he heard nothing. He refused to give up his post, pacing again and again across the field Hugh should have touched down on hours ago.

Reggie Martindale, a runty sort of fellow, whippet thin and pale, came up behind Freddy. "You're wanted, Lewellyn-Jones, back at barracks."

"Colonel Smith-Parker?"

"Yes, I believe so. He's had a wire from command. He's rather het up."

"Aren't we all?"

"You've been asked for. I've just been sent to fetch you. So..."

"Well, you've fetched me. Anything else, Martindale?"

"No—nothing. It's—"

“Yes, it’s a rum sort of day all round, isn’t it? You’ve performed your errand, I’ll come straightaway.”

“Well, that would be—”

“I said I’d be there straightaway.”

Martindale backed away two steps before turning to his nervous trot back. Freddy didn’t know why he found the man so objectionable. There was nothing overtly bad about him. He had rather an insinuating air, as if they had something in common, as if there was some agreement that bound them. While it may have been true that Reggie had a nature like his, still it infuriated Freddy that so much was presumed with not a word spoken. Freddy preferred plain, open dealing. He had no patience left that day for any sort of nonsense. He wanted only some word about Hugh. If that was not forthcoming, then he wanted his own orders. He wanted to act.

The news was bad, but inconclusive. Colonel Smith-Parker had only just heard. Both Penderby and Mulcahy-Morgan had been shot down. There was nothing further than that. No confirmation was possible as to whether they lived.

Freddy pressed for an assignment. Apparently, this initial failure was not about to put Trenchard off his strategy. The next assignment Smith-Parker had was a reconnaissance run, preparing for the next covert drop. Freddy put in for it. Anything was better than that infernal waiting. Even a reconnaissance mission would take him closer to Hugh. He might even fly over where his plane had gone down. He might even learn something about what had become of his lover.

Freddy came back from his flight, the second day after Hugh had gone down. And he came back from the seven other missions he flew in the next three months. Three months of stretching himself to the utmost. He was a man determined to beat back the terrors, the weakness, the pathetic sniveling that still lurked where he could not root them out, in the most remote corners of his mind. He refused to acknowledge these sentiments. He would not countenance them. He thought of his training, the training only Hugh could administer. He

knew he had to prove to himself that he took that training in; that he could count himself worthy of his master.

There is a terror worse than the fear that one's love does not return from war. That is the terror that one can no longer locate the version of that lover one carries inside, always. That however hard one tries, one cannot summon up the image of that face. One cannot quite recover the sound of that voice.

Hugh had trained him well. Hugh had commanded him to look, to see. Freddy obeyed. He strained to recover his training. But the shock of it—he could not say it to himself—what shock he had suffered. He would not say the words. He would not admit that Hugh was lost. He would preserve him in the only way he could, with the incessant reaching for him. A reaching in his mind. A reaching in darkness toward a figure whose contours he knew utterly, whose smells he inhaled, whose hands had left their marks on his own body. He could recover those sensations. The taste of Hugh's juice. The sweet burn left by Hugh's hands. The dull and sharp blows of the flogging that brought him so intensely to life.

His hands seemed to remember the contour of Hugh's plush muscles, the broad flanks, the swelling chest, the rounded fullness of his arms. He could recover all this, but he could not see Hugh's face before him. He saw only a blank silhouette of the man who knew him better than any man knew him. This admission, that he could not recover Hugh's face, could not call it up in his memory, was the dreadful thing he had to elude. He had to act, in whatever way he could, to keep this at bay. But there it was. The fact followed him like a ravening wolf. He ran like a man fleeing the direst of dangers and always there it was. It was implacable. And so he had to be, too. Implacable in his determination that he not know that which was impossible, that which could not be.

And then, he was rotated out. He had been too effective in his resolve. He'd flown too many missions. There was some whispered concern of a kind of mania. That he had been stretched too far. He was to be sent back to Chatham to train the new men, the novice flyers. This was unwelcome news to

Freddy. He knew that time away from the strain of danger was something that he must avoid. It was in that sort of respite that vulnerability lingered.

Freddy's impatience made him rather a thorn in the side of the newest men. He didn't suffer fools, and would brook no pretense. All the men knew he was thorough, and for that, in time, they came to be grateful. No man squeaked by without an absolute respect for the machines they were flying, and the risks they faced.

It was in this time spent at Chatham that Freddy learned of the sickening slough of the Somme, of the vile use of mustard gas, of the immeasurable waste as the war ground on. All his charges learned about the war's unceasing destruction, and still each of them chafed to fly a mission, a mission that might finally make the decisive difference; that his run might finally break Jerry's back.

He took Hugh's old cottage at Chatham, the one where he'd received his first training at Hugh's hands. It was a good thing for Freddy to have that cottage. Tending it in the long months as the war raged on was the only way to keep the panic that solitude promised at bay. When he returned from the airfield, after a day's work with the new trainees, he made sure the cottage was tidy, ready for Hugh's return. The cabinet was still there, and Freddy restocked it with the items they'd need when Hugh returned. He made sure a good whiskey was on the sideboard, though he didn't break the seal on the bottle. He kept supplies in the larder, that is, when there were supplies to be had. But all was kept in readiness.

Two summers he kept the small garden up properly. Two autumns he prepared the cottage and its yard for two winters. Two springs mocked him with life's renewal. But he kept the irony of spring's return away from his mind. He kept all disturbances from his mind. He was a disciplined man. A man determined to preserve himself at all costs. And he found the method whereby he could do this. All his daily tasks were like a mantle wrapped snugly round him. He drew it tight and it protected him. He knew that if only he could attend to just what appeared in front of his face, to the tasks that lay ready to hand, that he wouldn't run mad. It was the only way. He must not go

mad, how could he serve Hugh properly if he were mad? No, he tended with care to what was before him.

One early spring morning, when a feeble grey light through a weak cold drizzle cast a uniform melancholy on a weary world, the silence of the cottage was disturbed by a firm knocking at the door. Freddy expected no one. Surely if it had been Hugh, he would not have knocked. Surely if it had been Hugh he'd have sent word before hand. Still, Freddy's heart leapt into his throat at the shock. He drew back the curtain at the front window to see who stood at his door. He stiffened with surprise, and then opened it.

“Kitty—how good of you to—but how on earth did you find me? I beg your pardon. Come in, come in.”

She stepped into the little hallway and handed him the umbrella she'd just shaken out.

“My god, Kitty, it's been—”

“Yes, Freddy. It's been quite a time. May I?”

“Oh god, of course. Let me take your things.”

She shrugged off her damp traveling cloak and he hung it on the hooks by the door.

“Some tea, perhaps. Come in and do sit down, here, sit down.” He gestured toward the sitting room where no one had sat for two years. He lit a lamp. The surprise of seeing her sent him into a flurry of activity.

“I'll just be—” he called out as he walked to the kitchen to put the kettle on the fire. He arranged some biscuits on a plate. “Or perhaps something else—to warm you? You must have taken the early train down.”

“Yes. It was no trouble, really,” she called to him from the sitting room. “Gerald told me where you were posted, and when I inquired at the station, well, they knew where to direct me.”

“You've spoken to my brother?”

“Why yes. I ran into him in town. He was with a very lovely girl—Ursula, I think?”

“I—I haven’t had the pleasure.”

“So they said.”

He stepped back into the kitchen to pour the hot water. He tried to collect himself. He arranged a cup and saucer on a tray. He felt his pulse called to urgency. He set the teapot on the tray, lifted it, and went back to find Kitty.

She sat looking about the room.

“I say, you do look very well,” Freddy felt a fool, beginning this way. He set the tray down and handed a cup to her. She reached for the milk pitcher.

She was a perfectly nice girl, and hardly deserved to be treated in the way he’d treated her. But that was so long ago, now.

“Thank you Freddy, but you can leave off. I’m not here as a scorned woman. I’m here because there are those who care for you, and we’re intensely curious about just how you are doing.”

“Let me begin again. I behaved abominably to you, someone who deserved far more. There is no excuse for my treatment of you, and I—”

“Oh, do stop, Freddy. Do you really think that I have come because I want to make you suffer? I don’t, really, I don’t. Actually, I’ve met a very nice chap, a fellow with some prospects. If ever this beastly war—well, you know... But I’m really very well, you know. You do flatter yourself rather by thinking that I’ve spent all this time nursing a broken heart.” She flashed a smile and laughed lightly to take the sting out of her observation.

“I say, you are marvelous, Kitty. You’re quite right. I’ve become a self-centered monster.”

“Yes, quite a monster. Monstrously heroic, if you ask me. Or anyone. It’s true. You’ve been a hero. At least those who have any knowledge of what you’ve done know that. There are people who are frightfully proud of you. Nothing is being held against you. We just want to know that you are, well, that you are quite all right.”

“Right as rain. As right as anyone can be, given...”

“But why, then, have you been so resolutely incommunicado? If you’re right as rain, why not be in touch with—?”

“With my family? With you?”

“You don’t, I assure you, owe me anything. You don’t owe anyone anything. But we’re concerned.” She paused, looking about the room. “This is a charming place. Have you been here—?”

“Since before the war. We were posted to Larkhill at the start, but after my rotation back to training, this seemed quite the best place.”

“You live here alone?”

“Quite.”

“Always alone?”

“No—not before...”

“It doesn’t look as if a woman has been tending it.” He looked at her sharply. “Oh, Freddy, I don’t mean to pry. It’s just that, well, you understand that I—What I mean to say is that I reached my conclusions about what went wrong with us quite some time ago. It was clear to me then that there was someone else who had a claim on your heart, and that you could not bring yourself to tell me, or anyone else, for that matter, who it was. So, I reached the only conclusion a thinking person would.”

Freddy stared into the worn Persian rug on the floor.

“Freddy, dear, dear, Freddy. I am happy for you, if you are happy. But I see that you are not. Can you- can you accept that I still care about you, that I want good things for you?”

Tears had started to roll down Freddy’s cheeks. He sat utterly still. His breathing was shallow. He tried to speak. “Kitty... Kitty, you are—you are quite right.” He roughly wiped his face with the back of his hand. “There is someone.”

“Can you—?”

“I don’t think I can. You see, he’s been—he’s been detained. A great length of time. He’s been—” He sharply drew breath in and squared his shoulders. But he could not speak.

“He was another flyer. He’s been shot down. He’s been missing all this time. And you’ve been here, making sure things are just so, for the day he

returns. This is just like you, Freddy, to do this. Just this way. So very like the Freddy I've always been so fond of. Thorough and dependable and disciplined.”

Freddy had begun to sob as Kitty spoke. Her voice warmed the March chill, and it was as if a blockage of ice melted in Freddy's chest. He inhaled deeply for the first time that morning. He gave way into shuddering sobs, sitting quite still in his chair. He didn't raise his hands to his face; there was no need to cover his grief.

Kitty sat patiently for a while, then, when Freddy quieted, she reached over to take his hand. “My dear, dear, boy. You've been such a brick. This man you love is a lucky one. Is there—is there any official word—?”

“No. Inconclusive. Impossible to be certain. So I'll simply—”

“You'll do your duty, your work, and wait for word. No one could conceive of you doing any different. Is there—is there anything I might do for you?”

He looked at her, and tears rolled down his face again. It was her kindness that he could not face without giving way, her grace that made it impossible for him not to feel all he was feeling. Finally he spoke. “I really can't think of anything. I have, as you say, my work. I'm still of value to His Majesty, as far as I can tell, so... I simply will remain where I hope Hugh will think to find me, once he makes his way back. What else—?”

“Indeed. What else indeed? Just—do promise me—will you—that you'll look after yourself properly? Is there anything that you'd like me to tell your family?”

“Only that I'm fine. That they needn't worry. I'm out of harm's way, now. At least I am unless I rotate back to active duty. So, yes, can you, tell them I'm, I'm as fit as can be expected.”

“You do write to them, don't you?”

“Not nearly as often as a dutiful son ought to. My father sends me letters, or rather, his secretary sends me letters, and I respond. I'm a disappointment to him, you know—”

“Oh, no, you’re not, really, Freddy, you’re not—”

“Once they reach the conclusion you’ve so readily done, of course I’ll be a disappointment. At least a disappointment. More likely an outrage. But I don’t waste any time thinking about that. I’ve got my eye only on what I can do this moment. It is all I can do. Just do what must be done, this very moment. I can’t manage anything else.”

“No, I quite see that. Nor ought you to try. Can I help with the tea things?”

“Oh, no, really. Are you—are you off, then?”

“I thought I’d get back on the next train. I don’t want to intrude. I simply wanted to see you, dear, after all this time. To make sure. You understand?”

“I do now. And—I can hardly think of a way to—to express this sufficiently—I’m so, so terribly grateful to you. You can’t imagine how grateful.”

“My dear. You can repay me by introducing me to your fellow once he’s back. Will you?”

The sun broke through the glowering clouds and shot a ray across the floor. He reached out, snatched Kitty’s hand, and bent down as he brought it to his lips. She ran her fingers through his hair. The moment lingered.

Finally she stood. “Well then, I’ll be off. I think the rain’s let up, at least for now...”

“Yes. Kitty, I’m so glad you came. The next time...”

“Yes, much more than, next time. Do take care of yourself.”

She took her cloak, and with the familiarity of long acquaintance handed it to him. He held it for her as she loosely knotted the ties about her neck. She recovered her umbrella, then turned and stopped at the front door. She went on tiptoe to kiss his cheek. “Until next time, then...”

“Good bye, Kitty. Until next time...”

Finally, impossibly, inevitably, Jerry's back was broken indeed. November 1919. Armistice. Celebration was all around him. Freddy remained suspended, numb.

He could hear the celebration. Strains of singing from the pub reached him, but the joy and relief in those songs were not for him. Celebrations like those were too cruel for those like Freddy. The bereft ones. And if he were to acknowledge that singing, he would, of force, have to acknowledge his state. That he was indeed bereft. This he would not do. And so, he tended their cottage with care. Prepared it for a third winter. Made it snug, warm, and ready.

It was a beastly winter. Rain, slush, and mire. Mire all round. The end of the war brought Freddy's decommission. Without knowing it, exactly, he'd turned away from flying. What he could turn toward was the question. Not an easy one to answer. His father urged him to come up to town, to take his place in the business. This was, however, too great a disturbance for Freddy to countenance. He could not have told anyone this, but if he deviated too much from his routine, his daily tending to the things that needed doing, those tasks that were plainly in front of him, he would be finished. He'd be thrown into an unknown he would not acknowledge. And so he wrote respectful, grateful responses to his father's entreaties, not demurrals altogether, but temporizing. Drawing out what must be drawn out.

Kitty had written him, and he responded, always with the opaque message that did not persuade her that he was quite as right as he insisted. But it was enough for her to know he maintained his disciplined life, and it was enough for him to know that he was held in the mind of another.

Just when everyone in the village thought they could not stand the mire a day more, the clouds drew back and revealed a brilliant sky. The harsh winter light emphasized the tending the garden needed, and so Freddy put on his muck boots and oiled the leather of his gloves, working them back into suppleness sufficient for wearing as he worked. He went round to the back to get the scythe and the rake out of the shed. He'd have to sharpen the blade if it was to be up to the task hacking down the dead growth to make way for the

spring planting. It was a bit early for these chores, he knew, but the day and his solitude called out for strenuous activity. It would be good to feel his muscles work, to feel them strain against the flannel of his shirt, to have the smell of the earth in his nose again, to feel the sun on his back as he cleared out the overgrown brown weeds.

The rasp of the whetstone on the scythe's rough blade was enough to drown out any other sounds. So Freddy hadn't heard the man whistling a tune as he wandered into the back garden of the cottage. And since Freddy was so bent on his task, he hadn't seen the man with a weathered, handsome face, tall, broad through the back, leaning on a cane slightly as he walked. The man stopped and watched Freddy work. After a few minutes, Freddy was satisfied that the blade was sharp enough for the job, and he put it aside, straightened up, stretching his arms over his head, and looked about. Only then did Freddy see that Hugh stood only two yards away. Hugh pushed his cap off of his head and opened his arms. Freddy could not move.

Finally, Hugh dropped his cane, and took one step toward him. Freddy rushed at him, wrapped his arms around him, and lifted him off his feet. Their mouths met. Slowly Freddy set Hugh back on the ground, but their lips and bodies didn't part.

At last Hugh drew his face away. "I knew it. Didn't I? I knew just where you'd be, didn't I?"

"I knew just where you'd come—" this was all Freddy could manage. He swallowed a sob.

Hugh spoke, "Steady, old man. I'm here. All's right again. I'm here. Come, sit here while I—"

Hugh led Freddy to the stone step at the kitchen door, where the sun might keep them warm a moment.

"When did you—? How—? Oh, god, you've—"

"All right, my boy, all right. I'm here. Let's just sit a moment. I seem to have given you quite a start. But you see, you've got me again, and for good and all, if I have anything to do with it. Can we—help me up, will you?"

“Oh, god, your leg, what happened—?”

“It’s nothing, really, just a bit crumpled. Took a nasty spill. I can still use it, for the most part, but for a good long walk, I need this old thing.” He nudged the cane that lay next to his foot. “Come along, then, I could use a stiff one.”

Freddy helped him up, and they went in through the kitchen door. Hugh stopped and looked around. “You’ve kept things up nicely. Just as I knew you would. Will you—can you—?”

Freddy stepped up and kissed him again, holding his face in his hands. When he drew his face away, he looked at Hugh, tracing each line, each lineament the war had scored into his handsome face.

“You’re thinner. You need a good feeding.” He helped Hugh out of his coat.

“You’re right about that. Now, about that drink.”

Freddy dashed to the cabinet where the whiskey was, twisted the cap off, and poured a tumbler full.

Hugh sat at the kitchen table and took a gulp. “Much better. Now.” He stretched his legs out, leaned back, and looked at Freddy. “There is far too much for each of us to tell each other in an instant, that I know.”

“There’s plenty of time for that.”

“I quite agree. What I’d really like is a bath. Can that be arranged, do you think?”

Freddy set to pumping the water and lighting the fire. Hugh had set his small satchel at the front door. Freddy retrieved that, and put it in the bedroom. Hugh followed him in, and Freddy began to undress him. Hugh stood still as Freddy unbuttoned his shirt, unfastened his belt, and steadied him as he stepped out of his trousers. Freddy slid the undershirt over Hugh’s head, the drawers down his hips, and then quickly slipped out of his own clothes. He turned and knelt in front of him.

“Oh, sir, how I’ve—”

“And how I have, too, but we’ll have plenty of time for that.” Freddy had already taken Hugh’s cock into his mouth, tasting the musk and earthy smell of his lover once again.

Freddy looked up. “Come, now, let me tend to you.” And he took Hugh’s hand and led him into the kitchen where the brass tub sat ready. He poured the hot water out of the steaming kettles, refilled them, and set them back on the stove. The kitchen warmed with the fire and the steam.

Hugh stepped into the tub, holding his glass of whiskey, sat down and leaned back. Freddy took a sponge and a cake of soap and worked up a lather. He started with Hugh’s feet. He knelt at the tub, taking each foot and resting it against his swelling cock, and carefully washed each toe, each crevice, rubbing the sponge along his instep, up the arch.

He wrung the sponge out and dipped it in the warm water and washed an ankle, moved up the calf, caring as he washed for each vein, each tendon. He pulled the other foot out as he set the first back in the tub, and carefully washed it, and the ankle, the shin, the calf. He dipped the sponge in the warm water and moved up inside Hugh’s thighs, looking intently into Hugh’s eyes as he massaged his master’s tired muscles. He looked for any scarring along Hugh’s legs, but could see nothing.

“There’s no visible damage. It is nothing that will limit me too severely.”

“Pain?”

“Negligible. Only when I’m on it for too long. Your touch is balm to this tired soul,” Hugh smiled as he leaned against the back of the tub, inhaling the peaty aroma of the whiskey, allowing Freddy to wash his ballsack, his cock, his belly. Freddy reached under with the sponge and washed his bum. Hugh lifted himself up slightly, saying, “Yes, that’s right, clean it up, my boy.” He drank.

Freddy poured more hot water into the tub, picked up the soap, and worked up more lather. He moved round to Hugh’s back and scrubbed along his shoulders, noting how he could see each muscle, each bone in his back, even the ribs where the muscles parted like a dense curtain. Hugh was thinner, but

still hardy. Freddy leaned over and set the glass, now empty, on the table. Then he set to washing Hugh's chest, where the hair grew white now, just at the center over the sternum, then lifting each arm, rubbing soap into each armpit, rinsing away the dust of the road, warming away the cold of the journey.

He turned and picked up the towel he'd set on the kitchen table and snapped it open smartly. Hugh leaned forward and pushed himself up to his feet. Freddy wrapped his lover in the towel, rubbed vigorously, worked his way down each arm, each leg, lingering over his furry bum, the lush forest of hair at his crotch.

"What do you need now?"

"Just to look at you, my boy. Now I have everything. Now that I can look at you. And, to be perfectly honest, if I had another whiskey, then truly I couldn't ask for another thing."

Freddy poured another drink. "Hungry?"

"Not at the moment. Just sit with me. Will you?"

It hadn't actually occurred to Freddy that he'd been in motion nearly every moment since Hugh had walked so casually into the garden.

"Just sit down, here, in front of me. I want just to look at you."

Freddy drew the other chair in front of Hugh and sat. He wiped his hands on the towel. Hugh stretched his legs before him, leaned back, and began. "I've had rather a rough go, you know. So now, I need you to do something special for me. Can you do that, my boy?"

"You know there is no need to ask. Only tell me what I should do, and I'll do it."

"I'll tell you all about it later, but you may have understood that I was a prisoner of war for a time. It was beastly, but you see I stood it. One had to. I spent a good deal of time as a prisoner, and I found out something important about myself. It has to do with what I'm about to ask you to do for me."

Freddy simply listened, though he couldn't quite make out what Hugh was getting at.

“I need to put myself in your hands, boy. Can you do that for me? I can't quite find it in me to take you into mine. At least, not right now. Perhaps you already know that. That's why you've tended to me already so—well—so perfectly. But I need to you to take me over. I must just—well I think I want to simply give over to you. Can I do that? Will you take me over, will you bind me? Will you?”

Silently Freddy rose and took both of Hugh's hands in his. Those large, capable hands now needed to feel placed in Freddy's command. He pulled the taller man up to his feet and led him to the bed they'd shared so many nights. He pulled the quilt back. Hugh sat down and looked up at the younger man.

“I want you to make sure I'm never away from you against my will again. Do you understand? This must never happen again.” Though Hugh spoke quietly, at a measured pace, there was an intensity in his manner. His eyes were wide open and unblinking. “Freddy, you must assure me of that. I need that from you. Can you assure me?”

“You know I will never allow that to happen. Never again. This afternoon you will know that fully. Completely. I'm going into the other room for a moment. I want you to lie here, to lie still, and look about your room. You know this room. It has not changed.”

Freddy went into the parlor where the cabinet stood, opened it, and found the lengths of rope. When he returned to their bedroom, he found a large kerchief in his drawer. He laid these items on the bed next to Hugh. He stood over his lover and brushed the hair back from his brow, and began to speak.

“This man has suffered so much, so bravely. He needs to know how much he is cherished. He needs to know how rare a man he is, and how valued. Look at me, my love, look at me. Take me in. See how I'm taking you in. See how my face has changed. See how I've become a man who can master such a man as you. See how I can care for the man I love. Do you see me? Can you tell me that you see me?”

Tears had filled Hugh's eyes. His breath caught and he could not speak. He nodded.

“Good. You're my beautiful love, and I do not wish you to speak. You need not speak. I'm going to gag you so you cannot speak. Your words are not needed here, not now.”

Freddy shook the kerchief out and pulled it taut on the diagonal. “Open.”

Hugh's mouth dropped open. His face relaxed, he sighed as Freddy put the fabric into his mouth and tied it at the back of his head. He moaned slightly as he realized that he could not form words. He moaned with the understanding that he would not be required to articulate a syllable.

“Now I'm going to bind you fast. You will not be required to use your hands or your legs, and so I'm going to bind them. You are to know that you are kept fast, safe, here, forever.”

Hugh's breathing deepened. Freddy picked up a length of rope, and wound it around Hugh's left wrist three times and tied a knot firmly. He tied the end of the rope to the bedstead. As Freddy worked, Hugh looked intently at his young master. Freddy spoke steadily as he made his way round to each ankle, tying it to the bedstead, and Hugh's right hand.

“Do you feel how firmly you are bound here, now? Do you feel how tightly you are held? I hold you now. I wish you not to move, not to speak. I wish you only to feel, only to know that you are well and truly home.”

Hugh's cock had stirred to life and arched up toward his lean belly. A drop glistened at its tip.

“I see how welcome this bondage is to you, my love. I see how much you need to be bound.”

Freddy leaned over, flicking his tongue over the head of Hugh's cock.

“My love tastes so sweet, so good. Now, I'm going to bind that precious manhood fast.”

He stroked Hugh's cock with one hand as he reached for a length of cotton rope, softer than what bound Hugh's wrists and ankles. Freddy began to wrap

Hugh's balls with it, carefully winding each turn of the rope so that the pressure on Hugh's balls gently but firmly increased with each circle of the rope. Three times round, four times and Hugh felt the pressure of his balls being stretched. Freddy pulled on the rope as he stroked Hugh's straining cock. Hugh moaned, his hips rose and he pulled against his restraints, feeling the surety of his bondage, the certainty of the trust.

Freddy wound the coil five times, six times, until Hugh's balls were pulled well down, and they turned a resplendent ruddy rose. Freddy tied the soft cotton rope off and gently slapped his lover's balls, swollen and shining, as he pulled. Hugh's breathing hastened. Freddy's eyes were locked on Hugh's. Hugh nodded, moaned, more, he needed more. Freddy slapped harder, pulled down on the bound cock and balls, and Hugh began to thrash, his hips pushing up, his back arching. Still he nodded, moaning, more, he needed more. Freddy released his grip and began to untie his lover's ankles.

“Now I'm going to take you, my love. I'm going to claim you as my own.”

He pushed Hugh's knees up to his shoulders and buried his face in Hugh's warm and fragrant bum, lapping at the rose-colored hole. His tongue pressed into his lover's depths. Hugh moaned, stretching his legs apart, urging Freddy on.

Freddy found the lotion he kept in the nightstand, and knelt between Hugh's outstretched legs.

“Feel me coming into you, my handsome one. Feel my fingers opening you up. Open yourself to me, so that we can be connected.” He greased his cock now, straining with anticipation. He placed its tip at Hugh's opening. “Feel me come into you now. Breathe, want me in you, breathe.”

Hugh's breathing was slow and deliberate. He nodded, his eyes wide, his moans softer now, moans that said *yes, come into me now, more*, moans that mounted as Freddy pressed himself deeper and deeper inside.

“Yes, I'm in you now. I've bound you here, where you belong. You belong to me, my handsome one, feel me inside you.” He began to push himself into

Hugh. “Feel my strength. Feel your strength. Feel how connected we are. How connected we always will be.”

Hugh’s moans grew louder and more insistent. Freddy pushed himself more and more deeply into Hugh, and pulled on that magnificent, bound cock, pulled on it as he felt himself come closer and closer to his crisis.

“We are one, again, my love.” Hugh’s moans grew longer. “Yes, I’m fucking my master. I’m fucking my master, my master who trained me so well. I’m filling my master with my love. I can master my master, my love, feel me as I—feel me as I—Oh god, I’m—”

Hugh’s moans reached a climax and his jism shot across his belly. Freddy cried out as he pushed himself tightly against Hugh, pouring himself into his lover.

“Oh god, yes. Yes, my love, my master, my good, and only one. I love you.”

Freddy reached round Hugh’s head and untied the kerchief. He stroked Hugh’s head as he lay against his chest. Their breaths quieted in the silence. Freddy gently untied each of Hugh’s wrists. Hugh wrapped his arms around the younger man as he rested underneath Freddy’s weight. Comforted by that weight. Comforted by the smell of Freddy’s sweat, that smell that caught him so long ago.

Freddy looked up at Hugh. “Do you need anything?”

A grin spread across Hugh’s face. He sighed deeply. “Only these things: to wake with you and to fall asleep with you. To see the sun rise with you. To see the stars on a clear night with you.

“Yes. All that you have. All that we have. Now rest.”

They slept. When they woke, it was a clear winter’s night. The rimed landscape shimmered underneath the stars. For a time, at least, the world seemed to be at peace.

THE END

Author Bio

Gil Cole is a writer and psychoanalyst who lives and works in New York City. His debut novel, Fortune's Bastard, or Love's Pains Recounted was released recently by Chelsea Station Editions.

Contact & Media Info

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OUR PIECE OF SKY

By Eden Connor

Photo Description

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

Story Letter

Dear Author,

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

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

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

Enjoy, hope it inspires someone :)

Sincerely,

Willow Scarlett

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

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

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

Word count: 25,762

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Author's Note

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

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

OUR PIECE OF SKY

By Eden Connor

Manny

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

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

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

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

“Emmanuel Curtis.”

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

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

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

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

"Hey, can I ask you a question?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Do we put it up, or what?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Joseph

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Manny

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

We don't matter.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Joseph

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Yeah, sure.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Manny?” I squinted inside the dimming building.

“Upstairs.”

My hurried footsteps echoed in the lofty lobby.

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

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

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

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

Manny

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

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

"Just askin'. Be right back."

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

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

"Sure."

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

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

Joseph

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Manny

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He made me beg, damn him, before he rinsed me and took me into his mouth. The sonofabitch moved the sprayer, concentrating the water on my

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

Joseph

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

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

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

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

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

I don't kiss many men. Not like I kissed Manny. There's a difference between mutual gratification and making love, and I couldn't seem to stop myself from making love to Manny. The look in his eyes was so much like the

look Teague wore for such a long time after her baby died, I couldn't save me without hurting him.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Manny

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Joseph

We'd worked all night.

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

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

"I think I'm done."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I woke, heart hammering. The building was silent. Sunlight streamed through the upper, uncovered part of the narrow windows at my back. I

stretched my legs, listening to Manny's even breathing, enjoying the feel of his solid warmth at my side, while dread clutched at my heart. His head still rested on my shoulder. His hair was streaked with paint. The kitties started to mewl, and I relaxed. His eyes opened. I brushed his forehead with my lips.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Manny

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Yoo hoo. Anyone home?”

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

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

Joseph

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

What. The. Hell?

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

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

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

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

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

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

I stomped across the street, ignoring the honking horns.

Manny

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I didn’t, however, look forward to explaining my part in Willa’s auctions to Joe. Since I’d been Teague’s fluffer, that conversation would be like telling

your lover you fucked his sister, but he was the better lay. Maybe Cam would help. He seemed to have the gift for cutting through bullshit. He sure looked like one happy motherfucker. We waited for a car to roll past. “It’s a small world, isn’t it?” Jamming his hands in the pockets of his shorts, he looked ready to bounce out of his Docksides.

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

“No, we couldn’t. But we lied to keep Willa’s secret, not mine and Teague’s.”

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

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

“How was Charleston, Cam?” the brunette inquired.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Damn right, you’re fired. You can take *my* word for that.” The waitress spun. Her rubber-soled shoes squeaked loudly on the polished floor tiles. Apparently cowed by the sight of Teague’s flashing eyes, she stormed past Jillian, waddling down the aisle. *On her way to tell Joe. Which way will he land?* Teague yanked out the chair at my side. “Good job, Jill. The nerve of some people.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Jillian tilted the phone. “Oh, my God. That’s gorgeous, Teague. Your own personal sky.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Dylan wants Teague to rent the space,” Jill explained. I assumed she spoke to Willa. I tried to smile, but the way Joe was able to act as though there was nothing between us was hammering me between the eyes. The gulf between *here* and *across the street* seemed to yawn under my feet. Could I handle this? “Teague wants to display her sculpture up there.”

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

“God forbid.” Willa intoned.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Joseph

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

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

“I need to see the owner or manag—”

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

Willa piped up. “No doubt about it.”

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

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

"Cynda. Cynda Foster. I'm so sorry. I misunderstood. It's just—"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Did he just call me... *sour*?” Willa demanded.

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

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

Manny

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"She's thinking too small," Willa snapped, raising a brow at me.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Oh, I do, do I?"

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

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

"A coffee salon."

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

I shook my head. "No, not just another coffee shop. A coffee *salon*. Picture it. Comfortable, armless sofas around the walls, upholstered in rich, Renaissance-style tapestry. Every few feet, there'd be, like a television tray, for lack of a better term. So people have a place to sit the coffee. But they're

topped with clear, acrylic boxes about the size of a shirt box, and the base slides under the sofas. They'll be lined in velvet, and each box will feature a piece like Cynda's necklace, which is to-die-for, by the way." I smiled at the young black woman.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Joe grinned. “I sure as hell do.”

Four months later

Manny

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Heart thundering, I removed the lid, tugging out the velvet box with clumsy fingers. The ring was easily three-quarters of an inch wide, and so heavy, I thought it might be platinum. Each deep channel ensconced one skinny, elongated cat, stretched out and chasing his tail. Translucent enamel floated over sculpture so fine, I could see every tiny hair. I stroked one spine. My breath caught when I realized the cats were weighted somehow, so the slightest motion made them spin around the ring. The gray figure representing McQueen, in the center, faced and turned in the opposite direction from the other two. In the back, they darted through a solid tunnel. A mother's ring, I decided immediately, designed with a father's love. I didn't dare think Joe's gift could be more.

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

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

THE END

Afterword

I have a confession.

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

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

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

~Eden

Author Bio

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

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THE MEET

By William Cooper

Photo Description

Two men embracing. One man consoling the other and caressing his face.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

These men look happy now, but it didn't start out that way. The attraction was instant and mutual, but one of them held back. Why was he so afraid to admit his feelings for this man? How did he overcome his fear and finally earn his way into the arms of the love of his life after all he'd done to hurt them both?

Break my heart and put it back together again by giving these men their HEA. Bonus points for sexual tension.

Sincerely,

C.M.

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: athlete, college, hurt/comfort, sports, sweet no sex

Content warnings: incest/brocest, child abuse, HFN

Word count: 4,883

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THE MEET

By William Cooper

It wasn't hard to figure out why I fell in love with him. He was always there for me. He was the one who always watched my back, always tried to protect me. How could I not love him? There was no reason for me not to love him. Well, except for the obvious one—he was my brother.

Tyler was four years older than me. In my father's eyes, he could do no wrong. He was the perfect child, the star athlete, the straight-A student, the popular kid. Hell, even I thought he was perfect growing up. Part of me still did.

I, on the other hand, was the screw up. Mom had died giving birth to me and I guess Dad always held me responsible for it. It didn't help that I sucked at sports and was too shy to make many friends. I always broke things or got in trouble trying to impress Tyler. Whether it was climbing a tree or trying to do a backflip off the couch, if I thought it would make Tyler laugh or smile, I tried it.

Inevitably, something would get knocked over or broken in my attempts. Quite a few times it was my own bones that got broken. And each time I did something foolish, Dad seemed to get angrier and angrier. By the time I was ten, Dad gave up yelling at me or grounding me.

The first time he backhanded me, I hid it from Tyler. I didn't want him to be mad at me for provoking Dad. After that, it became habit to not tell him. And Dad conveniently never hit me in front of Tyler. Until the day Tyler came home from soccer practice early.

Dad had been in his study doing God knows what. I was in my room practicing some gymnastics moves. It was the one sport I was good at and enjoyed. Dad thought it was a girly sport and wouldn't let me get proper lessons. But Tyler always loved seeing the new techniques I had taught myself. But that day, I'd messed up one of my moves and knocked over my lamp.

Dad went ballistic. Not only was I practicing gymnastics like a “fag” but I’d broken something in the process. While he was shouting at me, he proceeded to take his belt off.

When Tyler came home, he found me curled up in a ball in the corner of our room. Dad was standing over me repeatedly smacking me with his belt. That was the first time I’d ever seen Tyler angry. He’d tossed his bag on the ground and pushed Dad away from me.

That was also the first time I’d ever seen Dad get upset with Tyler. The two shouted back and forth, while I stayed curled up in the corner. When Dad tried to strike Tyler, Tyler struck back. The two fought for a bit before Dad stormed off, slamming doors behind him.

When Dad was gone, Tyler ran over to check on me. I still remember opening my eyes to see Tyler smiling at me, a black eye and a bruise on his cheek already forming. But he didn’t seem to care. All he cared about was making sure I was okay.

That was the last day we stayed at home. Tyler called the cops and we were put into foster care. We bounced around foster homes for a year or so before a nice family adopted the two of us. Tyler even started working a part-time job so that I could take real gymnastics lessons.

As soon as I was old enough, the two of us moved into an apartment together. Tyler had put a lot of his money away so we could afford it and after high school he started working a full-time job. I tried to get a part-time job myself, but he insisted I focus on school and gymnastics.

“You’re coming to the meet tomorrow right?” I finished tying my shoe and picked up my bag. Tomorrow was one of the most important meets of the year. I hoped he would be there for some moral support on the big day.

Tyler nodded, a smile on his face. “Of course. Have I ever missed one?”

I shook my head. Tyler had never missed one of my gymnastics meets since I started back in high school. I don’t know why I thought tomorrow would be any different. “No, you’re always there.”

“Exactly. Now get going before you’re late for practice.” Tyler ruffled my hair like I was still a kid and I rolled my eyes. I hated when he’d do that, but I was pretty sure he only did it because he knew it annoyed me.

“All right, I’ll see you later tonight then.” I grabbed my keys off the small table by the door and headed out. Our apartment was on the third floor, something I both loathed and loved. It was a bitch to carry groceries upstairs, but going up and down all the time helped keep me in shape. Not that I really needed the extra workout, but it didn’t hurt.

By the time I got to the gym where we were having practice, I was bouncing with energy. I couldn’t wait until tomorrow’s meet. I knew my routine backwards and forwards. There was no way I was going to lose.

My best friend, Jesse, was already in the locker room when I got there. The two of us were the only guys on our school’s team. He was halfway through changing when I walked in. He looked up and grinned at me. “Hey. Ready for tomorrow?”

I nodded. “Hell yeah. We’re going to dominate the other schools.” I tossed my bag on the bench and opened the locker next to Jesse. “You ready?”

“Yeah, I think so. I’m a little nervous about the double Arabian, but I think I’ve got it down.” Jesse stuffed his clothes into his locker and shut the door. “I’m gonna practice some more today just to make sure I can do it tomorrow. I still don’t know how you do those high bar routines.”

I laughed and stuck my tongue out at Jesse. I knew he could do the same routines I did if he tried, but he seemed to be afraid of using the high bar. I loved the thrill of being up so high, pushing my body to its limits.

Once we finished changing our clothes, we headed out into the gym. Most of the team was already out there practicing their different routines. Jesse and I sat on one of the benches until it was our turn to do a run through. I was pretty sure I wouldn’t have any trouble with my routine. I’d been practicing it nonstop since the last meet.

Jesse got a chance to go up first and true to his word, he did seem to have the double Arabian down. I doubted he would have any trouble doing it at

tomorrow's meet. We were totally going to crush the other schools! The coach and I both gave him a couple tips, and after a few more run throughs he seemed to be ready.

Once Jesse was finished, it was my turn to do my routine. Jesse watched eagerly from the side and gave me pointers to improve my form. Each time I ran through the routine I felt more confident that I had it down. By the fifth time I went through it, even the coach was out of pointers to give me.

When it was time for the next person to start doing their routine, I was still brimming with energy. I wished we could have the meet right here, right now! I was more than ready to get out there and show the judges what I was made of.

"Someone's excited," Jesse said when he walked over to me. "We've got this competition in the bag."

I nodded. "Hell yeah. We're gonna crush everyone else!" I looked over at Jesse and grinned. "Hey, maybe for the next exhibition we should do a routine together. I'm sure we could come up with something pretty kickass if we both put our heads to it."

Jesse returned my grin. "Sounds good to me! Doing solo routines is starting to get a little boring anyway. Would be nice to mix things up a bit."

The rest of practice was uneventful. Both of us went through our routines a few more times. But by that point, we either knew it or we didn't. There wasn't much else we could do by then.

My muscles were killing me when I collapsed onto my bed. The hot shower after practice had helped, but I was still feeling like I'd been run over by a truck. But it was all worth it. I knew I had the entire routine memorized. There was no way I was going to mess it up tomorrow.

I heard my bedroom door open and glanced over to see Tyler standing there. He had a grin on his face as he looked at me. "Hard practice?"

I nodded. "Yeah."

“Want a massage?”

“Yeah, sure.” Tyler gave amazing massages. He’d always given me massages after particularly difficult practices. I slipped my T-shirt off and tossed it aside before rolling onto my stomach.

Tyler disappeared for a moment and then came back with a towel and some massage oil. He crawled up onto the bed and straddled my hips, making me groan at the contact. He squirted some of the oil onto my back and began to rub my muscles.

I moaned into my pillow. Tyler’s hands felt heavenly as he gently kneaded my muscles. Tyler had been doing this for a few years now and had become a master at it. I often told him he should’ve gone to school for massage therapy instead of computer science.

“How’s that feel?” Tyler asked.

I lifted my head off the pillow briefly. “Like fucking heaven,” I replied.

Tyler laughed. “Want me to do your legs too?” I nodded. “All right then, take your shorts off.” Tyler moved off of me and positioned himself in front of my legs.

I moaned into the pillow again. It wasn’t the first time he’d said that to me, but it was never in the context I wished for. Tyler had never made any type of sexual move toward me, no matter how much I wanted him to. I lifted my hips and slid my shorts off, tossing them aside.

Once my shorts were off, Tyler didn’t waste any time getting to work on my legs. He rubbed and kneaded all the muscles in my thighs and calves. Feeling his fingers work their way up my legs was driving me nuts. My dick was already rock hard and pushing into the mattress.

I wished Tyler would offer to massage that part of my body as well. It used to embarrass the hell out of me when I was in high school. But Tyler was always quick to tell me it was natural and that it wasn’t a big deal. It was still pretty embarrassing, but I’d gotten pretty good at hiding it from him so he didn’t notice I was hard.

By the time Tyler finished massaging my legs, my dick was painfully hard. I stayed lying on my stomach while Tyler wiped up the oil. “Feel better?” he asked.

“Yeah, much,” I turned my head and smiled at him. “I love your massages. Thanks.”

Tyler laughed and swatted me with the towel. “No problem. Gotta make sure you’re in top shape for your meet tomorrow. Can’t have you looking like an old man out there.”

“Yeah, yeah.” I closed my eyes and laid my head back down. “Should be a breeze. I’m pretty sure I could do my routine asleep I’ve done it so many times.”

Once Tyler was done, I felt like I’d died and gone to heaven. I would’ve been perfectly happy to lie in bed and never move again by that point. When he said good night, I closed my eyes and started drifting off. Fantasies of being with him danced in front of me, and I was eager to let them play out in my head.

When I woke up the next morning, I felt completely rested. Tyler’s massages usually helped me sleep like a baby and I loved it. If he hadn’t given me the massage I’d have woken up feeling like death. Now I was ready to get to the meet and kick some ass!

Half way down the hall, I could smell bacon and eggs cooking in the kitchen. It looked like Tyler was up already and making breakfast for the two of us. My stomach growled at the thought. A nice big breakfast was just what I needed to start the day!

“Morning,” I said as I walked into the kitchen. “Need any help?”

Tyler shook his head. “Nope, everything’s almost done. Coffee is ready too, if you want a cup.”

He knew me too well. I walked over and started fixing myself a cup of coffee while he finished cooking breakfast and setting it out on the breakfast bar. Everything smelled so delicious! My mouth was practically watering.

“You sleep okay?” Tyler asked when we both sat down at the bar.

I started piling scrambled eggs, bacon, and fresh biscuits onto my plate. “Yep! I always do after you get done with me. I owe you one.”

Tyler laughed. “Don’t worry about it. I just wanted to make sure you’re in good shape to kick some butt out there today. Can’t have all that practice you put in go to waste after all.”

“Trust me, it won’t,” I said as I stuffed a forkful of eggs into my mouth. “They’re going down!”

Tyler smacked me on the back of the head. “Don’t talk with your mouth full.”

I quickly swallowed my food and gave him a sheepish grin. “Yes, Mother!”

After we finished our breakfast, I did the dishes. Since he cooked breakfast it was only fair that I cleaned up after. Once that was taken care of, I headed to the bathroom to shower. The hot water cascading over my body helped my muscles relax even more.

Once I was squeaky clean, I changed into my gymnastics clothes and the two of us headed to the meet.

My heart was pounding in my chest as I watched one of the guys from another school perform his routine. He was good, but I was still confident I could do better. I had to do better. There were too many people counting on me to mess up now.

Once he finished his routine, I lined up to begin mine. I was practically bouncing as I waited for the signal to begin. Finally, it was my turn. Time to show them what I had!

One of the assistants helped me up to the high bar and I began my routine. My muscles flexed and strained as I ran through the routine. I knew it inside and out by this point. Each flip, each pose, felt natural to me. I probably could’ve done it in my sleep. There was no way anyone would beat me.

I took a deep breath and prepared for my final release, the one that would take me even further above the nine foot bar. I felt like I was on top of the world, like nothing could hurt me. Then the feeling of weightlessness vanished. With a loud crack, I plummeted toward the ground. I heard gasps around me. When I hit the ground below, everything went black.

The next thing I knew, I woke up in a bed in a strange room. I tried to sit up only to have my head throb. My arms felt like they weighed a ton.

“Easy, Ryan. You’re in the hospital.”

I turned toward the sound to see Tyler standing next to me. He grabbed a cup from the tray next to me and brought it to my mouth. I hadn’t even realized how dry my mouth was until then. I took a big drink and closed my eyes.

“What happened?”

“The supports holding the bar broke somehow. You’ll have to ask Jesse how. You had a pretty nasty fall. You’ve got a fracture in your left arm and you broke your right arm pretty bad. You’re gonna have a throbbing headache for a few days, too, but the doctors don’t think you’ll have any lasting damage.” I could hear the concern in Tyler’s voice. Even though he was trying to put up a strong front, I could tell he was worried to death. I knew him too well not to see through his facade.

I nodded until my head pounded again. He certainly wasn’t kidding about the headache. “What about the meet? What happened? Who won?” I needed to know. I hoped to God I didn’t cost everyone the win.

“Relax, bro. You guys won. It was close, but you guys managed to pull it off.” I opened my eyes to see Tyler grinning at me. “Part of that was thanks to you. The judges talked it over and since the accident wasn’t your fault, they decided to score your routine up until that point. So good job.”

I sighed and closed my eyes again. We did it! All the hard work really paid off! The high didn’t last very long though. There was no way I’d be able to do gymnastics again for a while. Who knew how long it would take for my arms to heal completely?

“Hey, relax. You’ll be back out there in no time.”

It figured Tyler knew what I was thinking. “Yeah, I know. It’s just gonna suck not being able to practice all the time. I hope I don’t lose my touch.”

Tyler laughed and gently patted my arm. The simple touch gave me flashbacks from when I was little and Tyler would care for me when I was sick. “Don’t worry, bro. You’ll be fine.”

A slight smile crept over my face. “Thanks. How long am I gonna be stuck here?”

“Just tonight, I think. As long as nothing happens, you should be able to come home tomorrow. We’ll have to figure out what to do about your classes, though.”

I closed my eyes and let out a groan. That was just what I wanted to worry about right then. School was the furthest thing from my mind at that point. All I wanted to do was sleep until the damned casts could come off.

I was able to go home the next day, thankfully. After getting me set up at home, Tyler went and spoke with all of my professors. They all agreed to help me with any of the work I’d miss for the next few days. With a voice recorder and my laptop, it wouldn’t be too hard to keep up when I went back.

By the third day of bed rest, I was starting to go stir crazy. Not being able to go to gymnastics was one thing. But I hated being cooped up in the apartment all day. That night, to help me relax a bit, Tyler offered to give me a massage. And there was no way I was going to turn that down!

I moaned into my pillow as Tyler’s hands worked their magic on my back. Instinctively, I began to grind my hard cock into the mattress. Tyler either didn’t notice or chose not to say anything. Either way, I wished he would use those magic hands of his on my cock.

As Tyler continued to massage my muscles, my mind began to wander. I imagined his hands going lower until he was caressing my ass. He slid my

boxers down and rubbed the bare skin. Then he spread my cheeks and probed at my hole.

Just as Imaginary Tyler slid his finger in my hole, my entire body tensed. A shiver went from my toes to my head and I let out a loud moan. My cock twitched and throbbed as cum shot out, soaking my boxers and sheets. God it felt amazing.

Once the high from my orgasm ended, I just wanted to crawl in a hole and die. There was no way Tyler didn't notice that. Tears began to form and I buried my face in the pillow. The soft pillow muffled my sobs, but my body still shook.

Tyler gently caressed my back. "Relax. It's okay. No big deal. It's been a few days, huh?" When I nodded, he patted my back. "I'll let you get cleaned up then."

He moved off the bed and left without saying another word. Now I felt like complete shit. After everything he'd done for me over the years, this was how I repaid him. He tries to help me out and I perv on him.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

By the time I managed to pry myself out of bed and change my boxers and strip my sheet off, I needed to piss. As I was heading down the hall, Tyler was just coming out of the bathroom looking flush. Great, I thought to myself. I probably made him sick.

"I'm sorry, Ty," I said in a whisper. My mouth had gone dry and tears threatened to escape again.

Tyler ruffled my hair, just as he'd done when I was young. "No big deal. Shit happens." He gave me a weak smile before heading toward the living room.

I headed into the bathroom to relieve myself, which wasn't super easy with casts on my hands. The way they'd put the casts on made holding my cock awkward at best. When I got a fresh sheet out of the bathroom closet, I groaned. There was no way I could put this on myself. Fuck.

I sighed and headed out to the living room. “Hey, Ty? Can you help me?” I couldn’t even look him in the eye. Instead, I kept my gaze focused on the floor.

“Yeah, sure.” Tyler walked over and took the bundled sheet from me and headed toward my room. I followed him, still looking at the ground. Even though I was a complete pervert, he was still helping me out.

Tyler didn’t say anything about what had happened while he put the fresh sheet on my bed. Once he was done, he said good night and left me alone. I turned the TV on and crawled into bed, hoping to clear my mind and forget today ever happened.

The TV didn’t help at all. That night, I couldn’t fall asleep. I didn’t deserve sleep. Not after what I did to Tyler. I knew he didn’t like me that way. I knew I wasn’t supposed to think about him that way. But I still did.

As I sat there, curled up against my headboard, my mind drifted to the day a few years back when I’d first confronted Tyler about my feelings for him. I’d been sixteen at the time and my high school gymnastics team had just won a regional meet.

I’d been bouncing with energy the entire way home. And Tyler was so proud of me that day.

“You did great, Ry.” Tyler beamed at me before pulling me into a hug.

Being in his arms just felt *right*. I leaned my head on his chest and wished he would never let go. A moment later, something made me look up. When I did, I saw Tyler looking down at me, a smile on his face.

I took a deep breath and stood on my toes. Once I was close enough, I pressed my lips against his. I felt Tyler stiffen up, then kiss me back, then push me away, all in the span of seconds. The force of his push made me stumble backwards. I looked up at him, unsure of what to expect.

“You shouldn’t have done that, Ryan.” There was no emotion on his face. No sign of what was going through his head at that moment.

“Please, Ty...” Maybe if I showed him how much I wanted it, he’d stop treating me like a kid. Maybe he’d give me what I’d been dreaming about.

Tyler shook his head. “We’re brothers. It’s not right. Why don’t you go get a shower and relax?” Tyler turned and headed to his room without saying another word.

My heart sank. I felt like crawling up in the corner and crying.

I was jolted out of my memory when my bedroom door creaked open. Tyler stuck his head inside. “You still up?”

I nodded. “Yeah.”

He walked in and quietly closed the door behind him. Then he came over and sat next to me on the bed. “You okay?” I shrugged. “Do you want to talk about it?”

Again, I shrugged. “What’s there to talk about? I’m a freak. You’re my brother and I fucking perved on you. I... I love you.”

“You’re not a freak, Ry. You’re my little brother and I love you.”

“But not like that.” Never like that. No matter how much I wanted it. How much I *needed* it. He would never feel the same way about me.

Tyler’s voice dropped to a whisper. “I’m sorry. It’s my job to look out for you, to protect you.”

“I don’t need protection! I’m not a little kid anymore, Tyler! I’m an adult. I wish you could see that.”

Tyler was quiet. When I glanced over at him, I saw him studying me. I wished I could know what was going through his head right then.

“I guess you are. But we still can’t. What would people say if they found out?”

I blinked at him. Was it just my imagination, or was he saying he felt the same way? “You do feel the same way, don’t you?”

Tyler closed his eyes and nodded. “I have for a while. I can’t help it, no matter how much I try. No matter how many times I tell myself it’s wrong, that it’s disgusting.”

If he liked me, and I liked him, then why couldn't we be together? "Says who? Why shouldn't we be together if it's something we both want? Please, Tyler... Please."

Tyler looked up at me. He was quiet for a while. I hoped he would say yes. That he'd finally let us be together. I wasn't sure what I'd do if he said no and walked away. Would I follow him? Or would I finally give up on this little fantasy.

"Are you sure about this? I mean, I haven't exactly been ideal boyfriend material."

"Yes," I said with a nod. "I've never been more sure about anything." I knew he wasn't perfect. Neither was I. I could look past anything if it meant I could be with him.

"Okay. But you have to tell me right away if you ever want to stop. Promise?"

"I promise!" I would've promised him anything at that point.

Tyler took a deep breath before he leaned in and pressed his lips to mine. I pressed back immediately, not giving him a chance for second thoughts. But he didn't seem to be having any reservations. His hands roamed across my back. I wished I didn't have the stupid casts on my arms so that I could feel every inch of Tyler's body as well.

It seemed like an eternity had gone by when Tyler finally broke the kiss. "I love you, Ryan. But I think you need some sleep for now. We can finish this in the morning." Tyler moved under the blanket and pulled me down along with him. Once I was lying next to him, he wrapped his arms around me and pulled me close. "Good night," he whispered in my ear.

"Good night." I closed my eyes and slowly drifted off to sleep, a smile still on my face.

THE END

Author Bio

William Cooper has been writing and reading since he was little. In 2010, he took the first step toward publishing a book and hasn't looked back since. Whether it's two men who met in college or brothers who have been in love their entire life, William loves to tell their story for everyone to read.

Contact & Media Info

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MEANT TO BE?

By Chris Cox

Photo Description

Two young men are standing on a beach, with sand and water in the background. The taller of the two, a brunet, is hugging the blond from the side, and kissing his cheek. The blond seems startled by the gesture, but in need of comfort.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

These two have been together for years. They are still each other's first love. But reality creeps in—both get offers for their dream jobs after finishing university, unfortunately with thousands of miles between them. Are they going to try a “long distance” relationship or is one forced to give up his dreams? Or will they find another solution?

The pic can be the beginning or the end of the story. I just wish for an established couple who is very familiar with each other, some angst and a HEA.

Thanks,

Sunne

Story Info

Genre: contemporary, new adult

Tags: college, engineering, landscape design, twink, non-explicit, sweet no sex, coming of age, established couple

Word count: 7,223

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MEANT TO BE?

By **Chris Cox**

“How do I look?” Sean stood looking into the vanity mirror, wearing his crisp pink and white pinstriped oxford shirt, cherry pinstriped suspenders and tailored gray pants. On the white bathroom rug, his feet were still bare, his toes curled under. The New Orleans humidity popped tiny beads of condensation along his forehead and neck.

Standing so close behind his lover, Rusty could see the fine baby hair curling at Sean’s nape. He breathed in the scent of uniqueness Sean gave to Happy for Men cologne and let a smile surface on his kiss-swollen lips.

Rusty wanted to nuzzle Sean in that tender spot between his earlobe and shoulder. Wanted to sink his teeth in just enough to cause Sean to shudder with desire. Wanted to whisper into Sean’s ear that he was beautiful.

But that’s not what Sean needed to hear right now.

“Perfect.” Rusty gave in to temptation and put his hands on Sean’s shoulders, squeezing tight enough to emphasize the words he didn’t need to say. *I’ve got your back. I always will.*

Sean’s gray-blue eyes met his in the mirror. “Fourteenth time’s the charm, huh?”

Worry had completely washed out the dreamy look of passion that had been there only an hour and a half ago. It had only been a blow job, but it had been the best one Rusty could offer.

Sean had been too anxious to make love.

Rusty swallowed back his sorrow and his memories. There had been a time... But that had been before...

Now was not the time to think of that. Sean would see the pain in Rusty’s eyes and he would think of that time, too. Not that either of them would ever be able to forget.

With a need greater than desire, a need to protect, a need to wipe away the fear in Sean's eyes, Rusty wanted to take Sean back to bed and make his lover's world soft and safe.

Safe from failure. Safe from disappointment. Safe from the prejudice that cut into Sean's soul, reinforcing the damage done from the moment his father first suspected his only son wasn't like most of the other boys, making Sean feel less than okay because of who he was.

Rusty gave into temptation and leaned in close to whisper into Sean's ear, "They'd be fools not to hire you."

While Sean's GPA was decent, he came across as incredibly shy. And incredibly gay. Either one could be the reason behind his unsuccessful job interviews for an entry level mechanical engineering position.

Sean responded to Rusty's nuzzling by leaning his head back, ear to mouth, caressing him, soaking him up.

Most people thought Rusty was the stronger of the two. Physically, he topped Sean by an inch or two and fifteen pounds. Not much, really, but he looked sturdy. Sean looked delicate. Always had. But he was so much stronger than Rusty. Rusty could never have survived intact after enduring what Sean had endured.

"Then I've met a lot of fools, lately." Sean tried for a grin, but failed. "I'm so sorry, sweetie. I'm really trying."

"No sorry to it." Rusty wrapped his arms around Sean's waist, tightening hard enough to feel Sean's ragged breath. "We've got each other."

Sean turned to face Rusty, his arms reaching up to wrap around Rusty's neck, seeking the comfort he never verbalized.

"If we have no other place to live, we can always share a box under the bridge." Muffled in Rusty's neck, it sounded more like a sob than a forced laugh. "Who knew my graduation would make us homeless?"

Rusty had caught Sean staring so often at the letter giving them two weeks notice to vacate student housing that he had finally ripped it from the refrigerator door, tore it into strips and took it out with the trash.

He thought about not reminding Sean about their bittersweet safety net. But it made him feel better to know it was there and he thought, underneath Sean's pride, it would make Sean feel better, too.

"Mom's got our rooms all ready for us. She's really excited that we might be moving in. You've seen the sitting room she's made out of Jolie's old bedroom so we would have our own little corner of privacy along with our bedroom."

Sean nodded. "Maybe it won't come to that. There's got to be someone who wants me."

"I want you." Rusty trailed featherlight kisses along his neck.

"And I thank God daily for that."

Rusty knew Sean did. His deeply spiritual lover was grateful for everything good that came his way, things that most of the world took for granted.

"So you think this will do?" Sean squinted critically into the mirror, picked up his eyeliner and frowned at it.

Rusty had advised him to dress however made him feel best about himself. With Sean, that would include eyeliner and mascara. The eye makeup was a sign of defiance. A sign of vanity. A sign of wanting to be beautiful for Rusty, knowing Rusty loved the way the dark lines and lashes accentuated Sean's light eyes.

Those eyes.

Rusty hadn't even known what gay was when he'd fallen into those eyes and fallen into love all those years ago.

For people who scoffed at the idea of soulmates, Rusty knew they were wrong. He had known he was meant to be with Sean since he was eight and Sean was nine.

Best friends to lovers. There had never been anyone else for either of them.

That first year in high school, Sean had tried dating a girl or two to get his dad off his back but it had done nothing but make Rusty sad and angry and

jealous and made Sean more aware than ever that he couldn't be straight no matter how hard he tried.

How a man could throw away his own son—a person he'd made with his own sperm—because his son had been born gay was a concept Rusty couldn't wrap his mind around.

But Sean's father was another thing Rusty didn't need to think about right now. With that deep connection he and Sean shared, Sean would pick up on it. Depressed was not the best way to go into a job interview.

Seeing the vulnerability in Sean's eyes, the inevitability that who he was would lead to disappointment broke Rusty's heart. His biggest hope was that, during their lifetimes, he could find a way to show Sean how truly perfect he was just the way God made him.

Sean put down the liquid eyeliner tube without unscrewing it. The tube bumped the big zirconia stud that lay on the bathroom counter. "Probably not, huh?"

"Tonight, baby." Rusty caught sight of his own matching zirconia stud in his earlobe. "Tonight we'll dress. We'll be exactly who we are, okay? And we will party like there is no tomorrow."

Working for his family, the family that believed gay was as much a righteous part of him as being green-eyed was for his oldest brother and musically talented was for his younger sister, Rusty had never had to be anyone but himself.

He resisted the urge to kiss the tiny white scar too close to Sean's eye that still bore the reminder of his coming-out confession to his family.

Yes, Sean was the stronger of the two.

"Tonight, we'll go out or stay in. Your choice. Either way, we'll have fun," he promised, trying to give Sean hope that today would end well, no matter what.

"We need to start packing up."

“We’ve got another week.” Rusty didn’t remind Sean he had already started to cart a few things over to his mom’s whenever it was convenient or that he’d already arranged with his dad and brother to come over the weekend before their last day to help with the furniture.

He glanced at the watch on Sean’s wrist. “You need to get going, sweetheart.”

Slowly, Sean unclasped Rusty’s arms from around him. “Those who are about to die—”

“—salute you.” Rusty gave him a hard kiss on his cheek, knowing if he tasted Sean’s lips they would have a harder time pulling apart. He caught Sean’s hand and put it on his heart. “We’ll be okay. We have all we need right here.”

Sean left the interview trying not to get his hopes up like he had the other thirteen times he’d shaken hands and plastered on a smile as the recruiter promised to get in touch soon. If Rusty had been interviewing, he’d have companies competing for him. He had that kind of dynamic personality, even if his math skills were so poor he couldn’t keep his own bank account straight.

Still, losing this one would hurt more than the others. It was his dream job. Sean had been fascinated by underwater robotics ever since his dad had been stationed in Hawaii when he was seven. That’s where his dad had taught him to snorkel—where they’d actually spent time together—before the transfer to New Orleans, before his dad started to watch him closely. Before his dad made him feel like he was doing everything wrong, telling him to toughen up and be a man every time he had the chance.

Why did his mind always wander in this direction when he was under stress? Sean pushed away thoughts of his father and of home. Six years. Long enough to let it go.

Just like he needed to let go of any hope that he’d get a call for the job he interviewed for.

He'd done horribly, even worse than usual. His palm had been sweaty when he'd shaken the interviewer's hand and mumbled his introduction. Despite his determination to maintain friendly eye contact, he'd caught himself staring past the interviewer or looking down into his clasped hands at least a half-dozen times. His monotone answers to the interviewer's questions wouldn't impress anyone. And he'd stumbled, tripping on his own feet as he got up to leave the interview room.

The weight of his student loans, of Rusty's sympathetic smile, and his own crushed confidence pulled his shoulders down, making his neck ache.

Sean shook off his suit jacket before he climbed into Rusty's old Toyota Corolla. *Their car*, Rusty always corrected. When he'd first begun interviewing, he'd dreamed of buying something new, replacing Rusty's ride with a more reliable car that would look good in Rusty's parents' driveway when they went for Sunday dinner.

One that would tell Rusty's family that their baby boy wasn't making a mistake by loving Sean.

Too aware he was wallowing in the self-pity he had been unsuccessfully hiding from Rusty, Sean made himself take the stairs two at a time to their third floor apartment. The physical exertion felt good.

He hadn't run in over a week. Then again, the apartment needed packing up. Student housing was only available for students, not for newly graduated, unemployed mechanical engineers.

Standing in the bedroom he and Rusty had called their own for the last four years, Sean wasn't sure what he should do next. No more exams to study for. No more resumes to send out. No more plans to make about sharing the car. After this last interview, he had nowhere he needed to be.

In a burst of anger, he kicked an empty packing box, venting until the hapless cardboard lay torn and flattened on the floor.

Ashamed of his outburst, he neatly and methodically finished off the job, bending and folding the box small to take up less room in the dumpster. After changing into running shorts, a T-shirt and his battered running shoes that he

would replace with his first paycheck, he took off for a last run around the campus housing that had been his and Rusty's first home together.

The last time Sean had nowhere to live, Rusty's family had taken him in. It seemed history was about to repeat itself, only for a different reason this time.

Only three miles into his run, he was gasping for breath. The stress of the last few weeks cut his wind. He slowed as he reached the campus pool, not even realizing where he'd been headed until he got there.

The water always soothed him. Rusty said it was the Pisces in him that made him part fish. When they'd lived in Hawaii his dad had taught him how to swim and then how to dive. The whole family had spent most of their time on the beach. Sean remembered being happy there.

When he'd asked for diving lessons for his tenth birthday, he had thought he could recapture those times with his dad. But it had been too late. His father had already recognized something in him that he hadn't yet understood in himself.

The pool was mostly deserted except for the bored lifeguard sitting on the stand. A sign on the pool fence advertised open positions for the summer. Sean had done that job since his teens. Maybe he should apply.

That's what five years in college and in debt got him. A job he was qualified for at sixteen.

Still, he went in, hung around the snack shop counter, then asked for a locker key instead of a job application, knowing his pride was standing in the way of making an honest living.

Pride. He would always associate that word with the word gay.

Gay pride. Yeah, all that had ever done for him was make him homeless.

“What's wrong, Rust Bucket?”

Rusty settled into his older brother's work truck and buckled his seatbelt. “Sean has another interview this morning. I'm just worried about him.”

His brother sent him a disbelieving glance. “Uh-huh. Wanna tell me the rest of it?”

As if he were dumping a pallet of landscape pavers off his back, Rusty took a deep breath and unloaded on his brother. How did Sean survive without family? “It’s not that I want Sean to fail. Really, it isn’t.”

He waited for confirmation that the judgment and condemnation he heaped onto his own head was justified. Instead, his brother simply turned on his blinker and slowed to hang a right and cut through a residential neighborhood, avoiding mid-morning traffic.

“I know you wouldn’t hurt Sean for anything in the world. What’s the problem?”

“I don’t want anything to change.” Rusty winced as it came out as more of a whine than a statement. “I even suggested he apply to graduate school, not because I thought he would like to go but because I like the life we have right now. I want it to always be like this.”

“And if he gets a grown-up job, it won’t be.”

Rusty nodded. “It won’t be.”

He stared out the window with a landscaper’s eye, automatically taking in the selections of plants and their arrangements as they passed by the tiny front yards in the older neighborhood.

“Is it wrong that I’m looking forward to moving back in with Mom and Dad? But Sean thinks it’s a step backward.”

“Isn’t it?”

Rusty hated the juvenile reply even as he voiced it. “You don’t understand.”

His brother, married for over a half-dozen years, hadn’t lived in their parents’ house since he’d turned eighteen.

His brother smirked. “All of us Duchenes are momma’s boys. Those first months I was on my own, I ate supper every night with Mom and Dad. We’re still over there every Sunday for dinner. Thankfully, Amanda puts up with my

need to be so close to my family, but it took a lot of discussion—a lot of fighting, if you want to know the truth—for me to understand that we needed to build our own family ties, too. We almost didn't make it."

"I didn't know that."

"It's not something I'm proud of." By the tightness of his jaw, Rusty could tell how deeply this still bothered his brother.

"But Sean loves Mom and Dad."

"And they love him." His brother grinned. "Wanna know a secret?"

"Sure."

"It was Mom's bread pudding with praline rum sauce that won Amanda over. Mom promised to make it every Sunday just for Amanda. It made her feel special."

"I can't even figure out what *I* can do to make Sean feel special. Much less what Mom and Dad can do."

His brother gave him a sympathetic smile. "The boy does have some issues, but he's definitely got his reasons. You've got a good heart, Rust Bucket. He's lucky to have you."

Sean tried so hard to make Rusty happy. To please him. To be everything he thought Rusty might want or need.

"I'm the lucky one."

The pool manager handed back the application form Sean had carefully completed once desperation had trumped ego. "Sorry, Sean. The lifeguard position is a campus job and since you've graduated..."

Great. He couldn't even get hired for a part-time, minimum-wage position he had years of experience in.

"Thanks for checking for me." He shrugged away the sympathetic look trying to hide his own disappointment that bordered on dread behind a look of stoicism.

Head down, he headed straight for the door before his mask cracked.

His student loan repayments would start next month. He had applied for an extension, but that would only make the interest pile up.

And graduate school, Rusty's suggestion, would only dig them deeper into debt—assuming he could actually get into graduate school with his GPA.

“Sean, wait,” the pool manager called. “Did you see the notice on the bulletin board? The Dive Shop is looking for help.”

“Thanks. I'll check it out,” he said without turning back. Rusty always said Sean didn't need to talk much. Everyone could read what was on his mind by looking into his eyes.

But then, Rusty had special privileges to look as deeply into Sean's eyes as he wanted to.

Or he always had. These last few months, Sean had pulled back, trying to protect Rusty from the direness of his worries.

Reversing direction, Sean headed to the community bulletin board and scanned the flyers stuck there.

“Upper right corner,” the pool manager said.

There it was. Black print on white paper when most of the other flyers were Day-Glo orange and neon green.

Counter help needed. See George.

Sean's diving certification card lay heavy in his wallet.

He reached out to grab the job notice but then clenched his fist.

This was so not how everything was supposed to turn out.

He and Rusty had talked and planned for hours about how Sean would get a decent job, then they would get a nice condo and save for a house. They would buy a second car—used until they paid off the student loans—then celebrate with something better.

Modest dreams. Affordable dreams. Not anything extravagant, although Rusty always threw in a vacation to Hawaii where Sean would teach him to surf.

And now...?

He grabbed the flyer, tearing it from the pin.

Fine. It was a job, right? And it paid something, which was more than he was making now.

Moving in with Rusty's folks was bad enough, but knowing he had nothing to contribute to the added expense of two more bodies in their household was beyond damaging to his self-esteem. He'd already lived off them those last two years of high school. He couldn't add to the debt, no matter how hard the Duchenes insisted he was family, as much for being himself as for being Rusty's partner.

But, at twenty-three, most men were moving out of their mother's house instead of back in.

Rusty pushed open the truck door, grabbed his gloves from the side pocket and pulled them on as he walked back toward the trailer full of Formosa azaleas.

Levi Graham, of Graham Contracting and the general contractor for this job, loped toward them. Dark sunglasses hid his eyes and a baseball cap shielded his face and made his hair curl up in the humid temperatures. "Rusty, got a minute?"

"Sure. What's up?" He tried to give Levi a strong look without being too obvious. He and Sean had an ongoing discussion on whether Levi was straight or gay. All they could figure out was that he was presently unattached and they had a friend...

Under his loose tank top, Levi shrugged his shoulders to stretch them then reseated his cap before rubbing his earlobe as if the empty piercing there bothered him.

Levi was one of the most laid-back men Rusty knew but now his twitchiness made Rusty uneasy.

"The client wants a rock garden with a fountain in the backyard, but she wants some greenery, too. Can you give me some ideas and an estimate?"

One of those clients? Rusty raised his eyebrow, showing he understood Levi's unspoken message.

Levi gave him a nod.

Rusty grinned at the challenge. "Show me."

This was the part of the job Rusty loved. His grandfather said he was a natural at assessing the micro-environment and coming up with the right plantings for both effect and long-term viability.

He'd been told the humid subtropics of lower Louisiana were different than any place on earth. He wouldn't know, having been nowhere else, except for the rare family vacation spent mostly in their SUV as they traveled to the mountains of Arkansas where the terrain was definitely different than his home turf.

Unlike Sean, who had been everywhere, living in exotic places like Hawaii and Germany and Japan. But Sean wouldn't know a boxwood bush from a bay tree.

Then again, Sean could talk diving depths and underwater caves for hours.

If only the corporate recruiter spoke his language, Sean would have no trouble acing his interview.

For the first time since he'd lain in Rusty's arms that morning, he felt the tension leave his shoulders and neck. Dive shops did that for him.

There was something about the smell of neoprene that settled him.

He found his way to the counter, partly hidden by a display of sunglasses and a rack of fins. Laying the flyer on the counter, he cleared his throat and said, "I'm here to see George."

And smiled when his voice didn't break.

The girl at the counter gave Sean a nonchalant shrug, said okay, and sauntered off to the back room behind the counter.

After several minutes of hovering near the counter, feeling uncomfortable near the unattended cash register, Sean decided to look around instead.

He fingered a mask before wandering over to the board advertising guided dives. Staring blankly at them, he took a deep breath, readying himself to talk to George, should he ever make an appearance.

We'll be okay. We have all we need right here. Rusty's parting words had sustained him all morning.

The bell above the door rang, and Sean looked up to see Bill Frazier, the interviewer from this morning. And there went all feelings of being okay.

The man saw him, did a double take as he recognized Sean, then said, "Hi."

Sean nodded, and managed to say, "Hi," back.

Bill moved toward the board. "Planning a dive?"

"No." It was short and clipped. Not what Sean had intended, but he didn't want to tell the guy he was applying for a counter job. That he was giving up on using his degree. That he was settling for a paycheck of any size from anyone.

His terse answer didn't seem to bother Bill, though. "See anything here you recommend?"

Sean looked through the list. "How experienced are you, Mr. Frazier?"

"Call me Bill. I'm Master Scuba Dive Instructor rated." He peered over Sean's shoulder. "I remember from your resume that you're Rescue Diver rated, right?"

"Yes, sir." From the corner of his eye, Sean noticed a man coming around the counter toward them. George, no doubt.

How was he going to handle this?

"Our waters are pretty murky around here. Lake Pontchartrain is popular if you want a quick dive that doesn't require a lot of travel time."

"Which one would you go on this time of year?"

"I think I'd pick Al Hernandez's dive at Manila Village. For one thing, I know the crew. They're safe, but won't smother an experienced diver. And the ride out to the site will give you a taste of our marshes and wildlife."

“Great. Thanks.” He patted Sean on the shoulder. Sean was proud of himself for hiding his flinch at the contact. If only he could be the outgoing touchy-feely type like Rusty, or at least comfortable with a stranger’s friendly gesture, he might have a job by now.

Instead, he took two steps back before he could stop himself.

Bill gave him a nod, acknowledging the boundaries Sean had just put up between them, then turned to George.

“I’d like to sign up for a dive.”

“Sure. Step over here and I’ll get you fixed up.” George ambled toward the counter gesturing to both of them.

Not knowing what else to do, Sean trailed them.

George pulled a notebook from under the counter. “Got your card?” he asked Bill.

“Right here.” Bill pulled out his wallet and sorted through his various credit and identification cards. Fumbling for his dive card, he dropped his PFLAG card on the counter.

There goes that excuse for not getting the job. Immediately, Sean mentally kicked himself for his pitiful attitude. Sure, prejudice existed, but he wouldn’t be a victim to it.

“And you?” George asked, his pen poised over the notebook entry he was making.

He forced his chin up, ready to confess. “I’m not here to sign up for a dive.” Words failed him, so he gently touched the flyer still lying on the counter. “I was hoping...”

George studied him, then shook his head. “Sorry, kid. I’ve hired my niece for this job.” He looked up into the shoplifting mirror at the girl who thought she was hiding among the swimwear, texting. “But check back in a week or so, in case it doesn’t work out.”

“Okay, thanks.” Under Bill’s scrutiny, he wanted nothing more than to disappear into thin air. Instead, he gave both men a nod then controlled his

steps along with his breath, using all the willpower he could gather to leave the shop with dignity.

As soon as he slid into the Corolla's worn seat, he realized his phone had been buzzing for a while.

Pulling it from his pocket, he checked, seeing Rusty's smiling face on the text message.

Thinking of you. Love you.

He texted back,

Love you, too.

And in the end, that's what mattered, right?

“Rusty Duchene? It's been a while since I've seen you. How are your mom and dad?”

“They're just fine, thank you.” With a happy grin, Rusty let Mrs. Filler trap his palm between her two beringed hands. Levi, standing slightly to his left, gave him a relieved nod.

“How is Julie, Mrs. Filler?”

“Doing well. You know she's engaged, don't you?”

“No, ma'am, I hadn't heard.”

“We miss you at church.” She turned to Levi. “Rusty and Julie always sat next to each other in catechism class. They made their First Communions together at St. Anne's.”

“Our family is going to St. Andrew's Episcopal now.”

“Episcopal? The Duchenes have been Catholic ever since I've known them.”

“A few hundred years.”

Curiosity overcame good manners when she asked, “Why...?” before letting her invasive question trail off.

Rusty gently pulled his hand free, feeling his grin turn to plastic. “It’s the gay thing.”

It seemed Mrs. Filler was suddenly fascinated by his earring.

To break her stare, Rusty turned and gestured toward her rock garden. “What mood are you wanting to create here?”

A half-hour later, in the privacy of Levi’s truck, he finished drawing out his ideas and making a list of plants to purchase.

“I’ve added fifteen percent to the overall price because I have a feeling we’re all going to earn that much and more in time spent reassuring Mrs. Filler that she made the right decision before this project is done.”

“I’ll leave the reassuring up to you. You had her giggling like a teenager before you were done.”

Rusty blew out his breath, trying but failing to hold back his frustration. “She only got giggly when she found out I was gay. Now she’ll feel politically correct because I’ll be her token gay landscape designer, like her hair stylist. How many times did she tell me she wanted to introduce me to him, even though I told her I already had a boyfriend? I hate being typecast.”

Levi smirked, “It’s better than hiding who you are, huh?”

Something sharp in Levi’s voice made Rusty pause. He’d wondered a few times about Levi, but the man didn’t obviously ping his gaydar. Maybe a slight ghost echo? Maybe Levi was bi?

And now who was typecasting. Rusty rolled his eyes at himself.

Levi shrugged. “As long as it pays the bills, right? To tell you the truth, Rusty, I think you got her soothed more because her family has known yours for centuries, and not because of your sexual orientation. And your skill did the rest. Your ideas are brilliant.”

“I guess.” Rusty thought of Sean, trying so hard to get a job on his own merits. But Levi was right. The job market was mostly about *who* you knew, with a bit of *what* you knew thrown in.

“Talking of paying the bills—my boyfriend just graduated in mechanical engineering and is looking for a job. Is Graham Contracting hiring?”

“Mechanical, huh? If he were a civil engineer, I might be able to help.”

“The job doesn’t have to be in his field. He’s good with math and paperwork.” Rusty signed the design and handed it off to Levi. “I wish he would just chill and wait for the perfect job but he’s driving himself crazy about being unemployed.”

Levi noted the hefty profit margin, knowing Mrs. Filler would agree to the price solely because of the Duchene influence. “Let me see what I can come up with.”

Precariously balancing a box of textbooks on his hip, Sean pulled the door to their apartment shut for the last time, wishing Rusty was here. Rusty always knew what Sean needed. If he were here right now, he would wrap his arm around Sean’s neck, pull him close, and growl into his ear that it would be okay.

Instead, Rusty was working on-site at a cabin on Lake Pontchartrain, working with Levi to put in spring plantings for a new vacation home.

Sean still fumed and felt ashamed that Rusty had used family influence to practically coerce Graham Contracting into offering him a job they had clearly made for him. But he couldn’t afford to let ego get in the way of a paycheck.

He’d asked for time to think about their offer, but he already knew he would be calling them on Friday to accept the job.

As he pushed on the door to make sure it had locked, his phone vibrated his pocket and he couldn’t help but smile.

Before he even dropped the box to fish out his phone, he knew it had to be Rusty. Rusty always knew when Sean needed him. He’d use the excuse to call to remind Sean about meeting him for lunch, but they’d both know he was calling because Sean needed to hear his voice.

But the display showed an area code and phone number Sean didn’t recognize.

Great. He’d dropped that heavy-assed box for a wrong number.

“Hello?”

“Sean Delahunt?”

“Yes.”

“Bill Frazier, from Oceanic Mariner, Incorporated. You interviewed with me a little over a week ago.”

“Yes?”

“We are prepared to make you an offer for an entry level mechanical engineering position.”

“Yes?” Sean cringed at his inane reply, pacing because he couldn’t stand still.

This was it. He’d done it. He would not only be pulling his own weight, but actually be able provide for all the things he and Rusty had dreamed about.

“I’ll give you the details then follow-up with an email, okay? The position pays industry standard and comes with a moving package and a signing bonus to help you relocate.”

One word stood out above the rest. “Relocate?”

“Yes.” Mr. Frazier paused, then said, “The job is in our corporate office in Boston, Massachusetts.”

“Oh.”

“Will that be a problem?”

He wanted to blurt out “no”, but Rusty—family meant everything to him. And Rusty had his own career, also tied to family. This was his home.

Sean tried to think of a diplomatic reply, but finally had to go with blunt honesty when nothing else came to mind. “Uh, I don’t know.”

He heard a strained clearing of throat on the line. “We have a new hire orientation starting in two weeks. We’ll need to know by this Wednesday, at the latest, to start processing your paperwork and get you moved up here in time. Can you get us an answer by then?”

“Yes, sir. I’ll have an answer by then.”

“You are a strong candidate for this position. We really hope the answer will be yes.”

“Thank you, sir.” Flipping the phone off, Sean squeezed his eyes shut, trying to breathe through the chaos zinging every nerve ending.

Pure peace. That’s what Rusty felt as he sat on the grassy bank of Lake Pontchartrain. A breeze kept the humidity at bay while waves set a soothing rhythm for his soul.

New Orleans. Everyone who had every traveled said there was no other place like it on earth. All Rusty knew was that New Orleans was home.

No matter what life handed him, he knew he could handle it as long as he had his roots firmly planted here.

He was halfway through his sandwich when he felt that certain awareness that told him Sean was nearby.

“Hey, you.” He searched Sean’s face, seeing pain there. Leaving the apartment was bad for both of them, but especially for Sean. The apartment had been the first place where he’d felt at home, like he had a right to belong there, since he’d been five or six.

“Hey you, back.” Sean’s forced smile stabbed through Rusty’s heart.

Rusty would do anything to keep the world from hurting his lover. If only he had that power.

As Sean came into range, Rusty reached out and pulled him tight into his chest with an arm around his neck. “I started eating without you. I was starving.”

“It’s okay. I’m not hungry.”

Getting Sean to eat was one of Rusty’s hardest trials. With relief, he realized he would soon have his mother to help him out. Nobody, not even Sean, could resist her cooking especially with her insistence to “have another bite or two” to please her.

The way Sean burrowed into Rusty meant he wanted to be held tight and Rusty obliged.

“Rusty?” Sean’s muffled voice sounded unsure. “I gotta tell you something. We’ve got a problem.”

Rusty smiled into Sean’s hair. His partner always seemed to think problems were bigger than they were. “Okay.”

The gulp of air Sean sucked in sounded watery before he cleared his throat. “I got a job offer.”

“What?” Not what Rusty had expected to hear. He wanted to push Sean back to look into his face, to read his eyes, but Sean clung too tightly to peel away. Instead, he squeezed the shaking shoulders tighter. “Fantastic, baby!”

“It’s in Boston.”

It took two full breaths as Rusty’s brain tried to wrap around Sean’s words until he got the big picture.

Softly, feeling Sean’s pain, he whispered to the most important person in his life, “I’m so sorry, baby. But there’ll be other jobs. The right one will come along. Until then you’ve got Graham Contrac—”

Sean stiffened, trying to break the bonds Rusty hadn’t even realized he’d tightened so much. “I think I want to take it.”

Sean woke from his uneasy sleep with Rusty snoring on the other side of the bed in the room that had become so familiar to him those last two years in high school. How could two men put so much distance between them on a queen-sized bed?

But then, the arguments that had preceded this worried him even more.

“What about all the debts I’ve accumulated, Rusty? The years I’ve put in for us, for our future.”

“Our future? Don’t you mean your future? I never asked you to go to college or to become an engineer. And don’t worry about the debts. Dad’s already said—”

“I don’t want your father paying my debts. They’ve already given me room and board since I was sixteen. And I know they slip you money all the time. Don’t you get it, Rusty? This is about us becoming our own men. Standing on our own feet. Being independent. I *need* to do this.”

Rusty had looked at him like Sean was out of his mind.

Sean took a shaky breath, trying to find the words to reason with Rusty. “Don’t you understand? I’ve finally got my chance. Things have always been easy for you. You’ve never felt indebted like everything you own is from charity. You’ve never had to fight for every scrap of self-respect you could scrape together.”

“What are you talking about? Charity? My family loves you just like they love me.” The way Rusty looked past Sean’s eyes instead of into them proved he wasn’t listening. “Damn it, Sean, don’t you realize what you’re asking me? You want me to give up my career to move to a place I don’t know anything about. I don’t even know what grows in Boston’s environment. And what about my family? I know it’s no big deal to you, since you don’t even talk to your folks, but it’s a big deal to me. Do you know what you’re asking of me?”

“Family? I thought I was your family. I thought I was enough.”

Rusty had clenched his fists, bitten his lip, and turned away.

Moving to Boston would mean Rusty would be giving up his family—a safe harbor for both of them—as well as his own career where he was working hard to build a respected reputation.

Passing on this job would mean Sean would be giving up his chance for his own self-respect, his opportunity to be his own man, the ultimate climax of all they’d worked for and sacrificed for as he went through school earning his degree.

They’d hurled barbed insults. Both of them were selfish. Neither of them listened to the other. And then Sean had stopped talking, not able to bear another agonizing exchange that ended up with him fighting the urge to cry and Rusty fighting the urge to hit the wall.

Maybe he should have called Mr. Frazier back immediately and turned down the job. Or just packed up his stuff and left.

Or—

He didn't know what he should have done to avoid all the hurtful things they'd said and left unsaid between them. After all these long, torturous days of heated words and cold silences, he still didn't know what to do, and he had to give his answer to Oceanic today.

In his sleep, Rusty rolled over, reaching for Sean. When his flailing hand found Sean already sitting up, Rusty blinked and Sean watched the awareness of pain wipe the dreamy sleep from those beloved brown eyes.

“Hey.” Rusty's voice was growly from sleep, his hand frozen in mid-reach.

“Hey, back.” Sean gave him a tight smile, but couldn't hold it in place as Rusty let his hand drop.

“I've got something for you.” Rusty reached over to his nightstand, pulled open the drawer and came up with a small box.

He gripped it tightly in his fist while he scooted closer to Sean in the bed.

Slowly, carefully, he trailed a finger down Sean's cheek then across his lips.

Sean couldn't stop himself—didn't want to stop himself—as he kissed at those fingers.

He wanted to lean into Rusty, be wrapped in his arms, lose himself in Rusty's heat and hear everything was going to be okay.

Instead, he held himself firm.

If he lost himself this time, he might never find himself again.

Rusty swallowed hard enough Sean saw his throat convulse, then said, “You know, extended family is still family, even if they're thousands of miles away.”

What was Rusty saying? The tone of his voice—soothing, placating, loving—made more sense than his words.

Rusty fidgeted with the box in his hand. “And with your new job, you can carry all the bills for a while until I get work, right?”

Sean blinked, trying to see past that earnestly intense gaze Rusty was giving him to the message underneath. Could he let himself hope?

“And Sean,” Rusty shoved the box at him, “the best thing about Boston is we can be married there.”

Sean opened the box to see two matching copper rings inside. Each band had a continuing pattern of fleur-de-lis around it.

“Will you?”

Sean gulped in enough air to answer. “Yes.”

Then he was gasping for breath again as Rusty lunged toward him, tackling him and pinning him to the bed.

Raised over him, his weight pressing Sean into the mattress, Rusty said, “I love you. I’ll love you forever.”

And Sean felt the truth of that in every cell in his body.

“I know.” He pulled Rusty down close. “I’ll love you forever, too.”

THE END

Author Bio

Published in a different genre under another pen name, Chris Cox is new to writing M/M romance. Having the freedom to write about issues that matter, as well as to write about loving relationships, gives Chris's muse great pleasure. Rusty and Sean's short story is part of the Bayou Boys series set around New Orleans, in Chris's home state of Louisiana. New Bayou Boys short stories, novellas and novels from Chris Cox will be available at most places where you buy your books.

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WINTER WINDS

By Missouri Dalton

Photo Description

A young man with impossibly blue eyes stares out at the viewer. It's the eyes that have it, because this man cannot hear, a disability gained only after he was turned—into a vampire. It's going to take one hell of a man to bring out the master vampire within.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

Forever young.

Forever beautiful.

Forever outcast.

Forever lonely.

Life as a deaf vampire is hard. It's seen as a flaw.

Being deaf is viewed as a weakness. They're foolish to underestimate me. Like Rudolph, I was never invited to play in any vampire games.

Then one foggy winter's night, everything changed.

My beautiful Black Irish vampire has a difficult life, some angst, and strong emotions, but he gets his HEA.

Sincerely,

Susan65

Story Info

Genre: paranormal

Tags: paranormal, fae/fey/fairies, vampires/undead/immortals, disabilities, contemporary, mystery/murders, age gap, tattoos

Content warnings: very light spanking

Word count: 40,706

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WINTER WINDS

By Missouri Dalton

CHAPTER ONE

Cillian

With two fingers I tapped the back and then the front of my right hand and then splayed the fingers out on both and waved them. I don't understand. The police officer blinked at me. He'd pulled me over and started talking before I could get a look at his lips. I honestly didn't know what he said. Probably something about how fast I was going, but I didn't want to make presumptions.

He spoke again, slowly, which I disliked. I could read lips without such accommodations, but I figured out what he said anyhow.

“You were speeding.”

I nodded, just as slowly, and then shook my head like a contrary horse. I pointed at the speedometer and then shrugged. I didn't feel like talking to the man. I could have, I just didn't want to. It wasn't one of my better personality traits.

“Yes, speeding.”

I shook my head again.

He looked like he was about to get irritated, so I stopped acting the fool and looked him in the eyes. The police officer's eyes dilated, the black subsuming the brown. His mouth opened and closed and then, without another word, he walked back to his car and drove away. I smiled to myself. Too easy. There were some things I really loved about being a member of the undead.

The list of good was shorter than bad most days, but I was feeling optimistic today. Never a good sign.

I rubbed the small glass vial I wore around my neck. It was filled with grains of precious earth from my grave back in Ireland, more symbolic than

anything as it had never held my body, but it was a good luck charm stronger than any witchcraft. Not that witchcraft had anything to do with my—transformation. Maybe if it had, I wouldn't have ended up an outcast in a society full of underwear models, geniuses and savants. You don't meet vampires like me—that survive. I'd been a perfect enough specimen when I was alive and first plucked from the wake of mortality to walk amongst the marble-skinned creatures of the night.

But something went horribly wrong. Ignacio Suarez, former duke of Feria, had been the one to bring about my rebirth. He couldn't have known what would happen that night, no more than I could. It didn't matter. I had a bad dose, and when I rose it was to a silent world. As if being a vampire wasn't bad enough, I had to be a deaf vampire.

With the recent, relatively speaking, invention of modern sign language I found myself speaking less and less. I didn't see much point in opening my mouth when there was no one to talk to. (Not that anyone could understand me anyhow.) I was avoided by the other vampires, discouraged from politics and left to die like a deformed Spartan child on the hillside. Nothing says "I love you" like total rejection. I hadn't survived for over five hundred years without getting thick-skinned, fast. Ma used to say that was the only way to live.

I hadn't wanted to believe her, and look where it got me.

I spent most of my time doing odd jobs for the vampires not *too* disgusted to deal with me. The rest of my time was divided between my current pursuit of knowledge—a master's degree in Conflict Resolution, which I thought might come in handy some day—and finding beautiful things to look at. I had a lot of degrees, from a lot of universities, some of which still existed.

I still think those harpsichord lessons were a good investment, but then *I* don't have to hear myself play. Or sing. I was never a very good singer, but it didn't bother me anymore.

I shook myself and started up my car again. I had to get home. The sun was rising, and I wasn't depressed enough to kill myself. Not today.

My living arrangements at the time were less than ideal. It was always cold, and the neighbors on the floor below played music so loud my bedside lamp vibrated its way off the end table on a nightly basis. I'd resorted to duct tape. I used duct tape to put black plastic over the windows as well. Plus a layer of cardboard stapled over top and then plywood. If it couldn't look pretty, I was going to make sure it was solid.

Every once in a while one of my kindred got it into their head that I was a blemish in need of removing. It was better if I didn't draw attention to myself, and that I made my domicile as sunlight-proof as possible. At great personal risk I'd put up crosses, coated the windows in garlic oil and done my best to vampire-proof the place.

Sometimes that made it difficult to get inside.

I climbed out of my bed, cracking several vertebrae back into place, and shuffled through the darkness of my apartment to the fridge for a pint of squirrel. Squirrel was really the only thing that stayed fresh-tasting after being frozen. That, and if I was caught hunting around here I was a dead man. All right, poor choice of words, anyhow, I didn't usually have the cheek to go around hunting for real food. I wasn't stupid. Every other half century or so Ignacio would send someone out for my permanent death. He seemed to get the dodgiest folks, though, especially lately.

I liked to send him their ashes in a box. Just my little way of saying "thanks for biting me and leaving me for dead, you asshole".

Sometimes I sent a note. Last time I sent a photocopy of my ass. I liked photocopiers and I liked to remind Ignacio of what a fine ass I had.

I hoped he appreciated it.

I pulled off the top of the glass bottle I stored blood in and chugged it like cheap beer. I felt the familiar blood lust roll over my shoulders and my fangs sprang out like a morning erection. Which was also a problem today. Bloody hell. I took a deep, unnecessary, breath and put the bottle back in the fridge and headed for the bathroom for a shower and a rub down to solve that problem.

I'd been the only one rubbing me down for a while now, a long while. I couldn't seem to get the juices flowing, as it were, with human lads. There was

no edge there. No harm they could do to me. It was boring. The last time another vampire and I had relations it was because he was young, had never heard of me, and I could play off that I wasn't deaf as a doorknob pretty well if I tried hard enough.

And I had been exceptionally motivated at the time.

After my sinful shower, I managed to get myself dressed and wriggled out of my apartment. It was winter break, so there were no classes to attend this evening, but I did find myself desiring company. I couldn't spend all my time holed up or I'd go crazy. Sometimes I wondered if I hadn't already gone crazy.

I had most recently made my residence in the cultural sink of Boston. On nights like this, where the cold and fog kept sane people in their homes, I liked to stalk through the streets and muck-ridden alleyways and feel some kinship to my perfect brethren. When that got boring, I would let myself into a museum and wander the exhibits, grateful for the beauty.

It wasn't just surface beauty, either. I could see the brushstrokes. Feel the depth of each individual bristle as they had pushed through the viscous suspension of pigment in oil to create their own sort of poetry that no one else could see as I could see. When I had my fill of the individual strands of color I could draw my gaze back and experience the piece in its magnificent whole.

This was a bloody, roaring painting. It reminded me of sounds I could no longer experience, bringing them to echo about my mind. The sun burned on the horizon of a bloody sea where bodies flung from a sinking ship floated and thrashed in the gray blue waters, a wave cresting to drive those still living deep into the murk, and predators circling just out of sight.

I could put myself into that painting. I could smell the salt and the blood. I could feel the slick surface of the ship's deck as I tumbled over it. Gulls were circling overhead, waiting for the larger predators to finish before they scavenged. I knew their cry as a memory, that piercing shriek that I had so hated as a boy.

"Declare the Typhon's coming..." I spoke aloud for the first time in many nights, the memory of what the words sounded like echoing in my mind. I stepped away from Mr. Turner's painting. I always came back to this, bypassing Titian and Renoir, Gauguin and Rembrandt for this painting. It was

alive for me. A subject matter so bloody... it reminded me of times long past. Of how I came to this country so many years ago, on a leaking ship, stuffed in a barrel and praying to St. Patrick I would make it.

Winter always serves to make me maudlin.

I felt a sudden hint of vibration beneath my feet and turned around. I had attracted attention from the night watchman. Bloody... I intercepted him quickly and looked deep into his eyes. I had never found it necessary to speak in order to bring someone under my spell. My eyes seemed to always be enough. Sometimes a bit of touch helped the process along, but voice was never a part of the equation.

The watchman, a portly fellow of middle years, was quickly soothed and wandered off under the assumption that he had simply *thought* he had heard something. I smiled to myself and meandered into the sculpture gallery before leaving my little sanctuary for a visit to the seaside. I think it was the ocean, more than anything else, which drew me to Boston. It reminded me so of home in Ireland. I'd lived along the coast with my family in a small village that wasn't there anymore. My da made his money with fishing. It had been a peaceful life, boring.

So I, being the fool I was, joined up with an army and ended up in Spain where I met Ignacio. I could still remember his voice. It was a common enough brain wave. That spicy, sweet sound—the last sound I ever heard.

The ocean was very still tonight. The moon was dark. I sat down in the sand with the stars for company and stared out at the near-invisible horizon. I could not go back to Ireland. The Families would never allow that. Here in the “new” world they had little foothold, but the old world was theirs, no contest there. I was not welcome in the Families. There were others like me, loners who wandered this continent. We stayed well clear of one another, but they had territories, those other vampires. They were settling now. Making new pseudo-Families and bringing the old world in. The old Families were investing here, buying property, but none had settled here.

I heard stories that one was already making a move on Miami. Hard for me to believe a Family would want to move to the land of sunshine and oranges, but there you had it. There was a little vampire I knew who had the state to

himself. I hoped he would find sanctuary as I could not. There were not many of us here. There had been a time when a single vampire could have a state all to himself. Those times were changing and unless I wanted to move to the Yukon, I was stuck sharing territory.

Boston had me, and a fledgling family calling themselves the Blades. They were young and stupid, but there were four of them and one of me and... I didn't feel like challenging it. I wasn't a proper vampire after all, I couldn't take four. Two probably, but they were always together, like a pack. A pack of dimwits in leather. That didn't stop them from being strong and fast and—whole. They let me be for the most part. Probably because their taunting only engendered a singular piece of sign language in response.

One that most everybody knew.

I grew tired of the ocean when I started to feel the sun. It's an innate response in me now. A sense of fire at the back of my mind. I picked myself up out of the sand and brushed it off the seat of my pants.

A hand clamped down on my shoulder and I whirled around, brain switching to aggression. I snarled, a response I'd never managed to break myself of, at the man behind me, his hands held up in peace and his eyes wide.

"I'm sorry, I thought you heard me come up." He was babbling, I could tell. Babbling has a specific sort of glazed look about the eyes. The man was bigger than me, not an especially great accomplishment. I'd been considered tall enough in my day, but every century saw bigger men than I. He was not only tall, however, but muscled in the way of a man who uses his strength every day. He wore jogging clothes, explaining his presence on the beach.

He was—captivating. His skin a soft golden tan, much like my own had been once upon a time. His face had the same strength of beauty as Greek sculpture. Eyes like burnished bronze framed by dark lashes and thick eyebrows. His hair wasn't dark, but as pale as raw silk, long and pulled back from his face in a tail. He smelled like fresh air and rain and... *home*. I was not sure what to make of him, an inhuman creature staring at me, babbling at me, handsome and so very—odd.

He didn't fit in this place. On this beach. Or even this time.

I shook my head and pointed at my ears and then shook my head.

He seemed to understand. “You’re deaf?”

I nodded.

“Sorry.”

I shrugged. The fire in the back of my mind twinged. I had to go. I cast one more look at the incongruous man and then hightailed it out of there before I became another pile of sand on the beach.

What a very strange man.

I picked up my mail, mostly correspondence from the university, and went back to my apartment to spend the day. Sorting through it, however, I found something unusual. A heavy lavender-colored envelope with my name and address written in thick India ink on the front. I ran my thumb across it to feel the subtle raise of lines drawn with a dip pen.

Cillian Doone

I swallowed. I had not gone by that name in... many years. My proper name.

I broke the wax seal on the back of the envelope and removed a thick card. It smelled like honey and death. Another vampire. Given that I could count on one finger how much friendly correspondence I’d gotten from other vampires, I found this suspicious. And the previous only counted as friendly because they hadn’t made a single death threat.

To the Child of Ignacio Suarez, Family Cortez, Cadiz

The Cortez family mourns the loss of Ignacio Suarez, who greeted the sun this December and has gone on to the Netherworld. You are invited forthwith to the House of Cortez to receive the holdings of your Master, of whom you are his only surviving blood. Please respond forthwith.

Our deepest sympathies.

Underneath was a glyph, the personal sign of a vampire, this one for the head of the Family Cortez, Elena. I’d never met her, but I had heard the stories. Debaucheries in blood-soaked villas were the norm. I heard she’d

traded her bloodlust for corporate takeovers, but I didn't see how that was much different. That sort of supreme bitch doesn't change the thing she loves most, and in Elena's case, that was power.

Whatever Ignacio had, I did not want. Besides, this could be some elaborate ploy to get me into Spain so he could kill me. I wasn't taking that sort of chance. No I was not.

I was going to bed.

CHAPTER TWO

Donal

There were many things I expected when I went out before dawn to run off the weight of the world, but this was not one of them. The water was gray in the predawn, and the waves lapped gently against the cold beach. At the water's edge, sitting in the sand, was a young man. His back was to me, arms gripped around his knees as he stared out over the ocean like he could see across to the other side.

His hair was sable, short and soft looking. He held himself like a child does, contained into a small space as if afraid to attract attention. His shoulders were slender, and his T-shirt stretched across the bones and muscle so much I thought it would rip. It looked a size too small, even for this fellow. There was a thin leather cord around his neck. I thought he had to be cold, sitting in the sand in a thin T-shirt and jeans, but he didn't seem to mind.

I noticed his feet were bare, but saw no shoes lying nearby. Had he walked here? Had he driven?

I hadn't seen any other cars in the parking lot when I arrived.

"Hey, are you all right, kid?"

He didn't even twitch to acknowledge I'd been heard.

"Hello?"

I started walking toward him as he stood up, and I was greeted by someone a bit taller than I expected. He was built along small lines, but there was plenty of muscle packed into his lithe frame. I put a hand on his shoulder. "Are you all right?"

He spun around, and I got a glimpse of anger as his lips curled back into a snarl. He bared white fangs at me.

"I'm sorry, I thought you heard me come up." *Vampire*. Damn it all. How had I not noticed that?

He was breathing. Vampires don't typically keep that pretense up.

He stared at me for a very long moment and then pointed to his ear and shook his head.

He... could he be? “You’re deaf?” That was more than just strange. That was—unheard of.

He nodded.

“Sorry.”

This vampire was—he was beautiful. His eyes were like an October sky after the clouds had gone, so blue it took your breath away. His eyes were framed by long dark lashes that only made them stand out all the more. And it wasn’t like the rest of him was any less breath-snatching. His lips, now that he wasn’t snarling, were the sort that make you think of all sort of lustful things, of red satin sheets and candlelight. He smelled of the ocean and old wood with a hint of garlic. Strange thing for a vampire to smell of. The leather cord around his neck held a small glass vial filled with—dirt. A talisman?

He gave me one last look and then took off running like he was being chased by the devil. He was damn fast, too. How—very strange. I had encountered many a man in my life. I had keened for kings and soldiers, I had swung a sword in battles no one remembered, but those eyes made my knees quake.

I gulped in a breath. *I have to know.* Who was this boy? How had he come to be what he was? And how had a vampire with such a flaw survived? *I have to know.*

I am not a stalker by nature, and that lad moved faster than even I could follow. In all my years I’d never encountered a vampire who moved that fast. He had to be old. Older than I thought by far, but I couldn’t help but think of him on the beach, arms around his knees. He’d looked like a lost child. Perhaps he was.

I’d no proper leads, so I did what any law-abiding citizen does, I let it go—for now. If he lived in Boston, there was every chance I’d see him again. If I did, I’d be sure to get his name. He had piqued my curiosity, and it took a lot to get my interest up. I think the job was making me jaded. After I got myself

cleaned up after my run, I went to work. There was no rest for the wicked and certainly no rest for an assistant medical examiner in Boston.

Becoming a coroner was a fine fit for me. The men and women who passed through our morgue deserved the lament as much as anyone else, and there weren't any other banshees lining up to give it to them. It was the calling of all my kindred. We keened for the dead not yet dead, and we lamented for the dead who'd gone on. No one seemed to mind much my singing.

It was much better than the music Doctor Gordon played. Whoever came up with the bastard mix of polka and rap ought to get drawn and quartered and sent on to the afterlife without a whit of music.

“Good morning, Dr. O’Neil,” Jenna said. The sweet twenty-three-year-old was my intern. Our chief medical examiner, Dr. Avery, had no patience for interns, so I had humored the girl. After so many years on this earth, patience was something I had in spades.

“Good morning, Jenna.” I took the clipboard from her, noting her new lemon yellow manicure with a raised eyebrow.

She took note, “Stickers, Dr. O’Neil. They come right off.” She demonstrated.

“All right.” I had a rule about nail polish. “They come off before you touch a cadaver.”

“Yes, Doctor.”

I nodded and looked over the intake log. “Number Five is up first, would you roll her out for me?”

Jenna nodded and hurried off. The girl was very enthusiastic, I'd give her that, though I'd no idea why such a vibrant child would want to work with death. I'd had no real choice in the matter, it was what I was born to do. Perhaps I could gently steer her into another line of work. I had done it before.

Staring down at the clipboard, I couldn't help but recall again those eyes. Practically impossible, those eyes. Like something out of a story. I had never seen eyes like that before, and I had seen the eyes of the fairies. The eyes of the dying and dead. I had seen all manner of men and beast and fey and vampire in my life, but none of them had made my knees quake.

“I have Number Five, Dr. O’Neil,” Jenna’s voice interrupted my thoughts.

“Yes, all right.” I picked up the corresponding file and flipped through.

Jane Doe, found near Beacon Hill.

Hm. I set the file aside, folded open to the space for my notes, and unzipped the body bag. Jane Doe was a pretty girl. Her dark hair was damp, and her clothes—club clothes—were bloody. I put on a pair of blue nitrile gloves and took a quick look for the source of the blood before we moved her out of the bag.

There were two puncture wounds on the inside of her right thigh, and another at the neck. They’d bled heavily. Strange. The injuries were certainly vampire bites, I could practically smell them, but they did not leave a kill like this, bleeding out. A vampire’s saliva was an anticoagulant, much like the substance in a vampire bat, to keep blood flowing freely even from minor injuries. There was no need to go for major blood vessels.

But they had, and then they let her bleed to death. I checked her hands. There was blood and tissue under her nails. She’d broken a couple of them, even. There were visible postmortem bruises on her hands and legs.

This girl had fought. I took a breath. This was a sport kill. Not something you saw in the old country. The Families wouldn’t allow this sort of thing. At least, you wouldn’t find the body if they did. The local group was young, which was another reason the one on the beach had surprised me. I knew about the Blades, the fledgling wannabe Family, but that vampire had been much older and much stronger. Even with his disability, I was very surprised he allowed them in his territory at all.

Especially when they were doing things like this. I sighed. Perhaps he needed to be reminded of his obligations. A vampire his age, letting babes run wild in his territory. I wasn’t about to let that go on. I might have to keen and lament, but I enjoy the loss of life about as much as I’d enjoy a hot poker up the arse. No, he and I would have a chat. If I could find the lad, that is. I’d gotten a taste of his spirit last night, but it might not be enough.

The Blades would know him. I’d pay them a visit then.

“All right, Jenna, let’s get the poor girl out of the bag.”

“Yes, Doctor.”

That evening I dressed myself for vampires. A black button-down shirt with silver crosses on the buttons, a thick wool coat with extra pockets for a stake and a short blade a bit longer than my forearm, and a good scarf to relieve them of my tempting neck. I didn't get particularly cold, being a bit of the Netherworld myself, but it generally paid to look human. Last were my gloves, black leather, and I was off. I had already tucked knives into my boots and braided my hair back from my face.

I hadn't had a proper encounter with the vampplings, but that was out of distaste. They might not know what I was, but they would find out. A banshee of my age could deal with more than just four such creatures. I had no intention of killing them, not yet. I knew full well that for every light in the world there must be a dark. My Lady Morrigan was a darkness, and a necessary one.

We banshee were her clarion call and her warriors. A role I had not filled in many lifetimes. I had found my way to serve her in this new world, without bloodshed. I would give the little vampires a chance to behave themselves in the place I called home. I would give the strange older vampire a chance to put them in line. If that failed, I would kill them.

The Blades made their home in a warehouse near the docks. The sort of place where rum runners used to hide their goods nearly a hundred years ago. And hundreds of years before that it was where slaves came in to the city to be sold. A place with very bloody history. Appropriate for such creatures as these.

I didn't bother announcing my presence as I walked inside, ducking under a half-fallen piece of timber to use the side door it seemed they'd not noticed. I couldn't blame them, only my history in Boston gave me the knowledge. It was one of the smuggler's doors. From there, I wound through the warehouse, listening carefully for the sound of them.

I could hear laughter bouncing off the walls. There they were. I concentrated for a moment, phasing myself into the half-solid state called the *taibhse*, a gift of my birth. I drifted along silent as death herself until I reached the room where the Blades had made their little nest. It was deep in the heart

of the warehouse, safe from sun and nosy people. I'd seen a few traps along the way, but I was far too old to be caught by the traps of children.

I freed my short blade from my coat and settled back into my corporeal self before walking into the nest, blade out and a no-nonsense expression on my face. "Uh-hum." I cleared my throat to get their attention.

All four, in various versions of Goth attire and makeup, turned to me. There were snarls all around. One, a skinny girl, started toward me but was stopped by a hand on the shoulder. The one who stopped her was definitely the eldest in the group. He wore a ridiculous top hat decorated in skulls. His dark eyes narrowed.

"You're not human."

"No." I shook my head. "I'm not."

"What do you want?"

I'd start with my mystery man. "There is another vampire in Boston. Blue eyes, strange. I want his name and how to find him."

Skull Hat frowned. "You mean Cillian, the freak?"

Cillian... an Irish name. "Yes."

The girl snorted. "He eats *squirrels*."

I raised my eyebrows. "Nevertheless. Where can I find him?"

"He has an apartment," Skull Hat said. "Keeps it covered in crosses and garlic. He's totally paranoid. Doesn't talk much. Sometimes he does jobs for us. Takes out the trash."

By the expression on Skull Hat's face, I was guessing he considered me "trash". "I see. Does he have a surname?"

Skull Hat shrugged. "I think it's Molloy. It's Irish."

I nodded. "All right. Then we come to my second reason for visiting. You will not kill for sport in my city."

The girl laughed, and I noticed the other two were starting to move.

"You can't stop us," Skull Hat said.

"This is just a warning," I replied. "Do with it what you will." I went into

the *taibhse* again. To their eyes, I looked like I was made of smoke. “But it is your only warning.”

There was a lot of shouting as I drifted out of the warehouse. I’d definitely managed to spook the jaded little brats. Good. Now I just had to find my mystery vampire. *Cillian, possibly Molloy.*

Because it wasn’t like there was more than one of those in the Boston phonebook.

CHAPTER THREE

Cillian

My mail, and the invitation to Spain, mocked me from the kitchen counter when I got out of bed the next night. I drank some blood and went to sort through the mail I hadn't gotten to when I went to bed.

Bill.

Bill.

Ad.

Coupon for bikini waxes.

Letter from the *Oxford Journal*.

Bill.

I stopped and went back to the letter, opening it up on the short end and tearing the letter free. I'd been waiting for a response back for three months now.

Dear Mr. Molloy,

Thank you for the submission of your article, "The Sound of Art". We are pleased to accept it for publication in the March edition of the Oxford Journal. We will follow up with a contract at your request.

Sincerely,

Alistair Godfrey

Editor

I got into the journal. I got *in*. I did a little dance, which I was certain looked ridiculous, and then hurried to retrieve my ancient laptop computer from my bedroom and compose a reply. I emailed it off to the editor and, with my mood set to pleasant, set about getting dressed for an evening of celebration.

I was going hunting tonight.

I only owned one good set of clothes. I needed to break into my cache and sell off some of my things again. There was a trick to that. Buy new, stash away, and then sell a hundred or so years later when the price skyrockets. That was about as investment-oriented as I got. The Families had their hands in all the banks. I didn't, *couldn't*, trust them. I preferred my assets in silver and gold, or furniture, or art.

My good clothes, a blue silk shirt and black slacks, meant I had to wear shoes. Given that I spent the better portion of my days barefoot, this was a slight annoyance, but I wanted to blend in. You could not blend in without shoes if you were wearing slacks. Well, that, and it was pretty cold. It wasn't snowing, but the sky threatened precipitation as I got outside, wrapping my scarf around my neck in a pretense of humanity.

I wanted something fresh tonight. I wanted—company. Cravings for company were usually best served by me holing up in my bedroom until the sensation passed, but I was in too good a mood to do that tonight. I was feeling a bit cocky even, probably not a good thing, and instead of my usual destination of the park, I went to the nearest club.

A long look at the bouncer was all it took to get me inside. I couldn't hear the music that set the young men and women inside writhing with passion, sweat on brows and eyes locked on partners or closed in ecstasy, but I could feel the vibration of it through the soles of my shoes. I slipped into the center of it all and let the emotions of the crowd carry me.

It was not long before I was joined in my abandon by another. A young man with hazel eyes and dark hair. He smiled at me in a way I'm sure he thought was predatory. I smiled back. He took my silent invitation and we began to move together in the oldest dance of all—courtship. Of course, courtship in these days was more about sex than souls, but that's all I wanted right now. He ran his hot hands down my sides, sending little shivers down my spine.

I kept smiling, and he took the opportunity to steal a kiss from me.

It had been so long since I'd been kissed. I put my hand in his hair and kissed him back. Being with him wouldn't be near as interesting as someone more like me, but I had been alone too long to care in that moment and he was

young and vibrant. He had his whole life ahead of him. I let him tug me into the dimly lit area off the dance floor and we began a more involved session of lips and tongue and teeth and skillful hands.

I just wanted to drown in sensation. I wanted to take all of that passion and be consumed by it. My self-destructive streak always came out when I decided to have a human lover. I grabbed his shirt and pulled him deeper into the darkness of the club, down a short hall to a more private nook. I was not concerned about voyeurs, or security. I wanted this youth, and I wanted him *now*.

He was quick on the uptake, shoving me against the wall and fumbling with the button of my trousers as he continued to work his tongue against mine. He pulled a condom out of his pocket. I held back a smile. How thoughtful, if unnecessary. I like a cautious lad, though. He got himself ready as quickly as I'd ever seen, and I helped out by getting my trousers down. He turned me around roughly after another kiss and started nipping at my neck, kissing and sucking to mark territory that he would never see again.

I braced myself against the wall and gave affirmative noises until he took me. I hadn't gotten a clear look at his size beforehand, but I could feel it as he moved. He gripped my hair tight with one hand, and my stomach with the other. He kissed me roughly and then ran a hand down to my own heated piece. I grunted as his hand gripped around the stiff shaft.

I had my hands flat against the concrete wall, and left them there as he continued his assault. He seemed content to run this encounter, and I was more than content to let him. He picked up his pace and continued leaving his mark on my neck and shoulders, releasing my hair to pinch and tease at my nipples.

I took breath in short bursts to moan and grunt and make all manner of lustful sounds until, at last, we found release. Shuddering, I held myself against the wall as he turned away from me. I pushed off and looked him in the eyes. He drew closer to me. I smiled at him and brought him in for a kiss.

I kept my eyes on his as I pulled away, watching as his eyes dilated a bit more. I kissed his neck and then made a small incision with the sharp edge of my fangs and licked to get the blood flowing. It was like I had found water

after a trek through the desert. I did not drink to kill, but to fill my stomach. At my age, I found that to be far less than when I was just born into the dark.

After, I pricked one finger against my fangs and spread the blood over his wound to stop the bleeding. I gave him one last kiss before putting my clothes to rights and heading out of the club feeling full and a bit dozy. It was a delightful sensation, such that I didn't care one way or another if the Blades saw me or not. I was feeling—strong.

That was never a wise feeling in my experience, but right then I couldn't have cared less. I could have gone back into the club for another round. I even considered it briefly but decided not to push my luck. I started to wind my way back to my apartment. There was still a whole lot of night left, but I couldn't think of anything better to do than what I'd just done.

It wouldn't be my first early turn-in.

I arrived at my apartment building a little after one in the morning. I was about to go up the steps when I sensed something—another vampire. I took a sniff of the air. One of the Blades, I was certain.

Specifically Damien, their leader, who emerged from the shadows to leer at me. He was wearing his ridiculous skull decorated top hat. "Hey there, freak," he said.

I flipped him off to acknowledge that I understood.

"Some guy is looking for you." He smirked. "He's not human, either. I bet he'll slice you open. Get rid of you once and for all. That'd make everybody happy."

I bared my fangs and snarled at him. He flinched, and I could smell a touch of fear. I took a menacing step forward and he stepped back. Over the last couple years the Blades had picked up a few of my signs. None of them seemed to understand me when I spoke, so it had been necessary. With my hand raised to one side of my body, I touched the four fingers to my thumb, like a clam. *Go.*

He wrinkled his nose and let me be. Someone looking for me? Not human, but not vampire. Damien would have said if the man was a vampire. I was

headed up the stairs when another presence interrupted me. I turned my head. It was—the man from the beach, in all his handsome golden glory.

He waited until my attention was on him. “Cillian Molloy?”

I nodded.

“We need to talk.”

I gestured for him to continue.

“Privately.”

I took a breath and nodded. “Come in,” I said carefully.

He quirked an eyebrow and followed me inside. If he wanted to kill me, I’d be better armed in my apartment. He had no difficulty getting inside, which lowered the number of possible creatures he could be significantly. Not undead, not vampire...

He took a seat at my kitchen table after I turned on the lights. It had been a long time since I turned them on, but the bulbs were still good. I sat down across from him.

“My name is Donal O’Neil.”

I nodded.

“I am here because the Blades are killing for sport.”

I blinked. He was here for that? That had nothing to do with me. I wasn’t in charge of them. I shrugged broadly and made the sign for *I don’t understand*.

He gave me a look.

I tried saying it aloud, but the more words I had to use, the less likely someone was to understand me. “Why is it my problem?”

He frowned. “Say that again,” he said. He didn’t say it in English, though. He said it in Gaelic. Old Gaelic.

I blinked. “Why is it my problem?” I spoke the language I’d grown up with tentatively, but the shapes were easy to remember.

He gave me another look. The sort of disappointed look Da used to give me when I did something really stupid. “Are you kidding me? They are in

your territory, and you are the most powerful vampire in Boston. You could kill them easily and you let them run roughshod over your city. Why?"

I was powerful? Me?

He must have seen the confusion on my face. "How old are you?"

"I was turned in 1483," I said.

Donal blinked. "Those children are less than a quarter of your age."

"There are four of them."

"And you are a master vampire."

"I'm what?"

"Master. Vampire." He gave me a long look. "An old, powerful vampire."

"I'm old but..." I shrugged. "Not strong."

He closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose, sighing. He took a moment and then looked at me again. "How long have you been alone?"

I considered the question and decided he probably wanted to know if I'd been with other vampires. "Always."

"Always? What of your maker?"

"I am deaf. It happened—during the change. Imperfect. I was discarded."

"You became deaf *because* of the turn?" he asked.

I nodded.

Understanding dawned on his face. "I see. The one who turned you, how old was he?"

I shrugged. "Three, four hundred?"

Donal nodded. "Vampires lose their potency to make children as they age. I suppose you are an example of why that is true. You have—a rebirth defect. I've never heard of this. Of course, I've never heard of a vampire who was so..." he made a gesture of exasperation at me.

"So?"

"You. You could kill the Blades, easily."

I shook my head.

“Don’t shake your head at me, I know of what I speak.” He licked his lips. “I am banshee. A servant of Morrigan. I know your kind. I know what you can do, even if you do not.”

Banshee. I was sitting across the table from a banshee. I felt—dumbstruck.

He tapped my arm. I blinked and returned my attention to him. I had the feeling he’d been talking and I hadn’t seen it. I felt a little embarrassed.

“Cillian,” he paused. “You are a like a babe in arms, aren’t you?”

I made a face. “I know things.”

Donal raised his eyebrows. “Oh? Really?”

“I can—” I wanted to say hypnotize, but I wasn’t sure what the word for that was in Gaelic, and more, I wasn’t sure he’d understand if I said it. I pointed at my eyes and then made a gesture with my hands like a stage magician casting a spell.

“Are you trying to say hypnotize?”

I nodded.

“All right. What else can you do?”

“Run.”

“And?”

I thought about that. “Isn’t that enough?”

He slapped his forehead with his hand and shook his head. He looked a lot like my da when he tried to explain sex to me.

“You—you have all of this power, and no idea what to do with it... do you even fly?”

I laughed. I’m sure it didn’t sound all that much like a laugh, either. “Fly?”

“All right. From this moment forward *I* will teach you.”

“You are not a vampire.”

“No, but I can’t in good conscience leave you untaught.” He shook his head. “We of the Isles, we are kindred. I will help you, I give you my word as a banshee.”

I grabbed a piece of paper and a pen. “Then—my name.” I wrote it out. *Cillian Doone*. “You should have it.” I slid it across the table. “My proper name.” He had given me his, I could tell by the way he said it, the way his eyes looked, and the ease of his lips. It was his name. I would return the favor.

He looked at the paper and smiled. “Thank you, Cillian.”

“This,” I touched my hand to my mouth and moved it away and down, palm up, “means ‘thank you.’”

Donal smiled and repeated the gesture. “You can teach me this. Fair trade.”

I found a smile working its way across my face and nodded.

I made a fist and extended my first two fingers, curving them slightly, and touched them to my neck. “Vampire.”

He mimicked me. “Vampire.”

The banshee were not anything to sneeze at. For one to take an interest in me—especially one so attractive—that was like an impossible dream. Or a nightmare. I suppose it depended on whether the banshee was keening for you or not. This banshee, this Donal, he wanted to help me. He was a son of Ireland, just as I was, a servant of the Morrigan. One did not doubt the intentions of such a creature.

Not even someone as jaded as myself.

CHAPTER FOUR

Donal

What I was expecting to find in Cillian was a typically powerful, lazy master vampire. The loners got that way often enough for it to be a stereotype. This *master*, however, was... endearing. He spoke English with an Irish accent thicker than a peat bog, putting my mind back to the time he'd been human. His Gaelic was the same, but easier to follow. He spoke his first tongue with ease enough, a person could forget he was deaf. But with the drastic changes of the times, it was clear that beyond short sentences of similarly short words, he had found it more and more difficult to communicate vocally, the poor thing.

When I signed back to him, he'd lit up like a child at Christmas. The honest smile had sent that familiar quake through my knees. *Cillian Doone*. How lonely had he been? Did those that pushed him away have any concept of the power they had shelved because of his disability? A power anyone could see, looking into those impossibly luminescent eyes.

And now I had signed on to teach this master child, because I swore to. I had no real idea why.

Before leaving, I pressed my phone number on him and made sure he knew how to text message—and had a damn phone—and made an appointment to see him again the next evening.

In the meantime, I made a few phone calls. I wanted a better handle on where he had come from, the Family that had abandoned him, and the general attitude of the community towards him.

There was an O'Brien in the Dublin Family whom I had tea with every other decade. He would have no issue gossiping. Housewives have nothing on Irish nobility. I made an appointment to see him in Dublin and prepared myself to walk the Ways, called in sick to work and cleared my appointment book for the next week.

I had the strangest feeling that things were going to get more bizarre from here.

I could not step foot in Dublin without remembering how it had been once. When I was born, there was no city here, just a small village occupied by Northern invaders. How it had grown since those roots. How Ireland had changed, how it stayed the same.

I felt my history walking down the brick paved street to meet with a former King of Ireland, Seamus O'Brien. "King" was something of a misnomer. He wasn't in any history books and he'd only been king for about... five minutes before he'd been turned into a vampire, and then his cousin got the throne. Very unfortunate, but the Stone would not accept a vampire. You had to be able to reproduce to rule.

"O'Neil, it's good to see you."

I was still a touch weary from traveling the Ways, but there was no faster way to get to Ireland, and I'd never trusted phones. O'Brien met me at a local tea house that kept late hours. As I sat down, I could feel the music of the land wrap around me gently, so. By the time I sipped my first cuppa, I felt myself again. Being home always restored me.

"And you, O'Brien, so what can you tell me of Cillian Doone?" I toyed with my spoon.

O'Brien, who reminded me more of a cartoon leprechaun than a king, whistled. He always whistled. "I thought he'd died till you called. Does explain the talk from Cadiz."

"Do tell."

"Well," he lowered his voice to a conspiratorial whisper, "Ignacio Suarez, the lad's maker, was murdered. Oh, they're saying he 'went to the sun', but that's bollocks. Cillian being alive means the old goat's holdings pass to him. Boy was his only living child, you know."

I raised my eyebrows. "What happened to the rest?"

O'Brien sniffed. "He was practically sterile. Never made a single child that wasn't wrong somehow. A couple turned revenant right off, some lost—pieces, and then there was Cillian. To be fair ta Ignacio, he wanted to keep the boy. It was Elena that refused him. Her purity shite is still the prevailing

opinion, unfortunately, and she'd kill Cillian before she'd let him take his inheritance."

I'd seen his living situation. It certainly hadn't looked like he cared much about money.

I finished my tea before speaking. "I'd assumed Ignacio was simply too old to make children. Is this sort of sterility common?"

He shook his head. "No. You can believe it looked bad on Elena, too, she brought Ignacio into the fold. As far as age, Johannsen brought Sven over when he was into his fourth century. Seems to fluctuate in the bloodlines, and I'm surprised Cillian lived this long. He can't be much of a vampire."

"He's a master," I said. "Untrained, but the power is there." I shook my head. "I can feel it. I asked him about his gifts, and he named speed and hypnosis as if there could be nothing else."

O'Brien leaned back into his chair, eyebrows up. "Master? So you've spoken to him?"

"He is in my city. A master with all the knowledge of a newborn. He's actually afraid of the local vampires, and they less than a quarter his own age."

O'Brien shook his head. "No one dared take him in after Elena's expulsion. It was the Inquisition, no Family would risk their treaties. We let him down, I'm afraid." He looked me in the eyes. "Do you intend to teach him, O'Neil?"

I nodded.

"Then I should tell you. Ignacio's death was not the first. They say whoever does it leaves no marks on the body. The Families are closing ranks."

"Thank you for the warning." I stood. "I pray I do not keen for you."

"May your glass stay full."

I smiled. "May your wife not catch you with the chambermaid."

I made it back to Boston before my next appointment with Cillian. Enough time to shower and change and grab a bite to eat. I had never had much luck

getting food when out with vampires. I wasn't going to make an ass of myself by having my stomach growl when I was trying to teach a skittish vampire.

I briefly considered catching squirrels to use as treats, but dismissed it. That would take too much time, and really, the boy needed to be eating fresh *human* blood. The blood of predatory animals was also sufficient, but every vampire needed a human feed now and again. The ones that ate only animals had a twitchiness about them as they aged. Some went mad. That's where Sasquatch stories come from, I'm afraid. A rather large, shaggy vampire went into the forest and never came out again. Sometimes it was werewolves, but usually it was a crazed "back to nature" vampire. The sun usually got those sort eventually. They weren't particularly bright.

Cillian's apartment wasn't any better the second time around. It was dingy and ill-lit, and while I admired his vampire-proofing on the doors and walls, he had no other form of decoration besides the crucifixes, and garlic oil does not make anyone's home smell welcoming. How he could stand it, I don't know. He probably didn't even notice it anymore.

"Welcome back," Cillian said, opting for Gaelic right off.

I smiled at him. He'd been dressed better last night, but I had the feeling he didn't have all that many clothes. He was barefoot, like he had been on the beach, but in more ratty jeans and a T-shirt advertising a barbeque restaurant from South Carolina.

"So, you should put shoes on. We're going out."

"I don't like shoes," he replied.

"It's December, Cillian. Humor me."

"Fine." He headed deeper into the hole he called an apartment. I followed and discovered there was a room similar to a bedroom, except the bed appeared to be a wooden box roughly large enough for a person, filled with pillows and blankets. I was starting to feel that I might have gotten in over my head. Just a little. I tried to remember the last time I'd been called upon to teach a son of Ireland. It had been awhile, and those lads had all been kings in waiting, or lords. This was a vampire in desperate need of contact, touch and understanding. I hoped I could help him, because it had been a very long time since someone made my knees shake.

I waited until he had his shoes on and was once again facing me to speak. “You don’t do much housework, then?”

“You’re the only person who’s ever come inside.”

Of course I was.

He held up his hands, closed into fists, side by side and knocked them together twice, gently. “Shoes.”

At least he was making considerations. I repeated the gesture. “Shoes. Come on, first thing you and I are going to deal with the Blades.”

He went a bit pale. Well, paler. He touched his open right hand to his forehead and pulled it away, closing the middle three fingers.

I took a wild guess. “Because it is your responsibility, Cillian. This territory is yours.”

Cillian gulped and then made a face I recognized as the precursor to such declarations as, “I don’t want to,” and, “You can’t make me do that.”

“And try to remember that I am a banshee and at least twice your age, and definitely twice as mean.”

His shoulders sagged in defeat.

“Come on, then.”

He didn’t know it then, but this was going to be fun.

CHAPTER FIVE

Cillian

Being dragged out of my apartment by a bossy banshee to battle the Blades was not on my list of possible outcomes for this evening. Then, I hadn't really expected him to show up again. He was a banshee, he *had* to have better things to do than teach me how to be a vampire. Not that I had anything better to do until classes started again. I was having writer's block on my newest art history research, so it wasn't like my time was being wasted.

I was still having a little trouble reconciling the fact that he looked like he looked and the *twice my age* remark. I mean, really. *Twice*, my age? I hadn't run into anyone older than I was in a long time, and though I'm loathe to admit it even to myself, the prospect was more than a little attractive. I mean, he was a golden edifice of perfection, older, dangerous, and he might even care a teensy bit about my welfare.

That was like hitting the jackpot for a guy whose longest-lasting relationship was with a typewriter. His name was Barry. It was really one-sided. *Sweet Lugh, I'm mad. I'm mad as a box of frogs. I am.*

Donal tapped my shoulder to draw my attention. "We're nearly there."

I nodded.

We'd walked, so I suppose it was a good thing I put the shoes on. I hated pulling glass out of my feet. It didn't especially hurt, not for long anyway, but it was inconvenient. He'd brought me to the dockside warehouse I knew the Blades were holed up in. I knew so I could avoid it. Coming to it on purpose was making my legs feel like jelly. I don't care what he said, there was no way I could take on those four. I mean, there were *four* of them. But Donal didn't seem to think that was an issue.

Maybe he would help. I could take one and he could handle the other three. Easy.

We paused at a stretch of wall where Donal revealed a hidden door. He looked at me and pulled out a long blade and pushed the hilt toward me. "Here."

“I...”

“Take it.”

I took it. There was no point arguing with the man. He gestured for me to go ahead of him. I was betting that wasn't negotiable either. I went on inside, but waited for him to catch up. As we walked through the maze of decaying wood and metal, it was clear he'd been here before. He moved confidently and easily, like a predator. I wondered if that's what I looked like when I was stalking. Doubtful that I would ever look that majestic, but hey, I could hope. He put up a hand to stop me and placed a finger to his lips and then pointed to an opening just ahead. I could see lights flickering.

He pointed to his ears and made the vampire sign I'd taught him and then held up four fingers and pointed to the opening again. I nodded and we continued onward. I gripped the blade tight. The last time I'd had a weapon like this in my hands, I'd been fleeing Europe. I'd survived, though, so I would have to take comfort in that.

Donal led the way, and I did my best not to turn tail and run back to my apartment. The space we found ourselves in actually looked worse than my apartment, and given that I'd seen cardboard shanties with more style than my apartment, this surprised me. All four of the Blades were settled in, the blood on their chins and hands saying more clearly than words that they had just been out killing and the glaze of their eyes saying they'd fed—heavily.

Damien got to his feet the minute he spotted us. “What are you doing here?” He bared his fangs and snarled.

I swallowed. “You will stop killing.” I spoke slowly and carefully, hoping he would understand. “This is *my* territory. My city.”

Damien started to laugh, at least, there was no other conceivable reason for his mouth to be open like that. “Your city? You don't even come out of that hole of yours, you eat squirrels.”

I raised my eyebrows. *You can do this, Cillian.* I thought of all the haughty, nasty, cruel vampires I'd encountered over the years. The ones that taunted, the ones that hurt me and the ones that pretended to be kind just to hurt me deeper. Beneath all of the pain and rejection, there was a simmering rage I had

buried. I was Irish, dammit, I wasn't going to let these no-good hooligans run *my* city.

I snarled at Damien and raised the sword. "You stop, or you die."

With Donal standing there like a sentinel, I was safe. If they started to overtake me, I—I trusted that he would intervene. I don't know why. Because he was a banshee, perhaps. Because he had sworn to help. People didn't make oaths and break them, not people like him.

Damien blinked. "Are you serious?"

"Yes." I hoped I sounded convincing.

He bared his fangs again. "Then kill me, freak." He leapt at me and I moved out of the way. He crashed into the wall behind me and I blinked. Well. While he scrambled to get to his feet, I took the opportunity and went to slash his throat. What happened, however, was his head bouncing on the floor. Vampires only turned to ash in sunlight or fire, but taking off their head was very effective. It did leave a corpse to deal with, though.

Damien's children stared at me but didn't seem eager to join their master in death.

"My city," I said. "Understood?"

They nodded eagerly.

"Good." I straightened. "Take care of that." I gestured at the corpse with my sword. I looked to Donal and marched out of the nest as confidently as I could manage. I peered over my shoulder and spied Donal following me. We made it out of the warehouse before he said anything.

"See, how hard was that?"

"I feel... odd."

"That's called pride. This city is your territory, Cillian. It is past time you acted in the city's best interest."

I felt that deserved some sort of response, but I didn't have any idea of what that should be.

"What do you want to do now? The vampplings will be wary of you now."

I frowned, uncertain I'd understood him correctly. "Vamplings?" I was sure I mangled that.

"Vamp-lings," he repeated. "Baby vampires."

I shook my head. "Okay."

"All right. Back to the question. What do you want to do now?"

"Sleep?"

"You sleep too much." He looked me over. "Do you have money?"

"Why?"

"You need clothes."

"Why?"

"Because you look like a homeless person. You're a master vampire, you should look the part."

I didn't fully understand that logic. "There isn't anything open this late."

He frowned. "I think you just said nothing is open this late."

"Yes."

"Then let me prove you wrong." He took my hand and started pulling me away from the warehouse.

"I don't have any money," I protested. "I don't trust banks."

I saw him roll his eyes. "I'll pay." He looked at me. "It's amazing what one can make on investments over the course of a few hundred years, you know."

"Banks are for suckers."

He gave me another of those looks my father used to give me. "We have so much work to do."

What was that supposed to mean?

"Come on now, lots to do."

Clothes shopping with a banshee, another thing not on the list of things I thought would happen tonight. Now, if we had sex, that would be three for three...

Okay, now all I could think about was having sex with him. I sighed. This was going to be a long shopping excursion.

So it turned out there were actually a few late night shopping locations and for reasons I did not understand I was required to try on *everything*. Why did one need to try on underwear? With that question in mind, I peered out of the dressing room and waved at Donal.

“I—” I considered what I was trying to say. “Why?”

Donal pushed into the dressing room and looked at me. *All of me*. Well, the all of me not currently encased in silky boxer briefs. He tugged on the waistband. “Good fit.”

I blushed. It was a side effect of a relatively fresh feed. If I kept telling myself that, I’d believe it.

Donal wasn’t looking at me like a man checking a good fit. He was looking at me like he wanted me. I knew that look. I wore it frequently and it usually went unrequited. Standing this close to him, so intimately, I was terribly aware of Donal’s size in comparison to me. I felt—delicate next to him. Donal locked the changing room door and put one hand on my shoulder and another on my cheek. Then he kissed me, really kissed me. The kind of kiss that made my bones feel like cooked noodles.

He pulled away from me and smiled. “We should get seven pairs of those. Good fit.”

“Okay.”

“I’ll go get shirts.”

“Okay.”

I watched him walk out of the dressing room. The moment he was gone, I sat down on the little bench in the dressing room with a vibrating thud. I looked into the mirror. I was attractive enough to get Donal, wasn’t I? That kiss certainly felt like a prelude to greater things but... maybe he just wasn’t the sort of guy that had sex in changing rooms.

Did that mean I was the sort of guy? I had recently had sex rather publicly. Did that make me, what’s the word? Slutty? Was I slutty? I was standing in a

changing room in underwear that wasn't mine. When did my life get so complicated?

Donal and I left the department stores with bags, lots and lots of bags. He called us a cab and took me home. I was in a bit of a daze. A daze colored by my desire to embrace Donal and tear off his shirt. He'd seen me practically naked, I thought I should see him in the same level of disarray. I bet he would look spectacular. I wondered if he had any tattoos. I didn't. I sometimes thought a tattoo would make me more mysterious.

Of course, a tattoo was practically impossible for a vampire. They healed too fast to stay.

As we sat in the dark of the cab, I kept stealing glances at him. I was so glad, in that moment, that I was deaf and not blind, because I wanted to keep looking at him. And smelling him... he smelled so very good. Not food-good like a human. He smelled like a memory. A wonderful memory. I wanted to make memories on top of that memory. I wanted to rub my scent all over him and show him I could kiss just like he could.

I just wasn't sure when to initiate contact. He'd made the first move. Was it a move?

You're five hundred years old, Cillian, you ought to know.

I am so pathetic.

Donal tapped my shoulder. "We've arrived."

I nodded. "I—will pay you back."

He shook his head. "I have money. A lot of money. Don't worry about it."

"I don't need a... sugar daddy." I was pretty sure I used the term right. Though I don't think it came out clearly because Donal looked a bit dumbstruck and then dragged me out of the cab. We gathered up the bags and he paid the driver before he hustled me upstairs to my apartment with the sort of haste I'd only thought myself capable of. Then, he was a banshee. There were probably all kinds of things he could do. That was the sort of thinking that led to dark places.

In my apartment, he gave me a look. "You are very jaded, you know that?"

“How are you not?” I returned. “You are so much older.”

He shook his head. “I have seen the worst and the best of man and woman. If there is one thing I have learned, it is that they will always surprise you.”

I shrugged.

“Now, I will see you tomorrow night for your next lesson.”

“What will that be?”

He looked around the apartment and then back at me. “How to act like a master vampire.”

“Why?”

“This is your territory now. You must cement it. This—abode, is not appropriate.”

I thought he was going to teach me to do vampire-y things. How was apartment décor a vampire problem? I mean, certainly the place was a bit drab, and I didn’t have a proper bed, and the shower didn’t actually work and... All right, I could sort of see his point.

“Very well.”

“Good.” He smiled at me and then did something most unexpected. He touched his open right hand to his lips and then brought it down to cover his left hand, which faced palm down and was also open. *Goodnight.*

I couldn’t help my smile as I returned the gesture.

Goodnight.

CHAPTER SIX

Donal

I could still remember the kiss from the night previous. He'd been so vulnerable, so... perfect. I bet he was the lad all the girls chased when he was human. Now I was chasing him and he seemed more than ready to be caught. I just—couldn't bring myself to do that. The kiss was a mistake, but one I wanted to repeat over and over again. That would be taking advantage of him. He was still fragile. He'd been alone so long, any attention was sure to make him happy.

It wasn't right to push myself on him.

Even if he was the most attractive person I'd ever seen.

I went to work that day in hopes that it would distract me from thinking about Cillian, and that I would be seeing him again that night. Jenna was waiting for me as soon as I got in the door and pressed a cup of coffee on me, which was a bad sign.

“Who's here?” I asked, taking a sip.

“Detective Griffin,” she replied.

I took a bigger drink from the coffee. I was going to need it. It would be more useful Irish, but I would take what I could get. Detective Kester Griffin was the most disgusting, loud-mouthed, irritating man I had met in three hundred years, and he knew it. That, and there was that short period of time when we dated.

That had been a capacious misstep on my part.

I finished off the coffee and handed the cup back to Jenna. “If I'm not out in ten minutes pull the fire alarm.”

She nodded, knowing I was serious. “I already have my gloves.”

She was such a good intern.

I walked into the exam room, tugging on a pair of gloves, and quietly looked over the man who had shared my bed, my life, my secrets for so long. Then he went and fucked it all up. I was better off without him, and I had been

content in Boston until he showed up last year all aflutter about getting the act back together. I'd responded by dropping him in the bay, tied to a safe.

Sirens don't die that easily.

Where Cillian was shades of soft warm marble and cerulean, Griffin was cold silver and green. His hair was short and fine, the color of a turbulent sea, and his eyes were the green of the Mediterranean. Like all fey I had known, he wore a glamour over himself, but the banshee cannot be fooled by such things. So I saw him as he really was, and even that was hiding something darker. Sirens were kissing cousins to banshee. Except where the banshee had a useful purpose, sirens only cared for fucking and feeding.

I might have a bias.

"Detective," I greeted coldly.

"Doctor." He flashed a smile at me and then immediately went grim, looking down at the Jane Doe I'd looked over yesterday. "So, exsanguination?"

"Cause of death, yes." I gave him a look. "You saw the report, what do you want?"

"This was a sport kill."

"I'm aware."

"Has it been dealt with?" He raised his nearly invisible eyebrows.

"Of course. I do my job."

He grimaced. "I had to know. Is there an identification on our Jane Doe?"

"Not yet. Her soul had passed on. We must wait for conventional methods. That is your department, I believe. I have submitted all of my findings."

He looked at me. "You look different. Are you seeing someone?"

"That's none of your business."

"That's what you say when you are seeing someone."

I really didn't think what was going on between Cillian and I counted as *seeing* someone. I was seeing him, I enjoyed being with him, and I definitely wanted to do all sorts of things to him he'd never even heard of—but I

wouldn't, because that would be wrong. Even if I couldn't stop thinking about him in that damn changing room.

"Now you're thinking about him, aren't you?" He grinned. "You are. I can tell."

"None of your business. You lost the right to question me when you screwed that Gancanagh."

"You just won't let that go."

"Never." I snapped off my gloves. "Now, excuse me, I have patients."

"Dead people aren't really a high priority, Doc."

"Higher priority than you are." The only reason the bastard was still alive was because he was immune to the keening, otherwise I would have sung him into a watery grave. No such luck, sirens and banshees were too closely related for their powers to work on each other. He couldn't even use the excuse of the Gancanagh's touch leading him astray, either, as he was immune to that as well. I bet he wouldn't be immune to a spear through the heart, but I'd mellowed somewhat in the fifty years we'd been apart.

I came back out to the foyer where Jenna was waiting. "I need some condo research, do you think you could find three or four places with open condos?"

"Certainly, Dr. O'Neil. What areas?"

"Oh... Beacon Hill and the Back Bay. I have a wealthy young friend moving into Boston. He needs a place, but he's absolutely hopeless."

Jenna nodded, "I'll take care of it."

"Thank you." After all, if you didn't give an intern one or two frivolous tasks while in your employ, they'd have nothing to complain to their friends about. Choosing the wealthiest portions of Boston as the new home base for my little vampire was a tactical decision. I thought perhaps I could set him up as the center of vampire power in Boston. The Families would be making their move soon, after centuries of indecision, and I wasn't keen on them settling in Boston.

I liked O'Brien well enough, and Cillian was ten shades of gorgeous, but I preferred to keep gaggles of vampires out of my city. To do that, there had to be a powerful vampire established in Boston. Cillian could be that vampire. He

just needed a confidence boost and a handle on his power. Well, and money. It always took money. I had money, but it would look like the fey were dabbling in vampire politics if I provided the money for him, and that was risky.

I was still waiting to hear from some contacts in the Families. If what O'Brien had said was true, that Ignacio had cared something for Cillian, perhaps there was money there. Vampires seemed to have no other way of showing affection.

I bet Cillian has ways of showing affection.

I should have taken a cold shower this morning. A very, very cold shower.

In the midst of wrapping up my work day I got an alert on my phone for an international phone call. I ducked into a nearby supply room and locked the door behind me before answering.

“O’Neil.”

In a soft, old-French accent that was all southern France, a man spoke. A country accent that was polished up over the years with touches of Spain. I knew that voice.

“Good afternoon, Donal,” Argent said. James Argent, of the Paris Family. He was an unusual specimen in that he was one of only a few vampires I trusted. I had known him when he was still human. He’d made the change willingly, long ago, to defend his country. It was something I could respect. He also made wonderful croissants.

“James, do you have some information for me?” James was the financial expert for his Family. He had contacts all over the world and an investment portfolio that put some countries to shame. If anyone could find money in Cillian’s name, no matter where it was buried, it was James Argent.

“I do indeed. Ignacio built a trust for his child in 1523 with the Swiss. It so happens he handed the funds to me last century when Elena started sniffing around. The bitch was trying very hard to make sure the boy never got a dime.”

“I’ve heard.”

“Well, I did my magic and scattered those funds so thoroughly only I would ever find them.” James sound proud of himself, and I couldn’t blame him.

“How much money are we talking about here, James?” He told me and I nearly choked. “So, what exactly did this boy do to make Ignacio love him so much?”

James laughed. “I have no idea, and I doubt the boy does either. I’ve heard stories about him. You know he killed three masters? Elena sent them to kill him. She stopped after he killed Santiago.”

“Santiago the Red?”

“That’s the one.”

“I don’t think Cillian knows he killed someone famous. He still thinks the number of vampires is more important than how old they are.”

“Oh dear. I just picked up a little bat of my own. Poor dear was all alone in the Everglades. Your bat might be more trouble though.”

“Do you have advice?”

“Well, Edmund is relatively easy, but if even half of what I’ve heard about Cillian is true, you’ll want to keep him on a short leash. Lonely vampires are like wild dogs.”

“He eats squirrels, is that normal?”

There was a long pause. “Is that the only thing he’s been feeding on?”

“I’m not sure.”

“Squirrels always make me jumpy. Get him on a better diet, and make sure he’s up on modern technology. Get him checked for rabies... you know, the usual.”

“I don’t think he can get rabies.”

“You never know.” James was teasing.

“Thank you so much, James. I should go. Can you arrange those accounts for access? Cillian needs a new abode.”

“I can take care of that. I’ll text you the information. Good luck.”

“Thank you.”

James hung up. Could Cillian get rabies? Or plague? Squirrels carried the plague. Perhaps I ought to check him over, carefully... I shook my head. That train of thought was dangerous. Even if I did want to examine every inch of his skin, and possibly lick it. I was also having a bit of a fantasy about washing him in a big clawfoot tub full of bubbles. Rubbing bath oils over those shoulders...

I shook myself again. Time to pick up Cillian and force him to buy a condo.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Cillian

I woke up snarling at the person who had dared enter my room. It was Donal, and I wasn't sure how he got in.

“Cillian, there's an outfit in your bathroom. Take a shower and put it on. Then you and I are going to buy a condo with the obscenely large amount of money your maker set aside for you to spite that bitch, Elena.”

“What?”

“Hurry up now, we have things to do.”

He walked out of the room and I was left incredibly confused and slightly aroused at how bossy he was. Or it could have just been typical evening wood. I blinked my eyes into awareness and climbed out of the bed and stumbled into the bathroom. There was a garment bag hanging from the shower rod. I took it down, turned on the water and stripped.

Did he tell me I was buying a condo? And there was something about money in there as well. Was I wealthy? I concentrated on easy things. I showered, dried, and then opened the garment bag. It was a suit. There was a tie. I didn't know how to tie a tie.

I put on the clothes I knew how to put on and went out to the kitchen. There were things—missing. “Where are my things?”

“Boxed. As I said, you're buying condo. Tonight.”

“Can you do that?”

“With the sort of money you have, yes. Also, you're a vampire. Hypnotize the realtor.”

“Okay.”

He stepped forward and helped me with the tie. “Shoes are in that box.” He pointed out a black and silver box on the kitchen table. “We'll get you a bite to eat first.”

“I shouldn't chase squirrels in this suit.”

“You won’t be chasing squirrels, Cillian.”

I raised my eyebrows. “Eh?”

“Human blood, Cillian. No more squirrel.”

“But it’s...” I hand spelled zesty, but I wasn’t sure he would understand.

“Text it to me.”

My phone was also on the table. I picked it up and carefully typed the word and hit send.

He looked down at his phone and then looked up at me. “Zesty? Really?”

I shrugged.

He pointed to the box on the table and made the sign for shoes. “Hurry along.”

I sighed and put on the shoes. They were leather, and shiny. Very shiny. As soon as the shoes were on my feet Donal had me out the door. I had a terrible feeling I was never going to see my apartment again, and if he had anything to do with it, I wasn’t going to be getting any squirrels for dinner.

That just seemed monumentally unfair. I didn’t think any person should discount squirrel until they’d tried it at least once. Looking at the immaculately dressed Donal, who had shown up this evening in a dark gray three-piece suit, his white shirt pressed and his vibrant gold tie done in a complex bit of knot work, I somehow doubted I could convince him to chase squirrels. The suit I was wearing was of similar caliber, though black, including the shirt, and the tie was blue. The shirt was silky soft against my skin, a delightful feeling, but I disliked the noose quality of the tie.

And the shoes were the sort that would squeak, I was sure of it.

I was hustled out of the building and down to a waiting Town Car. A black and silver monstrosity of Art Nouveau influence. Donal opened the back door for me, and a glimpse at the front told me there was a driver. I pulled out my phone and sent a quick message.

What’s with all of this?

Donal slid into the seat next to me and shut the door before looking at his phone and then answering, “I said before. You are a master vampire, Cillian. You need to act like one. At least in public.”

“Why?”

Donal was considering something, I could tell, and took his time before responding. “The Families are finally making a move on the Americas. If there is no established master in Boston a Family will settle here. I don’t want that, you don’t want that. Besides, I’d like to be able to keep an eye on you. Make sure you’re safe. This is much safer than you wandering the city at night.”

The idea of a Family coming to Boston did terrify me, so if this was going to prevent that, I was all for it. But what sort of danger could I be in? I’d killed Damien, the Blades weren’t going to try to take vengeance just yet. What danger was I in?

Other than the danger I was typically in, that is.

That was a lot for me to try and say, so I texted him instead.

What kind of danger?

He looked at me very seriously. “I talked to some friends of mine. Ignacio was murdered, Cillian. He wasn’t the first master, either, and he wasn’t the last. Another was found last night. I got the news an hour ago. There’s no pattern to these deaths. Anyone could be next. I’ll see you safe.”

Ignacio was murdered? *You said he left me money*, I texted.

“Yes. Right under Elena’s nose. She was the one trying to kill you, Cillian.”

I felt very strange. Ignacio had... cared? Now he was dead. I wasn’t sure what I was supposed to feel. The only good memories of Ignacio were just before he sunk his fangs into my throat. He’d been so vibrant. A sunnily-disposed man with long dark curls and large eyes. He’d been small, but it had been the mistake of anyone to assume he was weak. We’d spent three days together while I was off ship. I only saw him at night.

On the third night he’d said he didn’t want to live without me.

Easy to see where that got us.

“Are you all right?”

I don’t know. I touched the tips of my fingers to my forehead and swept the hand away like a flimsy salute.

Donal put a hand on my shoulder. “I won’t let anything happen to you.”

I looked him in the eyes. The strange bronze color was as captivating as ever. Tonight I could see flashes of green like patina. We were so close together. I couldn’t help but think of the kiss in the dressing room. I wanted to close the distance between us, press my lips against his and show him what I could do when I wasn’t dumbstruck.

He pulled away. “You need to eat.”

I clenched my teeth, a touch frustrated, and nodded. I was feeling the familiar tug of bloodlust in the pit of my stomach. I hadn’t eaten anything substantive since the boy in the night club. A sip of blood here and there, sure, but I’d been caught up in the whirlwind that was Donal. He was—a force of nature.

The car stopped and parked. Donal poked his head outside and then turned to me. “There are some clubs around here. Go grab a bite.”

I flashed a smile. He’d brought me to the South End, Washington Street. There were only a couple clubs here, but I had a feeling we were passing through on the way to another neighborhood from my apartment in Dorchester. South End was a place full of brick row houses and artists. Well, for now. I’d seen fewer over the past couple years. Prices must be on the rise. Not something I usually paid much attention to. I focused myself on a jazz club. There were people loitering outside the brick building’s bright red door.

I walked slowly past them, catching the eye of a young man smoking. His eyes met mine and I watched in some amusement as the cigarette slipped from his fingers. He stamped on it quickly and made some excuse to the person next to him before following me. I had never considered my hypnotic gaze all that special, but when I thought about it, I’d never seen another vampire do what I did. They all spoke to their victims, or gestured. It only ever took a look to bring them under my thrall.

I took the vibrant youth into the nearest alley and drank. I left him weak-kneed but standing, walking back to the car feeling sated and alive. Two human feeds in less than a week, I hadn’t done that in decades. I’d forgotten how much I’d missed the taste.

Donal watched me climb into the car. “You have blood on your lips.” He reached over and ran his thumb over my lips, coming away with a small smear of blood which he brought to his own lips and licked off. “Good vintage.”

The car started to move and I settled into the seat, every bit of me tingling with the desire to kiss him. It wasn't vampires alone who tasted the blood of man, I sometimes forgot. Banshees and other fey were known to partake on occasion. The man could not possibly get any more attractive to me, or so I thought. I wanted him. I hadn't wanted anyone quite as much as I wanted him. He was dangerous and authoritative. He smelled of Ireland. He reminded me that there was humanity in me. Reminded me that I was worth something, no matter what the Families might think.

He didn't think I was a freak.

“Where now?”

“There's a condo at Back Bay I found that should suit your needs.”

I blinked, taken out of my lust for a moment. “Back Bay? But it's...”

“Expensive? I know. Don't worry. Ignacio left you enough to finance a small country.”

I wasn't sure I could wrap my head around that much money.

“Don't worry, someone very able is looking after it.”

That wasn't my worry at all. I was worried I had gone from hole to palace overnight, and that I was way over my head. I was over my head, but that was a typical situation for me. There was the impossibly attractive Donal, the money, my supposed amazing powers, Ignacio, Damien... it was a lot to process.

At least I wasn't processing on an empty stomach.

The condos Donal brought me to were of recent construction, the steel and glass at odds with the brick of Boston. I raised my eyebrows as I looked the place over, and then spotted something possibly more jarring.

A glyph.

The symbol in question, a circle with three lines, meant the building was constructed with vampires in mind. I hadn't seen such a thing since I was in

New York in 1704. The place had burned down, and there hadn't been a vampire construction in sight since. It meant what Donal had said was true, the Families were expressing vested interest in Boston. I couldn't let that happen. I liked this city, and I wasn't going to be shoved out by bigoted bastards.

I'd spent my whole life being pushed around. I was a master vampire. No more.

“Show me the place.”

Donal walked me inside where a woman in a pantsuit was waiting for us. She smiled, a slightly off-her-prime—though more due to the horrifying false tan than to age—blonde with expensive jewelry. “Sandy Stokes, you must be Mr. Molloy. Your assistant told me you were looking for a penthouse, and by luck we do have one that just finished construction.”

I couldn't help but take a close look at the woman's wrist, just exposed by the edge of her sleeve. A glyph was there as well. I recognized it as the Bourbon Family. They ran Paris under the guidance of a fallen king of France. I hadn't had much contact with them, negative or otherwise.

I nodded to Donal for the woman's benefit.

“Do lead on, Ms. Stokes,” Donal said. She smiled and led us to a bank of wood-paneled elevators flanked by marble-topped tables, home to vases of elaborate orchid arrangements. The smell was very strong.

We boarded the central elevator and rode all the way to the top floor, thirty stories up. The elevator itself was a study in taste. The back wall displayed a tasteful painting of a floral arrangement, Italian in origin and a good couple hundred years old. The walls were oak, and there was a bench on both sides, upholstered in red leather. The floor was coffee-colored marble. It took perhaps a minute to reach the top, which I noted Ms. Stokes had had to use a special key to access. Not a keycard, either. A big brass key with three flanges of complex design.

The doors opened onto a small foyer, decorated with Parisian influence in white and blue. There were two small, well-hidden cameras in the foyer with a fixed view on the double doors and the elevator doors. Interesting. Using another complex key, Ms. Stokes opened the doors for us and gestured us inside.

I took hold of the door and swung it slightly. Steel reinforcement and oak.

Past these doors was a short hall and another set of doors. These took yet another key, and at last we were granted entry to the living area. I took a moment in the hallway to touch the walls. They were thinner than they should be, I could tell by knocking and feeling the vibrations. There was space behind them. *It's a killing gallery.* Very clever.

The first part of the living area was a sitting room. The entire place, it seemed, was furnished and the décor was decidedly English, with an “old country estate meets modern convenience” sort of feel. There were paintings of hunters on horseback, fairly good examples, and a few still lifes of hunt trophies. I wasn't sure what I thought of it.

Donal tapped my shoulder.

Ah, Ms. Stokes had been speaking.

“As you can see, the front room is a wonderful space for guests, and just through there we have the kitchen. Beyond is the dining room, there's an office just there, and this space has three bedrooms and three baths.” She stepped up to a heavy walnut bookcase that spanned half the side wall of the sitting room. With a practiced motion, she pulled on a brass handle and slid the bookcase to the side. It slid down until it just came into contact with the other wall, revealing the aforementioned kitchen.

I peered through the brick and steel kitchen to the walnut paneled dining room. There were more English still lifes in there, plus brass chandeliers and a deer head mounted at the head of the room.

I wrinkled my nose and looked at Donal. I pulled out my phone. *This place is creepy*, I texted.

“A bit,” he returned. “Ms. Stokes. I'm afraid the décor is less than inviting.”

Ms. Stokes froze and turned to Donal, “Oh, well, it can be redecorated.”

I wouldn't stay here if you threatened me with evisceration, I texted.

Donal read my message and shook his head. “We need something move-in ready, Ms. Stokes.”

She looked slightly panicked, but covered it quickly. “Well, there is one other that could suit your needs. Follow me.”

We followed her back to the elevator. She pulled out another strange key and pressed the buttons for the eight, eleventh and twenty-fifth floors. A small niche opened just to the side of the button panel. Ms. Stokes inserted the key and pressed the button for the thirtieth floor three times.

The elevator doors closed and it went up, again.

“I thought that was the penthouse,” Donal said.

Ms. Stokes turned around. “It is, this is—a ghost floor.” She looked at me. “The price is nearly double.”

Donal shook his head. “Money is no object.”

I wished I could seem so confident. I wished I knew what he sounded like. I bet his voice was deep and smooth, like fine whiskey. His kiss had certainly reminded me of that flavor.

The ghost floor was similar to the previous, except for the added security. There were two more sets of doors on this floor, and a winding hall that could confuse the unwary. This place had been designed for a siege. Vampires tended towards the paranoid, after all. I was pretty positive proof of that.

The main living area was brighter than the previous place. The walls were painted in the colors of the ocean, ranging from the gray of the night sea to the green blue of the Mediterranean. The floor plan was relatively open, with wide open doorways that flowed from one room into the next. It was furnished in leather, as the previous condo, but the colors here were old silver and butter, the floors were dark honey-toned wood, and handblown glass balls caught in cast iron cages hung from the ceiling as light fixtures.

There was a reproduction of the painting I so often visited hanging in between the sitting room and a hall to the first of three baths. I thought it was an omen. In spite of the violence in that painting, the terror and the tragedy of what it represented, I always felt a kinship with it. I wandered through the rest of the space, ignoring Ms. Stokes. There were four bedrooms, all of which were furnished in the same oceanic theme as the rest of the home. The bathrooms were blue tile and white porcelain. The master bathroom had a

walk-in shower the size of my old apartment, with a waterfall in it. I had never been in someplace so... expensive.

Donal cornered me in the master bedroom, a room dedicated to the work of Ivan Aivazovsky, arguably one of the greatest maritime painters of the nineteenth century. Some were copies, but the breathtaking nightscape of a ship sailing towards the moon high over the horizon, that was the original. I raised my eyebrows and approached it, taking a closer look. I had seen this painting once before in person, and I was certain it was the same surface I had looked upon then.

I felt my phone vibrate in my pocket and picked it up.

Do you like it? – Donal

I turned to him and nodded.

He smiled. “I’ll take care of it.”

I looked back at the painting and then to the one across from it. A painting my old favorite, Mr. Turner, had appreciated as well. He’d written poetry about it:

Reflected in the sea below...

Your picture has entranced me so

Turner was right about Aivazovsky. Donal was right about me. I had let others determine what I thought about myself for centuries. I had let myself be browbeaten into a dark hole in the wall. That wasn’t me. I was Cillian Doone, son of Pdraig. I had been a sailor and a soldier. I had been shipwrecked and near-drowned. I had fought. I wasn’t just some defect. I was Irish. I was proud of who I was.

Boston was my city, and no Family was going to take it away from me.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Donal

Cillian was very quiet as we went over the paperwork and took care of the money transfers. I called for the moving company to bring up the things that had been salvageable from his previous abode, and took all of the keys and codes from Ms. Stokes. She seemed to find Cillian unnerving. I suppose he could be. He hadn't spoken more than two words the entire time she'd been around. I was certain he had seen the glyph on her wrist.

I left Cillian alone to let Ms. Stokes out and then walked the security installations, checking the camera feeds in the display room and then changing all of the codes. It wasn't that I didn't trust Ms. Stokes, but she was human and already aligned to a Family. Certainly it was a family with more cosmopolitan leanings, but I wasn't going to risk Cillian's safety. I put in a call to a security service—fey run—to see about prices, and went back to see how Cillian fared. It took me a moment to find him.

He was in the master bathroom, stark naked, sitting on the long stone bench in the shower with his eyes closed.

Seeing him that way, he didn't look nearly as vulnerable as he had in the changing room. He looked different, less conflicted. Killing Damien had done something for him. It was the first time he had killed for territory. The other vampires in his long line of kills had been for self-preservation. This was different. There was a feeling one got after protecting their land.

His eyes were still closed as he stood up, and I got a good look at him. I'd gotten a good look before, but this—I felt my heart start to race. The muscles of his back bunched, and I could see a wicked scar, splayed like a spider's web across his left shoulder. It was paler than his skin and raised over the rest of his flesh. He turned, and I saw a small circular scar which must have been the start of the injury. If I'd had to guess, a boat hook or a harpoon had gone through his shoulder. It wasn't the only scar, but it was the worst.

He opened his eyes and looked at me. He turned off the water and grabbed a towel. This place had been stocked the moment it was complete. Vampires

aren't big on shopping for home necessities. Cillian dried his hair and then wrapped the towel around his middle before walking out of the shower and toward me.

He made the sign for *thank you*.

“For what?”

He stopped just out of reach. “Everything.” He shook his head and closed the distance between us, snaked a hand around my head and kissed me. I felt it was some sort of retaliation for my kissing him in the dressing room, but he was still the only one naked. I felt my knees quake again and he pulled away and smiled.

“Thank you.”

I nodded. “I should—check on the movers.”

He nodded back, a flash of disappointment in his eyes as he turned away from me.

I was not going to take advantage. The kiss had been a mistake. I couldn't... I wouldn't.

I left Cillian in the capable hands of the best digital security money could buy, and a pair of pookas I trusted. Pookas didn't lie, and they were fine mercenaries. Some of them even still took payment in food. The O'Hannagain brothers preferred cash, which bothered me little. They would keep Cillian safe as he adjusted. Tomorrow night, I would start teaching him the most important of mastery gifts: flight.

Some masters could raise fog and create fire or ice. Even the youngest of vampires could change shape, something it seemed Cillian had no knowledge of.

Bats were common favorites, but I'd known some vampires to take the form of wolves.

Werewolves were another matter entirely. They tended to live in communes growing their own vegetables, hunting and wearing very little clothing. Most people thought they were nudists, and that was for the best.

Werewolves were more territorial than vampires. Luckily, the two species tended to prefer very different landscapes. I think that's where the rumors about werewolves and vampires being at war with one another came from, though it was total bullshit.

Now, fey had gone to war with the vampires, a long time ago. That was over now, for the best. The Families had fought one another for centuries before things came to a head at the Inquisition. The treaties came after that, and poor Cillian got caught in the middle of it. The Cortez Family had been far too powerful to risk alienating, and he'd been left out in the cold.

Once you slipped through the cracks, that's where you stayed.

I'd been born into my life, had family to support me through acquiring my power, training as a warrior. I suppose that was part of the reason I felt so drawn to Cillian. I could not help but try to give him what I'd had. I was a sucker for lost souls. It was a banshee thing, I think. My sister was the same way, she ran a foster home for at-risk youth in Bristol these days. Banshees weren't big on high profile. I preferred the shadows. I did my job, I didn't need special recognition.

That was the other problem I'd had with Griffin. Sirens always wanted attention. They couldn't live without adulation. I couldn't live up to his ego, so it was no real surprise he'd cheated, but still, I'd loved him enough to think he could change. I was too much of an optimist. I hoped I wasn't being too optimistic when it came to Cillian. I hoped it wasn't just lust.

He makes me nervous, he makes me want him, he makes me... feel young.

It was terribly hard to feel young when you were as old as I was.

“Donal, what brings you to such a trendy restaurant?”

I looked up at Kes, groaning internally. The smug siren was smiling at me like he was Lugh's gift to all mankind. I had chosen this place because it was still open, and close to my apartment.

The food wasn't bad, either. “Go away, Kes.”

“You are out *very* late for someone that has to get up so early.” He sat down at my table.

“I did not invite you to sit down.”

“Oh, am I being naughty? There was a time when you liked it when I was bad.” He smiled again, flashing his teeth. His secondary set of teeth, like sharks’ teeth, were just visible. He was feeling amorous. There’d been a time when I’d found that attractive. Sirens could tear a man to pieces.

They fed on man, fish, crabs, man. Kes was very fond of men.

I fingered my fork and considered stabbing him in the eye.

“You seem tense, Donal. What have you been up to?”

I remained silent.

“Come on, we could have fun. Just like old times.”

I released the fork and stood up. “Goodbye, Detective Griffin.”

He didn’t follow me as I walked out of the restaurant. Good thing, or I would I have stabbed him. My restraint only went so far.

Three weeks later and I was still seeing Cillian every night. He’d come a long way from the ill-dressed, half-feral vampire I’d met on the beach. I’d nearly broken him of his squirrel obsession and he’d finally managed to fly—sort of. What he had managed was a more definite command of his hypnosis, caught his bodyguard on fire—twice—and mastered changing shape. I would have been happier if he’d managed something like a wolf, or a bat, something traditional and in keeping with his new position.

I had to admit he was an adorable squirrel, though.

Tonight we were celebrating his accomplishments by going out and being seen. Cillian wasn’t ever going to be a lover of the spotlight, but at least he was getting used to the idea that running the city meant buying his way into charitable organizations. He’d chosen the Museum of Fine Art. It was the one place in the city he knew like the back of his hand.

During our time together I’d managed to keep my hands off him. There’d been a few kisses, but I wasn’t going to let things go further. I refused to take advantage of him. I was twice his age, after all. And if I kept telling myself that was the reason we couldn’t be together, I might even start to believe it.

Next we had to find him some solid vampiric liaisons. James wanted to meet him, but I wasn’t sure Cillian was ready for that. The remnants of the

Blades were still alive and leaderless, listless really. Recruiting them to the family would be a wise move. I just had to nudge Cillian in the right direction.

True to his word, he'd taught me a great deal of sign language as he learned to be a proper vampire. I was competent, if not quick, so we no longer had to text half our conversations when he became unintelligible. I wasn't sure there was any way to help him speak more clearly. His accent was too ingrained.

I made it to the condo at seven thirty to escort him to a benefit at the museum. I didn't even have to pick out his clothes for him anymore. I think he'd been reading GQ and watching Cary Grant movies, it was the only thing that explained the swagger he had whenever we went out in public. Not that I was complaining. I liked seeing him so collected.

He was in the living room when I arrived, fussing with his sapphire and platinum cufflinks and looking—amazing. He wore a tuxedo for the event, and it fit him so well it looked like he'd been poured into it.

I waited for him to notice me, watching him as he bit down on his lip, concentrating on straightening out his bowtie after he finished with the cufflinks. He looked up and spotted me. Cillian smiled and his eyes warmed.

“Ready?”

He made the door knocking sign for *yes* and joined me on my end of the living room. *How do I look?* He signed.

“Marvelous.”

His smile widened. *Let's go.*

“After you.”

Soon enough, he wouldn't need me anymore.

The museum was an artifact of Greek influence on the American culture. Broad steps led up to a classic column-fronted face and the doors to the museum proper. They'd rolled out carpets, and there were valets and serving staff all about as we were ushered inside after handing over our tickets.

Cillian kept his eyes open, his gaze never settling on any one person as he assessed the danger. He always did that in crowded places, not that I could

blame him. One had to make concessions for his paranoia, given his disadvantage. Not that it was much of one. The more I got to know him, the better he gauged when I was nearby. He'd gotten my scent, he'd said. It only took a bit and he would know approximately how far away from him I was.

The vibrations of steps on the floor were usually enough to alert him if his olfactory sense was preoccupied, and past that, every vampire had a keen sense of their own personal space. If someone intruded, he knew. I still managed to surprise him. After all, I was fey.

I stayed within arm's reach of him. There was a part of me that wished I could take his hand in mine and never let go, but I was doing my best to ignore it as well as the way his looks still made me as nervous as a school girl about to lose her virginity in the back of the bus. His growing confidence in himself was only making me more nervous.

Cillian picked up a glass of champagne from one of the servers the moment one passed him by. I don't know that he liked champagne, but if something had bubbles in it, Cillian would drink it. He tried to carbonate some of his emergency blood supply. It did not work out as planned.

The cleaning staff had not been happy about that disaster. Heaven forbid a forensic team ever go over his kitchen and try to figure out how a mist of blood ended up all the way up on the cathedral ceiling.

I kept a close eye on Cillian, picked up my own glass of champagne and took a sip. I wasn't a fan myself. I preferred my alcohol sans carbonation, amber in color and over two balls of ice. I do not like cubed ice, it's too—pointy.

Cillian paused and looked at me. *How long do we stay?*

I shrugged. "Two hours?"

One?

I gave him a look and he sighed and made the sign for *okay*. He was adorable when he didn't get his way. That did not at all put a damper on my less than pure intentions. His eyes might have been what first set my heart racing, but there was so much more than that. He filled out that suit in ways that could make a nun rethink vows of chastity. He set my brain firmly in the

gutter with a wide variety of scenarios playing out. I'd been around a long time, I had seen a lot of things and done just about everything you could think of.

I wouldn't mind trying every single one of those things with Cillian. I wanted to make love to him, show him someone could care for him, could... understand him. I also wanted ravage him, dig my nails into his skin and hear him cry out in pleasure—and pain.

I wanted too much.

When I pulled my focus back to the matter at hand, Cillian had wandered off. Of course he had. I knew where he would go, however. His favorite painting was in the European Gallery, a Turner. There was a copy in his home as well, but he preferred the real thing. I'm surprised he had never stolen it.

I found him where I expected, staring at the tragic scene in the painting, the champagne glass touched to his lips. He was speaking to himself, silently.

“Watching him awfully hard, aren't you, Donal?”

I peered over at Detective Griffin and clenched my hand around my champagne glass. I was suppressing the urge to break it over his head. Not that it would do much damage, but after it was broken I could stab him in the throat. He looked good tonight, I had to admit, in his dress uniform. I suppose the police presence was required for some of the loaned pieces on display for just this night.

“If I am?”

“Could it be that's what's been keeping you up at night?” He raised his eyebrows. “Are you robbing the cradle, Donal? He looks awfully young.” Kes looked to Cillian and licked his lips. “I could eat him right up.”

“Don't bite off more than you can chew, Detective.”

“So cold. I'll go see if he's any warmer.”

I wasn't concerned. Cillian wasn't going to melt for Kes. Especially given that Kes' typical method operandus was to use his power to seduce and ensnare. This was going to be hilarious.

CHAPTER NINE

Cillian

I had abandoned Donal, but he had followed me. I could smell him lurking nearby. I could smell something else, too, something that smelled of death and the sea. Salt and seaweed overlain with spicy aftershave. Not pleasant. I wrinkled my nose and turned around to see if I could locate the source of the odor. Donal was standing not far away, sipping at his glass with an amused sort of expression on his face as a man in a fancy police uniform approached me.

The look on his face was predatory.

“Hello, Detective Kester Griffin, enjoying the evening?”

He was not human, this detective. I could see past the glamour he had over his features. He appeared normal enough to the mundane people around us, but I could see the aquatic tint to his skin and the darkness lurking behind those green eyes. *Siren*.

The siren smiled at me. I could see the muscles of his throat working. He could be trying to sing me into a trance, but that wasn't going to work. I glanced at Donal. He was smiling and I had no doubt he knew the siren and knew exactly what the devil was up to.

I nodded.

“I know a quiet little place not far from here, we could get a drink. I bet you like Bloody Marys, eh?”

He knew what I was. I suppose he was used to being able to seduce whatever, whoever, he set his eyes on. I raised my eyebrows and quirked a smile. Thinking he was getting somewhere, he put a hand on my arm.

“Shall we go?”

I smiled wider and dumped my champagne down his front. “Go to hell.”

Donal approached then, laughing. “Sorry, Kes, but that won't work on Cillian.”

The siren looked at Donal. “What?”

“Cillian is immune to your song, Kester.” Donal shook his head. “You should leave.”

“I don’t have to do anything.” He looked at me and snarled. I looked into his eyes and concentrated on what I wanted him to do. *Leave. Go away. Be gone.* It took a moment, but then I saw the familiar dilation of eyes and they became glazed. He blinked very slowly and then walked away without looking back.

Donal’s face spoke of disbelief. He looked at me. “That was amazing.”

Thank you, I signed.

“I—you are really—” He shook his head. “Come on, let’s get out of here. Let’s play a game of chess. How about it?”

I considered that. Donal played chess very well, better than me. It would be challenge. “Yes.”

“All right.” He held out his arm.

I shook my head and then took it, looping my own through his. I wanted more than a game of chess, but Donal didn’t seem to want to push our relationship further. I didn’t understand it, but I had never been one to instigate. I was in unfamiliar waters here. I wanted him, I thought he might even want me, but I wasn’t sure how to progress from there. I had never had a “boyfriend”, really. I had never really been in love. I had liked Ignacio, cared for him, but I wasn’t in love with him.

Donal was different.

I wanted him in ways I had never wanted anyone before. Sure, there was lust, but there was something else, too, and that was what had me at a pause. What kept me from acting on my lust. I wanted so much more than just sex. Too bad I had no idea how to get it.

Donal had left for the morning, and I was tucking myself into bed after a cold shower. My banshee had beaten me at chess, and the entire exchange had left me more than a little hot and bothered. My bodyguards had locked everything down and bid me good morning. The pookas were an attractive

pair, but I couldn't bring myself to make a move in their direction. I didn't want them like I wanted Donal.

I grabbed one of the many soft pillows on my bed and crushed it to my chest. I wanted Donal to hold me. I wanted him to stay with me while I slept. I would have to make do with the pillow. My winter break was over tomorrow, but I wasn't certain if I was going to continue. It seemed pointless when I had so much more to learn about my own power, let alone conflict resolution.

I felt something shift at the end of my bed. I hadn't moved. I rolled over and peered at the end of the bed. There was nothing there. I swore I felt something... I took a deep breath through my nose, scenting the air. There was nothing out of ordinary. Except. A strange chill tingled through the muscles of my back and legs, crept up my neck and over my scalp.

Something was wrong. I threw off the covers and sat up, looking all around the room, but there was nothing there. I felt like a child jumping at the wind but—I could not shake the feeling that something was—

I was slammed down in the bed by an invisible weight. I tried to get up, but the strength of the creature surprised me. It was like an anvil on my chest. An anvil that weighed as much as a car. I thrashed my arms and legs. I screamed and prayed my bodyguards would hear me. I thrust one arm at the ephemeral attacker. I made contact with something. Something—fabric. I gripped the fabric in my hand and brought my knee up. It took a moment for me to get leverage, but as soon as I had it, I threw the thing off of me.

I saw the contact it made with the wall, it cracked. Before the thing could fall upon me again, I leapt off the bed and went for the closet. Donal had insisted I keep a stash of weapons in nearly every room of the house. I thought I was paranoid. I grabbed the closest weapon, a blade shorter than my forearm, and took a defensive stance against the nearest wall. I still couldn't see what had come at me.

I shouted again, keeping the blade in front of me and a close watch for any movement. The vibrations I could feel through the floor signaled the arrival of my bodyguards.

“What is it?” the elder brother, Aidan, asked.

I was about to explain when I was attacked again, thrown up against the wall. I felt it give slightly as my head cracked into it. I pushed off the wall as soon as I recovered and slashed out instinctively. I struck something—blood flew off the blade and splattered onto the floor and the wall.

Something fell against the nearby table, knocking over a plant. I still couldn't see it, but the pookas were quick to take action, shoving me behind them as they drew their own blades. I couldn't see well beyond my wall of protectors, but before long, they relaxed and the younger brother, Lucas, turned to me.

“It's gone.”

What's gone? I signed.

The elder brother shrugged. “Don't know, but I can't feel it anymore. It felt—like fear. The sensation is gone though. I have to call Donal.”

I nodded. *I'm going to clean up.*

“Lucas will stay with you until Donal says otherwise,” Aidan said.

Fine. I needed to go to sleep soon. I could feel the sun, and even in the safety of my home, its effect was beginning. The longer I stayed up, the more sluggish and temperamental I would become. My strength and my power would wane.

I went into the bathroom and checked myself. I had a couple bruises from impacting the wall, but otherwise there was nothing. I was turning away from the mirror, when something began to change about a section of skin on my chest. A bruise was blooming. It would have taken days to appear on a human being, but my healing was speeding the process up.

The bruise took on the clear shape of a large hand.

I looked at Lucas and pointed at the bruise.

He pursed his lips. “Well, proof we aren't crazy.” He took a snapshot with his phone. “Donal will want to see.”

I nodded.

What attacked me? Why? I couldn't help wonder if it had something to do with Ignacio and those other masters dropping dead. Had I made myself a

target? Well, I wasn't dead, so it hadn't succeeded. If it came at me again, I would kill it.

“Are you all right?” Donal demanded the moment he was in the doorway. I nodded.

The brothers were quick to chime in with affirmatives. I was sitting on the large plush couch in the main room when he arrived. I noted with interest he hadn't taken the time to put his hair back into a braid, and the soft strands fell in front of his face and down his shoulders in a cascade of cream against his tawny skin. He was wearing jeans and a button down shirt which he'd buttoned incorrectly, leaving it bunched midway up and uneven at the bottom.

“What was it?” he asked next.

“We aren't sure, sir,” Aidan said. “Didn't get a look at it.”

“It was invisible,” Lucas said. “But it had a fear miasma. Soon as the sensation was gone we put up sigils.”

Donal took a deep breath. “Fear... well, that narrows the field.” He looked at me. “You took a bite out of it?”

I pointed to the sword I'd set on the coffee table in front of the couch. There was still blood on the blade.

“Good. We have an advantage, then. Aidan, call Mr. O'Brien and tell him of the attack. Be vague. Word will spread faster than wildfire and maybe we'll find out what's going on. Lucas, put that blade in plastic wrap, we don't want to lose a drop.”

The brothers were quick to do as he asked, leaving me alone with him. Donal sat down next to me. “You're sure you're all right?”

Yes, I signed.

“All right. I'll stay with you. I—I don't want to risk that it will come back.”

I managed not to smile, that would ruin the moment. *Thank you.*

“You're most welcome. Now, back to bed. The sun is already up, you should not be.”

I don't want to be alone, I signed.

He smiled. "I'll call off work, don't worry. I won't let anything hurt you." He kissed my cheek. "To bed."

If only he meant that in the way I wanted. For now, though, I would take it.

I woke the next evening to find Donal was not there, but I could see steam from the adjoining bathroom. I stretched and climbed out of bed. We'd slept in the second bedroom to give the repairmen space to fix the damage in the master suite. This room was a touch smaller, but not by much.

I padded into the bathroom and caught a sight I'd been lusting after since we first met. Donal stood under the shower head scrubbing shampoo through his hair, giving me a wondrous view of him in the altogether. Along his back and shoulders, creeping over his shoulder to his chest, his golden skin was interrupted by thick blue bands of ink that swept into intricate knotwork tattoos the like of which I had never seen before. They were complex and delicate in some areas, bold and simple in others, but the pattern worked together as a unified whole.

There were some scars, fewer than I expected, but he was fey and they did heal much like vampires. The muscles of his back bunched as his arms worked. He was—too perfect. That was a fey trait as well, though. Nothing could ever be as beautiful. I wasn't sure I could live up to that, now that I'd seen him.

You are over-thinking this, he kissed you first. Very true. Great, now I was talking to myself in my head. Better than out loud, probably, especially given that I couldn't hear myself any more than I could hear anything else.

He rinsed the suds from his hair and turned enough so I could see his face. His lips were moving, but it wasn't words I knew. He was—singing. Even though I couldn't hear it, I could *feel* it. An overwhelming sadness. The sort of emotion a man feels when he loses someone. He sang the lament of the banshee, but why?

I continued to watch him, frozen by the melancholy of his silent song until he opened his eyes and stopped.

“Are you all right?” he asked.

I tapped my ear and then placed a hand over my heart. “What—I felt that.”

His brow furrowed. “You felt the song.”

I nodded.

“Forgive me, I mourned for the past. I did not think it would affect you.” He turned off the shower and stepped out, throwing a towel over his head to catch the water dripping off his hair. “I suppose some magics are greater than any disability.”

I did not know what to say to that. There had been the barest moment where the feeling had seemed to echo—like a memory, it had played through my mind. A song I had never heard before, but its notes were there in the recesses of my soul.

“I’m starved,” he said. “I’ll get dressed.”

What had just happened?

“Donal.”

He paused. “What is it?”

I was too afraid to say out loud what I was feeling. It was one of those moments when my throat felt frozen. So I held up my hand, with the two middle fingers close down to my palm and looked him in the eyes.

He swallowed, and I could see indecision written on his face. I turned away, unwilling to see pity there too.

Warm arms wrapped around me, still damp and smelling of spicy soap. He kissed my neck gently. He crushed me to his chest and I felt his warm breath next to my ear. He brought a hand up to my neck and slowly traced the letters. *I L Y*.

He turned me around in his arms and kissed me properly. He gripped my neck in one hand and placed the other at my back and pulled me close. He broke away for a moment and looked me in the eyes.

“I love you, Cillian.” He traced the contours of my cheek with his thumb, and smiled wistfully. “I’m too old for you.”

I shook my head. “I’m over five hundred years old, Donal. I know what I want.” I kissed him. “I love you.”

It was like the floodgates opened. He pulled me to him, pulling off the shirt I'd slept in to press more of his skin to mine. I liked the feeling. His skin was soft and smooth and warm. He was so warm. Donal was the sun in my dark world. He made me think of music for the first time in centuries. He made me feel things I had thought I forgot.

Oh, I loved him.

CHAPTER TEN

Donal

It was foolish, perhaps, but the moment I saw Cillian's hand form into that silent confession, everything else went away. I loved him, I couldn't stop myself from saying it aloud. I held him close to me, still just kissing, just touching—I wanted to get to know every inch of him.

Every inch.

I pulled him into the bedroom. I wanted this time to be gentle, memorable, but Cillian was a bit more demanding than I could have imagined. His hands were slightly cool, and his nails were sharp. His eyes practically glowed as he pressed kisses along my neck and shoulders.

“Slow down.” I held him back. “We have plenty of time.”

He panted slightly and shook his head. “Don't want to go slow.” He grabbed the back of my head and kissed me. He bit down on my bottom lip and sucked, drawing a bit of blood as we tumbled back into the bed.

I thought I understood. It must have been some time since he'd had someone he didn't have to be afraid he'd hurt in bed. Had someone that made him nervous. Made him bold. I liked seeing him this way, wild. I stripped the drawstring pants off of him and kissed the skin that had been under his waistband. His skin was so smooth. It was like kissing silk. Silk covering lean, firm muscles.

He tasted sweet. I kissed my way back up to his neck. I braced myself over him and smiled. Cillian raised his eyebrows at me and smiled. It wasn't his typical, nervous smile, but a predatory smile. The smile I knew he flashed to those he hunted. The smile he had never directed toward me.

It made my already hardening piece twitch.

I pressed myself to him and kissed him, returning the bite he'd given me earlier, nipping at his lower lip. He made small noises, his breath catching as I ran my hands over his chest, winding circles around his nipples before brushing over them, teasing. He gripped my back, his nails digging into my skin.

I grunted and went for the crook where his neck met his shoulder and kissed it gently before biting down. I liked a bit of blood now and again, just like any other banshee. Vampire blood was a delicacy to the fey. I drew only two beads of blood and licked them up. The blood made my heart race. Electricity brushed over my tongue as the blood rolled down my throat and warmed my stomach like good whiskey.

He was hard, and the velvet heat pressed against my stomach. Cillian growled and grabbed the back of my neck, and bit me back, just as carefully as I did. I growled back. He brought his knee up and rolled me onto my back, tossing his head as he took the upper hand. He flashed his fangs at me.

“I love you.” His accent was so thick.

I sat up, pulling him into my lap, legs straddling my torso. “This is how you say ‘I love you.’” I pulled him in and pressed my lips to his, and then slipped my tongue past his lips and slowly, carefully, made the shapes. “I love you.”

I kept making the shapes, running my hands down his strong back to rest on his very fine ass. I pulled back. “Now you say it.”

“I love you.”

I gave him a smack on the ass in encouragement.

He growled, but he was still smiling.

“Again,” I said.

“I love you.”

I belted him harder. “Again.”

“I love you.” He kissed me. “I love you.”

I couldn’t wait any longer. My blood was still dripping from the bite, his saliva doing its work. The warm beads of blood rolled down my chest and my back. I licked the palm of my hand, it being the only lubricant nearby, and gave myself a couple quick strokes before lifting him up.

“Are you ready?” I asked.

“When you are.”

I gave him a third slap and pulled him down onto me. He moaned and I saw pain flash across his face, the predator in him so very near the surface. Cillian smiled and began his own rocking rhythm. The kisses didn't stop, and neither did our exchange of love bites. I wanted to mark him as mine. I didn't want anyone else to have him. I think I knew that the moment I looked in his eyes.

Lady Morrigan, I am such a fool.

Cillian tried to make me breakfast, which was sweet, but I took over before things could go too wrong. I would have made enough for the brothers, but they'd ordered out, and besides, there was never really enough for a pair of pookas.

He settled for watching me, perched on a barstool and dressed casually in jeans and a zipped-up blue hoodie. He hadn't eaten yet, and a few of the bites I'd given him hadn't quite healed. I liked that. I'd always liked marking my lovers, but this was different. He was different. He was a contradiction. Predator and prey, damaged and exceptional. His powers of persuasion were so much greater than any vampire I'd ever seen.

His master powers were developing so quickly. More quickly than I ever could have hoped. Gods, he made me feel young and old and... mad.

My back was turned for a moment; something struck the back of my head. Something soft. I turned around and spotted a balled up piece of bread on the floor and looked at Cillian. I raised my eyebrows. "Are we feeling bold?"

He leaned on his elbows and grinned. It made him look like a Puck. He shrugged and balled up another little piece of bread, weighing it in his hand. He looked me dead in the eye and threw the ball at my head.

I let it hit me, watched it fall and then looked back at him. "Feeling playful?"

He made his "maybe" face, and tipped his head to one side.

I laughed. "Throw another one and I'll pull you over this counter and show you that those little smacks earlier were just love taps."

He balled up another piece of bread.

Later, much later, I was stretched out on the couch while Cillian watched the news and complained about the poor spelling on the closed captioning when my cell phone rang. I picked it up. “O’Neil.” A perk of being with someone who couldn’t hear, my phone conversation wouldn’t bother him.

“It’s O’Brien.”

“Tell me you know something.”

“I can tell you that when one of those masters died, one of their children was in the building. They said they were overwhelmed by fear.”

“That’s news.”

“Aye. Now, there’s something else you ought to know. The masters that have been killed, they’ve been of the same bloodline. The line of David.”

I looked at Cillian. “I see. Then someone is holding a grudge?”

Serious for once, “Could be. Could be someone from a rival bloodline. I’m not sure. You must be careful, Donal. The line of David bore very few progeny. I had no idea Ignacio was one of them.”

“All right. Thank you for the information.”

“No problem.”

O’Brien hung up and I put the phone down. The line of David was a vampire line of rather mystical origins. There were more legends around it than truth, which was typical of all vampire bloodlines, but the David line was even more clouded. The descendents were all supposed to be exceptional. Special, even among vampires.

Cillian was certainly special.

I tapped his leg and he looked at me. “Yes?”

“We need to start building your family.”

He raised his eyebrows. *Excuse me?*

“You know, vampires. Other vampires. You should recruit.”

He wrinkled his nose.

“Come on. The vampplings you left high and dry probably need direction, and you need minions.”

“Fine.”

“That’s the spirit.” I patted his leg. “You’ll be an annoying, overbearing vampire in no time at all.”

He rolled his eyes and turned his attention back to the news. Now I just had to figure out what could induce fear in a vampire to the point that they died without a mark on their body, and why Cillian hadn’t felt it when he felt the sorrow of my lament even though he couldn’t hear the song. I could do all of that, but could I do it with Cillian as a glorious distraction? I would just have to suffer through it.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Cillian

The evening after my energetic first and second—and later third—rendezvous with Donal, I woke in his arms. It was an amazing feeling. He was so strong, so warm so... He was everything I never dared hope for, all those long lonely years in the dark. He was my glorious sun. He was also still the bossy banshee he always was, which meant this evening I was going to meet with what was left of the Blades and bring them into my fold.

I didn't think it would be all that hard, given how they'd been living. That warehouse was worse than even my apartment, though I'd lived in worse. I'd spent twenty years in a rotting shack by the seaside. A wonderful twenty years, actually. I'd hunted sharks. It was mildly suicidal, I admit it.

I wore my least favorite suit, a dark gray Armani that made me feel like a mobster. I didn't understand why every suit in my closet had to be Italian. If I was going to play the wealthy vampire overlord, why couldn't I do it in jeans and T-shirts? That would really shock the other masters. At least I didn't have to go to them this time. I had people for that, apparently. Well, I had pookas. The brothers were more than a match for the young vampires.

I met them in the sitting room.

The girl seemed to be in charge now. I guessed she'd been too young to drink legally when she'd been changed. She was skinny, all elbows and knees. There was a sort of awkward beauty about her, but it was decidedly unconventional. She had a beauty mark on her chin, underneath pouty lips colored in with black lipstick. Her eye shadow was smeared, and her mascara had run. It looked like she'd been crying.

The boys, one tall and one short, were also made up in dark makeup. The taller held his right arm gingerly. There was blood on his sleeve. I supposed he must have put up a fight. His eyes were his best feature, practically silver in color and wide. His face was round, and his Native American heritage was clear in the cut of his bone structure and the long braid of sleek black hair that went down his back. He'd been a bit older than the girl when he became a vampire.

The last boy was the youngest of the group, trapped in the youthful glare some boys had between fourteen and twenty-two where they seem not to age at all. His hair was curly and blond, his eyes a murky green. He had freckles, which he had tried to cover unsuccessfully with makeup. He was slender, and I had the horrible feeling from the way he avoided my eyes that he had been a victim most of his life.

“What are your names?” Donal asked.

The girl stood in front of the boys, like a wall against us. “Are you going to kill us?”

I looked at Donal and then at the girl. “No.”

“What are you names?” Donal repeated.

She frowned. “I’m Wi—” She paused and shook her head. “My name is Joanne. This is Zach,” she pointed at the freckled boy, “and Adam.” The taller boy.

“It’s nice to meet you,” I said slowly and carefully.

“You, are you really deaf?” Joanne asked. “Damien always said so, but...”

“I am.”

“But you’re a master,” Zach blurted out. “You’re powerful.”

“Yes.”

“You can protect us?” Joanne asked.

“I can and I will.”

“Why?” Adam asked.

“Boston is my city.” I took a moment. “You are in it.”

“But Damien—we all were mean to you,” Zach said. “He said you were a freak.”

I shrugged. “I don’t care.”

Donal looked at me, eyebrows raised.

Right. “I mean. You are forgiven.”

Donal rolled his eyes. “We should move along, then. Were you all children of Damien?”

Adam shook his head. “I was not.”

“Then this process is familiar to you,” Donal said.

The boy nodded. “It is, and I’ll go first, if that’s all right.”

I gestured him forward. What we were about to do was something I had never done. Just as I had never made a child of my own, I had never claimed any orphans. There had been no reason to do so; I had not the means to support them, and it would not have been practical to take any on. I knew the practice, though, and now I had plenty of means. I could give these children a better life. The child to be claimed would take blood from the master and the bond would form between the pair.

It was common practice, especially when a vampire was claiming territory from another master. I slid my fingernail over the palm of my hand and held it out to Adam. He came to me tentatively, but took my hand and kissed it, taking a lap of the blood. It did not take much. He straightened and blinked. This was the moment that concerned me. Donal had explained that the binding of children to a master could include—changes. In the children. If the master was powerful enough.

Adam’s eyes changed from practically silver to completely silver. His expression was calm, but his eyes widened slightly and a smile quirked at his lips. “You taste—like strawberries.”

“Thank you.”

Joanne stepped up next and took her turn. There was no visible change in her, but there was a difference in *feeling* to her.

Zach came last, nervous. His eyes changed also, going from murky green to a bright apple color. He looked more—alive. With all three bound to me, I was starting to feel them, the connection between us. It was in the back of my mind, letting me know they were all right, safe. It would warn me if they were in danger, as well.

I stood up and smeared the blood on my palm along the gash and watched it heal. I looked at Donal. *Can we buy the building? This one*, I signed.

“Of course. If that’s what you want.”

Yes.

I looked at the former Blades. *They need a place. It will be safer.*

“True. I will see to it. Joanne, Zachary, I will show you where you will be staying. Adam, go with Cillian.”

There was a moment when it looked like one of them would protest, but they remained silent and went off with Donal to the wing of the condo with two of the spare bedrooms while I took Adam to the secondary bedroom. I’d had clean sheets put on the bed, but the room still smelled like Donal. At least the master bedroom was repaired now.

Adam looked around the room. His eyes went wide. “This is swank.”

I made a face in agreement.

“Is this mine?”

“For—now. I am buying the building. You can—have any space you like.”
I went slowly.

“Your accent, it’s Irish?”

I nodded.

“How—how old are you? I mean, Damien was a hundred or so and he was the oldest I’d ever met. I’ve only been this way for thirty years. I can’t imagine what a hundred is like.”

I smiled. “You know the Inquisition?”

“Like in Spain?”

“Yes.”

He nodded.

“I died then.”

He blinked. “You’re... really old.”

I shrugged. “Yes.” I smiled. “Donal, though, is older. He is fey. They have long lives by nature.”

“Like a fairy?”

I snorted. “Don’t say that to Donal. He is a banshee. Not a fairy.”

“Okay. I’ll remember that.” Adam took a deep breath through his nose.

“This place smells like you and him.” He peered at me. “Are the two of you together?”

I considered that. “Yes.”

“Cool.” He sat down on the bed. “You are—very strange.” He chewed on his lip. “Will you teach me how you talk with your hands? I bet that’s easier than trying to slow down so I can understand you.”

I smiled. “Yes.” I brought my hand to my mouth and pulled it away. “Thank you.”

He returned the gesture with a shy smile.

After five hundred years, I’d become a parent. Da would be so proud.

“I finished the paperwork for the building purchase,” Donal said. “The O’Hannagain brothers put in a call to their cousins. We’ll have the building covered within the week. New codes, some more cameras.” He rubbed my shoulders in a way that made me feel like my whole body was being rocked in a warm ocean of marshmallows. I nodded and turned my head back to face front and looked to my lap. His fingers were magical.

All of him was magical.

He even hit me in a way that made me swoon. It had been a long time since someone did that to me. I’ll admit, I thought my proclivity was unusual when I was younger, but those concerns had melted away as the years went on. There were far stranger interests in the bedroom than mine.

Right now, however, I was content with the massage.

It helped me put my mind off the fact that hiding from whatever had attacked me wasn’t a long term answer. We had to find out what it was, and kill it. I wasn’t going to hide anymore.

“Do we know what attacked me?”

Donal paused and came into view, sitting down on the bed next to me and then lying back. “Not yet, but we will. I promise.”

“You think it is what killed Ignacio.”

“I do.”

“Then I want to kill it.” I’d decided I’d hated Ignacio for far too long. Even if I hadn’t loved him, I would miss those days we had together. I would miss that we never reconciled. Right now, however, I just felt angry. I felt the anger of a child whose parent had been killed. I wanted revenge, not just for Ignacio, but for myself. I wanted to kill this thing and show all of those stuck-up masters, show Elena, that I wasn’t damaged goods. Show them I was a vampire you crossed at your own peril.

I had Donal to thank for reawakening that part of myself.

Donal nodded. “You will.”

I leaned down and kissed him. “I love you.”

“I love you, too.” He ran a hand through my hair, expression wistful. “Your vampplings are out. The O’Hannagain took them clothes shopping.”

“Oh?” I raised my eyebrows and caught my lip between my teeth.

“Oh.” He kissed me with bruising force, and gripping the back of my neck and the small of my back, leveraged himself up, slamming me into the bed. His expression made me think he was growling. I wished I could hear it properly. I wished I could hear the sounds he made when he came. I wished I could hear his voice. I wanted that so badly.

But I would settle for watching his face, looking into his eyes and touching him. I would just keep touching him. That, at least, I could do. He unbuttoned my shirt with deft hands. It delighted me that someone with such large hands could be so dexterous. They were just the right amount of rough, strong. I could admit that those hands made me squirm like an eel. As he moved his hands under the fabric of my shirt, I felt my phone vibrate in my pocket, demanding attention.

“Gods...” I reached into my pocket and fished the thing out. I had a text message.

You will die when I next come.

I raised my eyebrows. “Donal.”

He paused what he was doing and took a look at the phone. “Well, your mystery attacker?”

I shrugged. “Should I reply?”

“Sure.”

I typed, *Try it you coward*, and hit send. I tossed my phone way. “Where were we?”

Donal smiled. “I think I remember.”

Sometime in midday, I did something I had not done in a very long time. I woke up. I felt—scared. Not from any outside force, but from a dream. Vampires do dream. My dreams usually were of songs I remembered, or my father’s voice, my mother singing as she sewed. Cherished memories of the ocean crashing against the beach. Of laughter.

This dream had been different. I had been alone, at the bottom of a deep well, and the water was rising and rising and I couldn’t swim. I was drowning. I was weak.

It was expected. I had spent so long as a kicked dog. The strength of my blood, the defense of territory, the binding of those children—Donal—those things were pushing me toward a destiny I had never imagined I could have. I had that dream because I was terrified I would fail them all. Deep down, I still didn’t think I was worthy of it. You couldn’t erase all those years in a few short weeks, but Donal was certainly trying his damndest.

I wanted to believe that I was everything he saw. I wanted to be that man.

Donal woke when I did. *What’s wrong?* He signed.

Bad dream.

He put his arms around me and kissed my neck. He didn’t have to say anything to let me know he was there. He just had to touch me, and I knew he was comforting me. There was so much between us that would always go unspoken. So much I couldn’t say. So much I wouldn’t hear.

I closed my eyes and curled back into Donal’s arms. *Donal believes in me.* That would have to be enough, because I never wanted to let him down.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Donal

There were most certainly doubts circling in my blue-eyed boy's mind. He doubted himself, but he was putting up an amazingly convincing front for the vampings and his new horde of bodyguards. Buying up the building was an interesting move on his part. Bold, decisive, and it made it clear to the watching Families that he was putting down permanent roots.

Our current discussion was over the change of glyph marking the building. All masters had their own mark, but Cillian had yet to decide on his. His attempts thus far had been—problematic. Either they were already in use or they were incredibly offensive. To be fair, those symbols were at the end of the list.

“I'm bored,” he complained.

“We have to choose something dignified and appropriate. And we need to do it today, Cillian. The stone cutters—”

“I know,” he interrupted. He pulled the piece of paper he'd been sketching on toward him and looked at me. “Does it have to be simple?”

“It's not a rule or anything.”

“Good.” He flipped it over and picked up the pencil. He frowned for a moment and with a confident hand, drew a profile of a ship in remarkable detail.

“This is very good.”

“I want this. My mark. The ship I sailed on, all those years ago. The *Esmeralda*.”

“All right.” I touched his face. “You draw well.”

He shrugged. “I paint better.”

“You paint?”

“Of course. Maritime scenes, mostly. I have *many* degrees, Donal.”

It was easy to forget how well educated Cillian had made himself. I suppose burying himself in academia had made him safe. He was a very

unique creature, and making any assumptions as to what he could or could not do was a vast miscalculation on anyone's part.

"I wrote poetry for a time, as well."

"One should have a passion." Perhaps one of the rooms could be renovated into a painting studio for him. I could imagine him dabbed in bits of paint, a paintbrush between his teeth and frowning at a work in progress. There were other, more daring, visions I could imagine with the two of us and paint.

And then washing it all off in the shower.

I shook my head. "Well, then. Put on something nice, you and I are going dancing."

He raised his eyebrows. "Dancing?"

"Dancing."

I knew of an establishment for a more dignified sort of dancing than what passes these days in the dance halls of the young people. It had better music as well. The wood floors were done to a high polish, and every man wore a suit. The women were in gowns. The music was waltz and the dance, of course, matched. We were not the only homogenous couple, Cillian and I. I led our dance, tapping the beat of the music on Cillian's shoulder.

He danced well, not that I was entirely surprised. I found dancing very calming. Kes had never enjoyed dancing. Cillian was smiling, though, his body relaxed and his eyes closed, his head resting on my chest. It was a moment I would preserve in my mind always. As a banshee, I could feel the coming of death. I knew there was blood in the water. It was only a matter of time before Cillian was attacked again.

I only wished I knew what had attacked him. I was not used to being in the dark. I very much did not like it. Cillian nuzzled my neck. "You are distracted."

"Forgive me." I kissed him. "I am not usually prone to distraction when so occupied."

"You are worried."

"I am."

“Do not be.” He smiled. “The next time he attacks, I will kill him.”

“Him?”

“I think it is a him.”

I trusted that instinct. Unconsciously, Cillian had given his attacker a gender. There could be other things he could remember about the incident under the right circumstances, things he hadn't processed at the time.

“All right. In the meantime, I believe it is time for the Spanish portion of the evening.”

He raised his eyebrows and signed, *What?*

“The tango.”

“I do not tango.”

“Just follow my lead.” The look on his face promised retribution later. I ignored it and spun him out as the music started. I tapped the hand I still held with the beat. I pulled him back to me and grinned. “See? This is fun.”

He shook his head, but continued to follow me through the steps of the dance. He might not have ever tangoed before, but a vampire's grace was not something that could be overcome by something so paltry as an unlearned dance.

I had a moment where I wondered why I was there, what I thought I was doing with a creature like Cillian. A moment that passed in an instant when he looked in my eyes. Cillian's eyes would always make my knees wobbly. Even if my brain was confused, my body wasn't. My heart wasn't. When he told me, so tentatively, that he loved me, I had responded in kind knowing full well it was the absolute truth.

I had loved in my life, of course, but this was different. I felt Cillian in my bones when we were together. He sank into me. Dancing with him in public like this made me feel like a teenager again. I wanted to hold onto that feeling. We'd known each other less than a month, but when you were as old as I was, love was something you recognized and you held onto.

It was too precious, I almost forgot that. The only reminder I'd needed was Cillian's admission. I was never good at admitting my feelings, even to myself.

As the dance ended, Cillian tugged me off the dance floor to take a seat at one of the small round tables around the perimeter. He looked... hungry. "Do you need to eat?" I asked.

He nodded. *I forgot earlier.*

"There are plenty of delicious morsels around us."

He made a face. "I want something—" he finger spelled the word *zesty*.

I made a face. "Really? It's ten o'clock, Cillian."

His eyes went wide. "Would you deny my dinner?"

"I do if it involves chasing down squirrels in the middle of the night."

Cillian smiled winsomely. "I'll go with or without you."

"Fine." I shook my head. "Let's go squirrel hunting."

I wanted to be mad, but he looked so damn happy. It was all right, I would get him back for this excursion later. It wasn't like that finely shaped ass of his couldn't take a few red marks.

If one was unfamiliar with vampire hunting habits, they could be forgiven for assuming the handsome young man in the suit with no shoes or socks climbing into a tree in the middle of winter was insane, or drunk. Cillian wasn't drunk, but I did wonder now and then about his sanity. This was one of those now and thens. I waited, patiently holding his shoes and jacket while he clambered into the tree and clawed into a hollow for his prize.

I considered the evening prior to this moment and wished I could have convinced him to go home and have sex instead. Nope. He wanted to hunt squirrels. Squirrels. Cillian smiled at me and held out the prize, a furry gray squirrel. It thrashed in his grip, and I'll admit, I felt a bit squeamish watching him sink into it like a can of soda, but I took it in stride for the moment.

I waved to get his attention. "Would you get out of the tree now? You've had your snack."

He tossed the drained creature aside and hopped out of the tree. "You just don't understand."

"I don't think I want to. Now you need real food."

There's some in the fridge, he signed.

“Fine.” I held out a hand. “Shoes, jacket, car.”

He grinned like a madman and walked over and took up his shoes and jacket. There was a bit of blood on his cheek. I, however, was not a fan of squirrel, so I plucked my handkerchief from my pocket and wiped the blood away. “You are such a child.”

He shrugged. “At least I’m not boring.”

“Oh yes, at least there’s that.” I put an arm around him and we walked back to the car. Cillian refused to put his shoes back on, but his distaste for footwear wasn’t something I was going to be able to change overnight. Still, I looked at him in the other seat, lounging so easily in just his shirtsleeves and the fitted vest that matched the rest of the bespoke suit I’d managed to get him into. He’d picked the fabric, a bold, untraditional but subtle plaid of tan on darker tan. His tie was nearly the same blue as his eyes, and the shirt was a blue stripe with a white collar.

He looked like he’d stepped out of an Arrow Collar advertisement. Hell, he could have modeled for an Arrow Collar advertisement. Leyendecker would have loved Cillian. He’d been a wonderful man. A good man. Cillian hadn’t known enough good men. I could tell. He didn’t talk about those lonely nights often, but his eyes became distant sometimes, and during the day he would have nightmares. I don’t think he remembered them. The two of us were quite a pair. He was damaged and lonely and I—I was angry. I didn’t like to think about it very often. I could ignore it for the most part.

Angry at Kes, I had always been one to hold a grudge.

I had to let that go, just as I knew Cillian had to let go of his past. That was the only way to keep moving. I took Cillian’s hand in mine. He quirked his eyebrows. I smiled and brushed a stray strand of dark hair away from his forehead.

“I do love you.”

His returning smile pushed all those thoughts away. “You think I am... childish.”

“Sometimes you are. I still love you.”

“Sometimes you are—” He paused and then signed, *overprotective*. “And I still love you.”

“Relationships are about compromise.”

“Compromise.” He glanced at the front seat where our driver—fey—was studiously not listening to our conversation. “I enjoy our—compromises.” He put a hand on my thigh and smiled broadly.

“Oh?”

“Dancing, dinner...” He looked down at my lap and then up. “Sex.”

“We must work on your pronunciation some more,” I said.

“Oh? Your last lesson—left marks.” The smile never faltered.

“I’d be willing to leave some more...”

Cillian leaned forward and placed his hands on my face, and kissed me. A strong, heated kiss that sent shivers down my neck and back. He had absolutely no concern for the driver as he shifted from his seat to straddle me, knees on either side of my legs as he sat down in my lap to lean deeper into the kiss. He was warm from his feet right down to his fingertips. It amazed me that such a small amount of blood could warm him.

Perhaps there was something about squirrels after all.

He continued to kiss me, hands moving through my hair. I pulled back and took a deep breath.

“You are a bad man.”

“I am.” He traced small circles at my temples with his thumbs. “But you love me.”

“I do.” I put a hand on the small of his back. “I also love not having to hire new drivers because I’ve emotionally scarred the one I have.”

He wrinkled his nose. “No sex in the car?”

“Not in this car. A limo... maybe.”

“Next time?”

“It’s a promise.”

One pronunciation lesson later, I went to bed early. I was starting back at work in the morning. Cillian was holding his own now, so I didn't need to be with him every moment of the day. That would be selfish and we'd get sick of each other. I did not want him to get sick of me. Absence does make the heart grow fonder, after all.

I left Cillian early that morning and went for a run on the beach. I had missed the sunlight, the sand, the ocean. I always missed it. That was a thing Cillian and I shared. A love of the ocean. The smell of brine that stung the inside of your nose, the sound of the waves. The cold spray on your face from the waves that crashed against the shore. It was the most beautiful thing in the world. The most dangerous and the most terrifying. The ocean was everything a man could feel.

Cillian was like that too. His eyes held the depths of the sea. He was so beautiful. He could be serious, he could be whimsical. He was mercurial. He would never be boring. He would never age, I would never see him waste away. Somehow, standing on the beach as the sun rose, I knew in the core of my being that Cillian was the person I had been searching for. That person that everyone searches for. I wasn't a fool enough to tell Cillian that. I didn't want to scare him away.

I was going to make sure I never lost him.

After my run I went back to my own apartment for a shower and changed into my work clothes, grabbed my wallet and went to the morgue. Jenna was there with a smile and a clipboard.

"Did you enjoy your vacation?" she asked.

"I did." I took the clipboard from her and flipped through it. "Dr. Avery has been busy, hasn't he? I'm left with... two homeless men and a John Doe from Beacon Hill. Jackpot."

"I have the John Doe on the table waiting for you. Our other patients were identified earlier and the EMT's initial report suggests they died of exposure."

I nodded. "Thank you, Jenna. Oversee the autopsy with me."

"Yes, Dr. O'Neil."

I headed inside the exam room and set the clipboard down. I put on a pair of gloves and approached the corpse. The man was young, in his early thirties,

and conventionally handsome, though incredibly hairy. I did a cursory examination, but there were no marks on him. No bruises, no abrasions. There was no sign of any exterior damage. There was a sort of smile on his face, and on a hunch, I pried open his eyelids.

“*Gura féis ic faelaib do chorp,*” I swore.

Jenna looked at me blankly. “What language *was* that?”

“Gaelic,” I replied, stepping away from the body. “I have to make a phone call. Take a few clear shots of his iris, would you? I’ll be right back.”

His eyes had been so dilated they were near black through, the smile, the lack of marks... There was only one thing I knew that did that and I smelled it all over our John Doe. I walked out of the room and ducked into my office before pulling out my phone and calling the one person I would much rather not be calling.

“Donal, to what do I owe the pleasure?” Kes answered after the third ring.

“You killed. I thought you weren’t doing that anymore.”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“Don’t play dumb with me, Kes. The hairy fellow. Siren kill, I’m surprised at how sloppy you were, leaving him to be found. I thought you would have eaten him. Plenty of meat on the bones.”

“If I had killed someone, I would have,” he returned.

“You really think I believe you’d let another siren in your territory?”

“Believe what you like, Donal, but it wasn’t me. I have to go. Work to do and all. *Ciao.*”

I should have tried harder to kill him the last time.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Cillian

That day I dreamed of Ignacio. It was not the first time I had ever done so, but it was strange nonetheless. In my dream we were on the golden beach where I had met him so many nights ago. I had been watching the sun set, thinking of the green shores I had left behind and tracing shapes in the sand.

So it was that my dream started, except it was not at night, the sun was high and the waters were blue. Ignacio smiled at me, his long dark curls a mess around his face as always and his dark eyes warm. He sat down next to me. He wore knee length Bermuda shorts with a pattern of birds, no shoes and no shirt. I hadn't ever seen him in anything like modern attire. Given the length of our estrangement, it was a bit jarring.

“Hello, Cillian.”

It was a dream, and so I could hear his soft, smooth voice with its Madrid accent. “Ignacio.”

He shook his head, and his smile was sad. “I am so sorry, for what I did to you. Abandoning you. I feared Elena.” He sighed. “I should have fought harder for you.”

I didn't know what to say, so I didn't say anything.

“This thing, this thing that killed me and the others of our blood. Cillian, there was—a sound. It was some sort of song.” He looked out at the ocean. “It reminded me of the sea. It reminded me of my humanity. It reminded me of death. I do not think I was ever so scared in my life—except once. The night I made you what you are.” He looked over at me, and I could see the tears in his eyes. “You were so perfect. Your eyes were clear, no madness. It shouldn't have mattered that you couldn't hear. You are perfect, my child. I am so sorry.”

Ignacio placed a hand on my cheek. “Perfect.”

And then I woke up, feeling a hundred years younger. Like some of the weight I'd carried had been lifted away. I took a shower and dressed before I

went to the fridge for food. The vampplings were watching television in the living room. I grabbed a few gulps of blood and then went out to join them. I should spend time with them. Bond. That was important.

“What is this?” The screen was occupied by puppets. One of them appeared to be a deer, his nose was red.

“It’s a Christmas special,” Adam replied. “Rudolph.”

“Oh. Why is his nose red?”

All three of them looked at one another and then back at me. Adam made a face. “Well—I’ll turn on closed captioning.”

Oh good, I was bonding.

Shortly after the film, Donal arrived. I could smell death on him. “How was work?” I asked.

“Fine. What have you been up to?”

“Watching television.”

Adam interjected, “Rudolph was on. Isn’t Cillian just like King Moonracer? Adopting all the misfit vampires?” He gave Donal an intense look.

Donal blinked and then understanding dawned on his face. I had no idea what was going on. “He is.” He gave me a kiss. “Have you all eaten?”

The vampplings took that opportunity to make negative assertions and vacate the premises. Well, that was strange.

Donal looked at me. “King Moonracer is what you took out of Rudolph?”

“Yes.”

“All right.”

“Oh, I want to paint again,” I said. I’d been thinking about it since I woke up. I felt—inspired again. A sensation I had not felt in many years. “Could we set up a studio?”

“Of course,” Donal smiled. “Anything you want.”

“Good.” I considered telling Donal about my dream, and then dismissed it.

It had been a silly dream, anyway. Just a dream. Except—my instincts were telling me otherwise. I shouldn't ignore those instincts. "I—had a dream."

"Oh?"

"About Ignacio. He said—he said the thing that killed him, it sang. A song that made him think of the ocean, of death." I shrugged. "I do not know what that means."

Donal smiled. "Well, it was dream."

"It felt—very real." I shook my head. "I do not often dream."

"Then I will not dismiss this. Come, let's figure out where that studio is going."

"All right." I felt, however, like Donal wasn't telling me something. Why would he do that? We had secrets still, the two of us could talk for a year and never know all the other had done. This was different, though. I put a smile on my face. I had to trust him. If I didn't trust him, if I couldn't trust him, there was no point in any of this. I might as well go back to that hole I'd come from. I didn't want. I didn't want to lose him.

I had to trust him. I had come this far, hadn't I? Certainly our relationship hadn't been very long just yet but... *I love him*. It was uncontrollable, that feeling. When I looked in his eyes, when I felt him near me, when I could smell him on my pillow—I couldn't imagine my life without him. He made me feel like I was worth something. He made me feel strong. He made me want to be more than I had been.

That was what love was about.

Real love challenged you. Donal—he was a challenge worth risking everything for.

He touched my shoulder and I blinked, coming back to the conversation.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

I nodded. *Thinking*, I signed.

You think too much, he signed back.

"I know."

“So, my king, are we planning on collecting misfit toys?” he asked, a smile lurking at the corners of his lips.

“Oh yes,” it was only half in jest, “this palace shall house them all.”

“Do allow me to pay my respects to your majesty.” He kissed me.

Well, if that’s how he wanted to pay his respects—I was all for it.

After my second shower of the day, Donal and I were playing a game of chess I was losing when one of the signal lights security had installed for me to alert of a person at the door, lit up. Donal heard the bell, by the expression on his face.

“I’ll see who it is,” he said.

I nodded, looked at the board, knew I was losing, and resigned, tipping over my king. Donal flashed a smile and then went to the security room. I stayed where I was and reset the board. Donal returned a few minutes later with another person—another vampire. He was just shy of Donal’s height, well built. I guessed he’d been turned somewhere in his early thirties, but his hair was completely silver in color and his eyes were very dark, nearly black. He wore a tailored suit the same color as his hair, a white shirt and a bright red tie. He looked dashing.

“Cillian, this is James Argent, the man who’s been organizing your finances,” Donal introduced.

“James, Cillian Doone, Master of Boston.”

My blood realized before my brain that this was a pivotal moment. I remained seated, but straightened my back and raised my head. “Mr. Argent.”

“Mr. Doone,” he inclined his head slightly.

“Welcome to Boston.”

“Thank you, Mr. Doone.” He smiled. “Do we have peace between us?”

“We do.”

“Then please call me James.”

“Cillian.”

With the dance of dominance over, James took a seat on the chair opposite the coffee table where we had set up the chessboard, and Donal sat next to me.

“So, are you here for...” I paused and looked to Donal and signed, *Financial reasons?*

“Financial reasons,” Donal repeated.

“No, your finances are sound,” he replied. “I am here regarding the deaths of Ignacio Suarez, Benjamin Masters, The Dervish and Sally Prior.”

“The masters who have died,” Donal said.

“Yes.” James pulled a packet of papers from his jacket pocket and placed them on the table. “Photographs of the bodies.”

I didn’t want to see Ignacio’s lifeless body. Donal picked them up instead and flipped through them before placing them back on the table face down. “These are unusual kills.”

“Yes,” James said. “I’ve never seen anything like this.”

“I have not seen vampires killed this way,” Donal replied. He had a look on his face that told me he had thought of something but wasn’t prepared to express the idea just yet.

“I am concerned,” James said. “We have seen bloodlines targeted in the past for a variety of reasons, but typically the person or persons responsible become known quickly. Do you have any leads?”

“The attack on Cillian left a few traces, but nothing we’ve had any luck tracking down. The fellow even texted Cillian, but security had no luck tracing it. Whoever this is, they are smart.”

“Clever,” I corrected. “Smart would have been to not attack me. Smart would have been not to kill Ignacio.” I probably mangled Ignacio’s name, but it had been centuries since I heard myself speak anything Spanish.

“Clever, then,” Donal said. “We are no closer to an answer.”

“At this point we are getting very close to seeing a full council of the families. That would be bad. The last time a council formed—Donal, we cannot let that happen.”

Donal nodded. “We find our killer, and then we kill him.”

“The sentiment is appreciated, Donal. You should know, Elena has made some accusations toward you, Cillian. She thinks that perhaps you have some mastery power that causes these deaths. That you are taking revenge.”

I raised my eyebrows. “If I wanted that, she would be dead.”

“My response exactly,” James said. “Elena is a simple creature, for all her power.”

The children, of course, chose that moment to return home from their excursion for fresh food, and in Zach’s case, another stuffed animal for the growing collection in his room. It was a rabbit this time. My youngest charge was by far the most reclusive of the group, and it was clear to me that Damien had plucked the youth for his beauty and compliant nature.

I thought, though, that given time the boy would show a strong core.

James remained in his seat as the younger vampires crept into the living room, all of their eyes stuck on him like he was a tiger sitting in a field of lambs.

“This is James Argent,” I said. “A friend.”

Adam was the first to relax, and Joanne followed him, but Zach was clearly taking cover behind the older boy, the rabbit clutched in his arms.

James looked at me and then back at the young vampires. “Adopted some orphans, did we, Cillian?”

“They needed a home,” I replied.

“This is Adam, Joanne and Zachary. They were Damien’s children,” Donal said.

James nodded. “Damien, yes.”

I gave Donal a look.

He nodded and said, “Adam, why don’t you and Zachary go clean up? Joanne, that interior designer called, would you call them back?”

I gave them a nod in acknowledgement of the requests and they were off. I looked to James. “They are—skittish.”

“Damien was young, he was not well placed to have so many children,” James said.

“You knew him,” Donal asked.

“Of him. I make it my business to know the vampires in America. There are few enough of us as it is. We must know who is where.”

“Fair enough.”

I considered the question I wanted to ask, realized I probably couldn't get through it all without mangling four words and turned to Donal and signed it, *Pass this to James. If this thing is another vampire, how is it no one has heard of a master that can become invisible to the eye? What sort of vampire could steal the life of other vampires?*

Donal watched closely and then turned to James and repeated my question.

James considered for a long moment. “Just because no one's ever seen it doesn't mean it's not possible.”

“That doesn't help narrow the search,” Donal said.

“No. I'll be staying in Boston, however, until the matter is settled. My presence here should alleviate any suspicions toward Cillian.” James looked at his watch. “I should get back to my hotel. My little bat worries when I'm gone. I would have brought him, but he is so skittish around new vampires, you must understand.”

I had no idea what he was talking about, so I nodded.

“Then I shall leave you. Donal has my phone number.” He stood. “It was a pleasure to meet you, Cillian.”

“The pleasure was mine,” I returned.

Donal walked James to the door and I looked to the chessboard for inspiration regarding our situation. I did not like waiting for an attack without knowing the warning signs. My mind wandered back to the dream. The sea, death, fear. Just prior to the attack had been my encounter with that siren. Detective Kester Griffin. A man who smelled of death and sea water. A man who sang his victims to their death.

I had never heard of a siren killing vampires, however, that wasn't in their purview. They killed for the meat. They did become invisible. They did not become scentless. It did not make sense. None of this made sense. I needed to clear my head. Do something that didn't require me to think.

Donal walked back into the room. “I think that went well,” he said.

I shrugged.

“You’re worried about our mysterious killer.”

I stood up from the couch and crossed the room deliberately, put my arms around him and kissed him.

He pulled back. “Is something wrong?”

“Yes. You can fix it, though.”

Donal smiled. “All right.” He kissed me. “I’ll fix it.” He was always fixing me, wasn’t he? I never saw him vulnerable. I don’t know if I ever would. He didn’t seem like the type to cry. “We should move to the bedroom.”

I wasn’t going to disagree. I latched onto his tie and smiled before leading him off into the bedroom.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Donal

Despite Cillian's seemingly endless list of reasons for us to remain in bed all day, I did go to work. My head kept turning around the events of the previous evening. My suspicions kept coming back to the one person that made no sense at all.

Sirens simply did not have the power to do what had been done to these vampires. I wasn't certain anything did. I had a card I could play yet, but I was loathe to do so. I hadn't spoken to Her in centuries. I had hoped to keep it that way. I knew, however, that the fastest way to get the information I needed was to ask Her. She was the reigning authority on things that kill other things.

My Lady Morrigan.

I tried to put the entire thing out of my mind and concentrate on the autopsies I had scheduled for the afternoon, but being surrounded by dead bodies and trying *not* to think about the collector of souls is a difficult task.

And once one started to think about the Lady, She had a tendency to show up whenever, and however, she damn well pleased. So it was with little surprise on my part, when during my lunch break at a local café, I was joined at the table by a statuesque woman in a tailored white skirt suit with pitch black hair straight and long down her back, and eyes the color of crows' wings. Her lips were blood red and her unblemished skin had a golden glow similar to my own.

"Lady," I didn't stand, that would draw attention.

"O'Neil." She took my water glass, drawing attention to her sharp manicured nails, done the same red as her lips. She took a sip and then looked in my eyes. "It's been ages since you called."

"It wasn't much of a call."

"Your brothers and sisters rely on me little, I take what I can get from the old guard. Now, what troubles you so?" She frowned. "I do not like to see you troubled."

The last time she saw me troubled was the Famine. I understood her worry. “There is a being killing vampires.”

“Hardly noteworthy.”

“He is stealing their life force. The descriptions we have gathered say he inspires fear. There could be an element of song. This thing is invisible, carries no scent. It has killed *master* vampires with ease. Now it is going after someone I care for. The events are sparking something greater, however. The Families wish to call council.”

“Now *that* is a concern.” She pursed her lips and tapped one finger against her chin. “All right. In the interest of preventing the Families from causing trouble, I will look into this matter.”

“Thank you, Lady.”

“You will keep up your good works, won’t you, O’Neil? You are so kind to the souls.”

“It is my nature,” I replied, bowing my head.

She touched my cheek, the sharp edge of her nails catching my skin. “I’ll send word.”

And then she was gone, leaving only the sting of where her nails had cut into my flesh. The Morrigan never could leave without bloodshed. I felt a bit more at ease with her on my side in the matter. She could easily have chosen to wait it out. She was a battle goddess, after all, she could be unpredictable. Her motives were always not quite clear, and there was always the chance she could decide you were her enemy.

I stayed on her good side.

I finished my lunch and wrapped up the work day hopeful we would have an answer soon. I don’t know what I would do if Cillian—I couldn’t even imagine that. If he was gone, I think I would wither away. Banshee may have been one of the heartier of the fey, but our emotions could draw us to great heights and terrible depths, just as the more fragile fey. There were those men who had learned that the bloody way when I last stood in battle.

There is no greater thing to fear than a banshee who has lost what they love.

I found Cillian's apartment in a state of some chaos. Joanne seemed to be in the center of it all, with a phone in each hand while she went through sample books and chatted with the pair of interior designers I had called in to help remake the condos for the vamplings. The girl could multitask, I would give her that.

She had made quite the transformation from scrawny Goth to put-together young woman. The black makeup was gone, replaced by more flattering earth tones that brought out the dark amber of her eyes, and the black dye job had been stripped away to reveal soft auburn curls that rolled down her shoulders. She wore a green sweater and jeans, more appropriate for the weather than anything that had previously been in her wardrobe. She looked confident. I saw momentary flashes of uncertainty, but given time, she seemed the likeliest of the three to run the day to day of Cillian's tiny empire.

A burden I was happy enough to pass on.

She saw me when I came in the room and put both phones aside. "Cillian is in the shower."

"Thank you, Joanne."

She nodded and returned to her tasks.

I decided to check on the others while I made up my mind about joining Cillian in the shower. I found Adam in the security room with Aiden, who was teaching him the system. I had long noticed that giving out responsibilities tended to make people feel more wanted. I'd made the suggestion to Cillian, and was pleased to see him implementing it. Adam seemed to be a bright enough lad. It would benefit everyone if he stepped up. He would need to learn to fight, they all would, but Cillian would benefit greatly from a loyal head of security he didn't have to pay.

Not that there was anything wrong with the pookas, they were loyal, but I'd always had a small dislike of mercenaries, no matter how useful.

I had momentary difficulty locating the too-quiet Zach. His introduction to society was going to take more delicacy. He had opted to stay in Cillian's condo rather than take his own, which said a great deal about how attached he had become to his new master. I had not known Damien well enough to judge,

but the youngest vampire's behavior made it clear the man had not been an upstanding master for his children.

I found Zach in the bedroom I'd shown him on his first night here, organizing his quickly massed collection of plush animals around the perimeter of the large bed. Which had now been pulled head first into the empty closet, doors splayed out on either side as barriers.

"Zach?" I spoke softly.

The blond looked at me. "Hello, Donal."

"Are you all right?"

"I—just—" he licked his lips, "they were in the wrong order."

"I see." I noticed he had a particular love of rabbits, and oddly, one rabbit, a scruffy yellow one with a missing eye, was off on its own on the far end of the room. "Why is that one alone, Zach?"

The young man turned and looked at the rabbit. "He's wrong, he can't be with the others."

"Because he's missing an eye? We could fix that."

"No."

"No we can't fix it, or no that isn't the problem?"

He seemed surprised I'd continued the conversation. He made a face and then shrugged. "Some things can't be fixed."

"Some things aren't really broken," I said. "Cillian does just fine, and he can't hear."

"I know that." He looked me in the eyes. "Cillian is strong, his blood is strong, I can feel it. I just—I don't know if I'm that strong. Adam and Joanne... they're different. Damien picked them because they were useful. I was just an accident."

Accidental children amongst vampires were relatively rare, but I could understand what must have happened after Damien realized he'd turned a meal into a vampire. I had a feeling Zach had not been well treated by Damien because of this, and there was no doubt the boy had been at risk prior to his rebirth. Otherwise he wouldn't have been out at night for Damien to snack on.

“Cillian chose to take you on, Zachary. He wouldn’t have done that unless he wanted to.”

The lad seemed to consider that. “I’m not—what use could he have for me?”

“That depends on you, lad. Your fellows are finding their place, you will find yours, just give it time. A commodity you have plenty of, I might add.”

He looked down at the plush animal, a cat, in his hands. “What if I can’t?”

“You will.”

Cillian took that moment to appear at my side in a rare show of vampiric speed. He looked at Zach and with an unerring sense of the situation, walked over to Zach and gave him a hug. I had never seen Cillian show affection toward anyone beside myself. The younger vampire seemed taken aback, but then he relaxed.

Cillian pulled away after a moment. “You don’t need to be anything but yourself.” It was clearly spoken, my pronunciation lessons must be paying off. “All right?”

Zachary nodded. “All right.”

“Good. Now, why don’t you go help Joanne? She will like that.”

Zach managed a very small smile and nodded before gingerly getting up off the bed. I moved to let him out the door and watched him go off down the hall. Cillian joined me at the door and put an arm around me.

He is fragile, I signed.

Yes, he replied. *He will get better*.

I suppose if anyone had an inkling of what the boy was going through it would be Cillian. “You are a good man, you know that?” I pushed a lock of hair away from his forehead.

“You are a good man,” he replied. “I am a vampire.”

“So? I am banshee, that doesn’t make me less a man.”

“There is a lot of you.” His eyes went wide as he looked me up and down. I felt ogled. I was fairly certain that was his intention. His hair was a bit damp from his shower and he smelled like soap and steam.

I suppose I was too late to join him in the shower. That didn't mean I couldn't get him dirty again. My encounter with the Morrigan made me want to do something that would make me feel alive. Being with Cillian already made me feel alive, fucking Cillian just made that experience even better.

He placed a hand on my chest, playing with one of my buttons. "You need a shower."

"But you've already finished yours."

He raised both of his eyebrows and walked away from me with seductive strides. Curious, I followed him down the hall into the other wing of the condo where the secondary living room was being converted into his painting studio. I could smell paint thinner and oil thick enough to mask Cillian's personal aroma. It seemed he'd started using it already. There was an easel and canvas set up, a sketch laid in on the large surface and some base colors laid in. I watched, bemused, as he walked up to the palette lying out next to the easel, pulled his finger through a blob of blue, and then drew a stripe across his cheek.

Not as though he had to worry about being poisoned by the pigment or the thinner.

"I'm dirty again," he said with a smile.

"All right, my bold boy, let's get you cleaned up." I strode across the room and with more ease than most of my lovers would have liked, I lifted him up over my shoulder. Cillian could have stopped me if he'd wanted to, but he didn't. My love seemed to prefer me in the dominant role, not that I minded. I carried him into the master bathroom, locking the door firmly behind us and set him down.

I looked Cillian in the eyes and smiled. "Take off your clothes."

He grinned and stripped off the blue T-shirt first. He still wore that strange vial of dirt, but I'd never asked about it. It was better to leave some things a secret. Your lover should always have a hint of mystery about them. His eyes narrowed, and he put his hands on the waistband of his jeans and slowly undid the button and then the zipper before slithering out of his trousers. He wasn't wearing any underwear.

“We spent all that time finding you the perfect boxer briefs and you don’t even wear them,” I scolded.

“I prefer less,” he said.

I wasn’t going to admit the idea of him going around without any underwear on at a fancy social event was a turn on. Instead, I put on my best disappointed face and crossed my arms over my chest. “You are supposed to be setting a good example.”

“Why?”

“You are a master vampire, the lord of Boston. You have to act like it.”

He made a face, “No.”

“No?”

“No.”

I backed him into the shower while undoing the buttons to my shirt. “I think we need to start responsibility lessons in addition to your pronunciation lessons.”

His smile would have rivaled the Cheshire Cat as he stepped backward to the shower controls and with malicious glee, turned it on.

“You want to teach, you have to get naked... or get your clothes very wet.”

I chose to strip. I wasn’t about to ruin my clothes. I folded my things and set them aside before stepping into the shower where the little imp was waiting for me. I was never going to be bored with this one, was I? He made a game of it, slipping away from me whenever I got too close, but while the shower was large, it wasn’t that large. I pinned him near the waterfall and kissed him, getting tongue and teeth in on the action.

I got him hot and bothered before pulling away and turning him around to face the wall with a hard shove on his shoulder. His hands met the stone tile of the shower with a resounding smack, and I followed up the sound with slap to his muscular ass. The smile on his face widened as I delivered several more hard strikes. He made small sounds in encouragement. *Never going to get bored.*

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Cillian

There were rarely any marks left over by the time Donal and I finished sex to show for my troubles, but this time I got a good look in the mirror at Donal's handiwork in the form of already healing bruises. He came up behind me.

"Wishing the marks stayed longer?"

I managed to read his lips in the mirror. "A bit."

"If you like, I'll give you a spanking every couple hours to make sure the marks stay fresh," he said with a smile.

Tempting. I smiled at him. "Maybe as a reward after that thing is dead."

"It's a promise." He kissed my neck. "Come on, let's check on your children."

"If I must." I frowned. "Speaking of that." *Zach needs a counselor.* I signed.

"I won't disagree. Perhaps James could suggest someone."

"Could you ask?"

"Of course," he replied. "Come on, then." He slapped my ass. "Get dressed."

I followed him back into my bedroom and got dressed for the second time. Joanne was finished with her interior designers, or at least they were gone, and was arguing on the phone with someone about something. The details were inconsequential right then. Zach was reorganizing the sample books intently and Adam was drawing up a floor plan, I thought.

"How goes the remodel?" Donal asked.

Adam looked up. "Slow. You guys know we can still hear you if you fuck in the shower, right?"

I blinked. "You'll survive."

Adam rolled his eyes. "Anyway. We're getting the condo downstairs refitted as a security base. The plan is one every three floors, just to cover our

bases. This one will have rooms for security personnel and a full gym. Did you know you have a gym in here?"

I raised my eyebrows. "No."

"Well, you do. The O'Hannagain brothers have been using it. They're really nice." His eyes had a look about them that said he thought at least one of them was more than nice. Well, I wished him luck. I might not know as much as I ought to about vampires, but I was Irish, I knew about pookas, and if a thing could take the shape of a horse, I was fair certain it was probably hung like one.

I'm sure Adam would be fine, though.

"They are. Anything else?"

"Well, most of the building is empty, so all the security stations won't be staffed," Adam said.

Joanne hung up the phone and turned around to face me. "I'm arranging one floor to be turned into an art gallery. If you're going to be supporting the arts, it seems logical."

"Good thinking," Donal said. "It will go a long way toward establishing Cillian as a philanthropist."

"Joy," I said. Looking at them all, I wondered if the thing that attacked me would go after them to get to me. The idea of it made fear churn in my stomach. I put a smile on my face. "Donal, you must be tired and I have to mark my territory. Best done alone."

His eyes narrowed, a clear sign of suspicion. "Are you certain?"

"I'll be fine."

"All right, be careful."

"I will."

I hadn't walked the streets on my own in some time. I hadn't even driven a car. I wasn't sure what happened to my car. The beat up old thing hadn't been worth anything, but I'd been growing fond of it. I grabbed a coat for form's sake and headed down the elevator, passing through the newest layers of security and out the back exit and into the chilly winter evening. It was a clear

night, the moon was just a crescent in the sky and the stars were out in full view.

Good night for a walk. To me, it might as well have been midday, as bright as the streets were with the lamps and the stars and the light pollution from the skyscrapers reflecting off white concrete. As I walked, I felt the same surge of instinctual protectiveness I'd experienced towards the foundlings I adopted. The same feeling I had when I killed Damien. The city *was* mine. I was sure of that.

If I'd been uncertain, the response to James' presence made it clear that even if my brain said no, my blood demanded the city as my own. The front of my building bore the glyph of the Esmeralda now, a symbol the young vampires would wear once the custom pendants I'd commissioned came in. I even had business cards now, letterhead and there was a signet ring being made for me.

Nothing said pretentious vampire lord like a signet ring.

I had come a long way from Cillian Molloy, who published art history articles every couple years. I was still proud, my article would be out soon and I would be pleased to see it in print but—something had lost its impact for me. The world I had been shunned from was opening up for me now and I was walking in with my eyes wide open.

Just walking the streets left the impression of my psyche on the area, but it was my blood that would mark my territory. I cut into my palm with the edge of my thumbnail and as I passed through neighborhoods I marked landmark buildings with a thumbprint of blood. I licked my palm once and let the blood drip down my arm. I could not mark the whole city in a night, but I covered the oldest portions of the city and headed home when I began to feel the sunrise in the back of my mind.

These past few weeks had shed light on the things I knew and the things I guessed and the things I was just plain in the dark about in regards to my own world. I had gone from thinking someone like Damien was a threat to my life, to knowing I could kill nearly any vampire that dared come into my territory uninvited. I had taken in charge the very creatures I had feared, and I saw them now for what I couldn't then: children in need.

And Donal, my Donal, he was a bossy banshee, but he was also going only so far. He pushed until I could stand on my own. With every passing day I was getting stronger, the ground beneath my feet was steadier, and before long, I thought I would stand next to him on equal footing. Most of the time, anyway. Sometimes I wanted him to take charge. One day, soon, I would give him a real surprise and show him what I could do when I decided to take charge. I had a feeling he'd enjoy it as much as I enjoyed his "lessons".

I had made it back to the boundaries of the Back Bay when I felt something—off. The sensation of life in the air vanished. I looked around me, but the streets and sidewalk were empty. I took a deep breath, scenting the air, and found it devoid of—anything. The hairs on the back of my neck rose in warning and with instincts bred from centuries of being the victim, I threw myself to the ground as something made a strike for my head.

Something I couldn't see, but I *felt* the vibration of its presence in the air around me. I checked my surroundings. There was a patch of dirt near me, a touch frozen over, but that hardly mattered. I slammed my hand into the earth, pulverizing it in my fist and throwing it in an arc around me as I stood, watching carefully.

The earth met resistance mid-air on my left flank. I lashed out at the invisible attacker with as much force as I could put into my swing. I felt myself make contact with flesh and bone covered by fabric. I followed up by grabbing at the figure dusted with flecks of dirt. The fabric in my hands was thick and slightly rough, a wool coat, I thought. I dug my nails into the fabric and snarled at my attacker.

"What are you?" I don't know why I asked, I couldn't see his lips move to get the answer, but it seemed appropriate.

And then, for the first time in five hundred years, I did *hear* something. Laughter. The instance shocked me into stillness. My surprise gave the thing an opening, slamming me back down onto the concrete with enough force that it cracked under me. I felt my bones break and I screamed.

I wasn't going to stop fighting for a few broken bones. I lashed out, hand arched into a claw as I dragged my nails through skin—I thought it was his face. The blood of my attacker was not invisible, and as it ran down his cheek

it revealed the shape of his jaw. I reached up and smeared the blood across his face.

I never would have expected the face revealed to me in red. I had seen many a thing in my life, but this I did not understand. It was Kester Griffin, but as I watched, the invisibility slipped away to reveal the man in his entirety—vampiric fangs and all.

“That’s not possible.”

He dropped the pretense of his invisibility and smiled, showing off both his vampire fangs and the long row of razor sharp teeth behind his human set, like a shark’s. I hadn’t been frightened before—but the sight of those teeth made my heart race.

“Scared?”

“Kester, what are you doing?”

He blinked. “Who is Kester?”

“You are Kester.”

His eyes, which had been dilated and large, changed for a moment. “What?” The vampire fangs disappeared and he stumbled away from me. “What are you doing here?” he demanded.

I watched him warily as I stood. My bones were healing, but it was going to take a proper long feed before they were tip top, and the sun was coming. “You attacked me.”

“No, I didn’t.”

“You did.” I took a step forward and he stepped back, shaking his head. I saw his eyes begin to dilate and the mad look he’d had before returned along with the fangs.

“No, he didn’t,” he said. “*I did.*” He turned around to look at the sky and then looked back to me.

“The sun rises. I will kill you next time.”

He ran off before I could say anything and I was in no shape to run after him. I gritted my teeth against the pain, and started running. The sun was coming.

I made into the lobby just before the sun's light broke through the shadows cast by the towering buildings. My late arrival and disheveled appearance were marked by the front desk security as I rushed past them and into the elevator. In spite of my pain and general irritation, I was still somewhat in shock and more than a bit in awe about what I had witnessed.

A fey vampire. My brain felt like mush. I simply was not made to stay up like this. As I stood in the elevator, I found my legs no longer wished to support me and I slid onto the floor. I felt the sun like a lead weight in my limbs.

I watched through narrowed eyes as the elevator doors opened. Donal was there waiting for me. He was there in a flash. I couldn't see what he was saying, my eyes were closing too fast. I felt him lift me up into his arms. I felt us moving and then—I was out.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Donal

“I need help,” I said as I carried the unconscious Cillian inside. The vampplings were abed, so it was the pookas that appeared to help me. “I’m putting him to bed, check all of the footage from outside the building, find out where he was—find out what happened.”

They nodded in tandem and hurried off to do as I asked. I took Cillian to his bedroom and laid him out, stripping of his clothes to assess the damage. There was blood on his hands and face, but it didn’t appear to be his. There were deep bruises on his back and as I touched him, I could feel the shifting of muscle under skin that indicated he was healing.

Thank Lugh.

“He is quite handsome.”

Only my age kept me from jumping out of my skin as my Lady appeared from the shadows and took a seat on the other side of the bed. Her sable hair was pulled into a tight braid against her head, her nails were black and she wore a white lace dress.

“Run away from a wedding, my Lady?”

She smiled. “You know no man will ever pledge himself to me. Too fragile, poor things.” She looked at Cillian. “Not like this one. He is strong. Cillian Doone, son of Padraig. Another good strong man.” She leaned over him, running her nails over his exposed chest. I didn’t bother asking for her to stop, she wouldn’t and I didn’t feel the urge to be flayed today.

“Do you know what attacked him?”

She nodded. “Better, I know who.” She looked into my eyes. “Kester Griffin.”

“That doesn’t make any sense. A siren can’t do what has been done to these people.”

“He is not simply a siren any longer. It appears he was reborn—bitten by a vampire.”

“Fey cannot—”

She held up a hand to stop me. “He is not entirely vampire, nor is he entirely fey. He has become caught between the two. I do not know if it is something that can be fixed. I do not know if he even knows what he’s doing. All I am certain of is that his vampire half is hunting the bloodline of the one that bit him. Possibly in the misguided belief that killing them all off will fix him.”

She shook her head and sighed. “Poor boy. He is not strong.”

“When did this happen?”

“I cannot be sure, sirens do not follow my path.” She touched my face. “I am sorry, I know you cared for him once.”

“Once,” I admitted. “But my tastes have changed.”

My Lady smiled and kissed me. “You have good taste, O’Neil. Kester was simply an aberration. This boy,” she glanced at Cillian, “he is more than good taste. He is special.” She took a deep breath. “Deal with Kester, O’Neil.”

She pulled away from me and before my eyes burst into a cloud of black feathers, and vanished. Ever the dramatic one, my Lady. I looked back at Cillian and noticed something strange. Where the Morrigan had touched his chest a pattern had appeared in blue. A pattern of knotwork that was familiar. A warrior’s pattern, much like the one splayed across my own skin.

I touched it gently. The marks didn’t budge. The Morrigan, it seemed, approved of Cillian in a significant way. I’m not sure how I felt about that. It was a bit disconcerting, but also sort of—nice. She thought I was on the right path. I took a breath and laid down next to Cillian, putting my arms around him and pressing my face to his neck.

“I’ll never leave you.”

Never.

I woke before sunset to wait for Cillian to wake up. He’d healed slowly while he slept, and I had no doubt he would be hungry. I was willing to let him have a sip of my personal vintage. When he finally woke up, it was thrashing from a nightmare.

I put a hand on his chest and he settled quickly. “Donal. It was Kester Griffin.”

“I know,” I said.

“I’m hungry.”

I held out an arm. “Feed.”

“Really?”

“I’m the best you’ll ever have.”

He smiled. “I know.” He took my arm very gently and made an incision with the sharp edge of his nail and licked along the edge before latching on and taking a long drink. When he pulled away, his eyes were slightly glazed and his cheeks flushed. “I feel better.”

“Good, because there’s a siren out there we need to kill.”

“He—not just a siren.” Cillian shook his head. “Vampire.”

“I know that as well.” I swallowed. “I asked my Lady for assistance. The Morrigan.”

He blinked. “The Morrigan? Are you insane?”

“Sometimes. Anyway, she told me about Kes. He’s... not fey or vampire. He’s something I’ve never seen or heard of. His vampire half is separate from him. He might not even know what he’s become.”

Cillian pulled himself into a sitting position. “He is still a killer.”

“I do not excuse what he’s done, Cillian. I only try to understand.” I sighed. “Now, let’s get you cleaned up.”

I still wasn’t sure how I was going to explain where the tattoos came from. He was *definitely* going to notice.

Cillian awkwardly climbed out of bed and headed for the bathroom. Given that I had taken off all of his clothes the previous morning, I was treated to a fine view of his shoulder blades—and that exceptional ass.

I counted to five silently, approximating how long it would take him to notice, and was rewarded with a shout of surprise. He hustled back into the bedroom, rubbing at the marks with one hand.

“Donal, there’s—” He gestured at the marks, at a loss, and made the sign for *why* sharply.

“You can thank the Morrigan for those. I think she likes you.”

If he was capable of fainting in shock, he would have. “The Morrigan... likes me.” He blinked and turned around, walking back into the bathroom. I heard the shower turn on. It was best to give him space to let it all sink in. While he was doing that, I changed into some clothes I’d left here for emergencies and went out to the living room to see if anyone else was up. Adam was watching the news, drinking from a bottle of blood.

“How is Cillian?” he asked. “Aidan said he came in bloody and the door was locked when I went to check on him.”

“Healed,” I replied. “He’ll be fine. Where are the others?”

“Joanne is in her condo with the interior decorators and Zach”—he made a face—“Zach is playing solitaire.”

“That’s healthy.” Luckily, calling James had been the right idea. We would have someone to counsel the boy soon enough. Thinking of James—I ought to call him and brief him about last night’s events. I felt very calm about the revelation of Kes. We had been apart too long for me to feel any sense of grief and I was still angry, so that was overriding any pity I might have had. Knowing him, he probably tried to transfix the wrong vampire.

I stepped into the kitchen on the pretense of not being overheard and dug through the fridge for a bagel before making my call.

“Donal,” he answered.

“James, Cillian was attacked again last night, and this time he got a good look.”

“Please tell me you have a name.”

“We do. I’ll let you know the moment it’s been taken care of.”

There was a long pause before he answered, “It has to be Cillian’s kill, Donal. You understand that.”

“I do.” Even if I did want to strangle Kes with my bare hands for hurting Cillian. The Families had to know it was Cillian that killed Kes. It had to be him if he was to maintain his footing here in Boston.

“Good. Call me when it’s done.”

“I will.”

This was why I left Ireland, too many fucking politics in the fey courts. Vampires were bad, but the fey were so much worse. I put my phone away, rubbing the palm of my hand against my forehead and shaking my head.

My life used to be so simple.

Cillian walked into the kitchen, eyes lighting up when he saw me. *I was looking for you*, he signed.

“I called James to give him an update.”

He made an *ah* face and leaned against the counter. *What do you want to do?*

“You have to kill him. It’s the only way to appease the Families.”

Cillian nodded and rubbed a hand through his still damp hair, spiking it up into a crest down the middle of his head. “Where?”

“We’ll track him down.”

“All right.” He straightened. “I need a sword.”

“I think I can help with that.”

It was strange to think that, until today, Cillian had never been to my apartment. It was in the more working class part of Boston, not because I couldn’t afford better, but because I didn’t need better. It was close to work, and that was the important thing. We took the stairs up to the third floor of the old brick warehouse, which had been converted to apartment space during gentrification some thirty years ago. My apartment was an open plan loft with brick walls and a steel beam ceiling. I suppose nowadays the area had started to become more desirable, but I had bought the place outright some years ago. I wasn’t concerned about rising rentals.

“Nice place,” Cillian said, taking a look around my sparsely furnished living area. One corner had a rug, a couch and a TV for watching the news and

entertaining, another corner had a small kitchen, but the bulk of the space was dedicated to open floor. On the walls hung the weapons I had accumulated over the years. An axe and sword from the Vikings who came to the shores of Ireland when I was a lad. Rapiers and foils from the Spanish and French. Long swords from the English and on and on.

I always kept the weapons.

Cillian took in my armory silently, walking along the walls. He paused on a short blade. One I had used myself once upon a time. It was a light infantry sword, practical. “I had one like this,” he said. “Lost it.” He turned to me. “You have a large collection.”

“I fought in many battles. I like to remember.”

“Anything more—new?”

“Of course.” I joined him at the wall and led him down to the wooden cabinet where I kept those weapons I’d occasion to use in the last dozen years. One of which was the short blade I’d lent him to kill Damien. It was this that I pulled out of the cabinet and handed to him. “This seems most appropriate.”

He recognized the blade with a smile. “Yes. Very.” He looked at the wicked edge and smiled.

“Let’s find that siren.”

I smiled. “It’s a date.”

I’d had stranger dates. I had no doubt I would have stranger dates with him. Tonight, though, tonight we would cement Cillian’s hold on the city, his position amongst the Families and his safety. I didn’t know where we would be in a hundred years, but I did know I wanted to be right next to him the whole way.

Always.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Cillian

Donal expedited our search by calling Kester's precinct and finding out if he was on duty that night. He was not. In fact, he'd called in sick. Perhaps our siren was beginning to get an inkling that something was wrong with him. The killings had been going on for the better part of a year, little enough time that a narcissist like Kester could ignore minor lapses in time if he so chose. Or perhaps he simply didn't care that there were days he couldn't recall.

I don't know that I would be so cavalier.

Donal drove us to Kester's apartment, but the siren was not there. I had never tracked someone with the intent to murder them before, but I got a good whiff of his scent.

"We go on foot," I said.

Donal nodded, "All right. Keep your eyes open."

"And your ears," I replied.

He made a face and we started off after the seaweed and death scent of the siren. It didn't appear that he was going anywhere in particular. The scent wandered down main streets and side streets, brick paved alleys and empty lots, parks and parking structures until it took us down into the subway. He'd taken the Blue Line.

"Now what?" I asked.

"I would bet he's going to the ocean," Donal said. "We can start at Revere Beach."

I eyed the map and nodded. "All right." We'd bought tickets on the way in and boarded the next train headed to the beach. I hoped Donal was right. I wanted this to be over. I wanted the man who killed Ignacio to be dead. I wanted to start my new life without the old one hanging over me.

It was strange, riding the train, sitting next to Donal. I read the advertisements and the public health notices, watching the other passengers out of the corner of my eye. Donal put an arm around my shoulders, drawing a

disdainful look from a middle-aged woman in a faux fur coat even I knew was in poor taste. I gave her a look in return and she moved off without blinking.

Donal looked at me and smiled. “Offended?”

I shrugged. “I didn’t hurt her.”

He shook his head and gave me a kiss. “Bold boy.”

“I wish I knew what you sound like,” I said. “I bet you still sound like Ireland.”

He smiled, “You’d win that bet.”

“Good.”

“I suppose you only date Irishmen?”

“Before you... I had a typewriter and—one night stands.”

“Don’t feel bad, most of my relationships have ended in murder.”

I gave him a look. “Murder?”

“About fifty-fifty.” He shrugged. “I’ve a terrible temper, I admit. I don’t take breakups well.”

“I promise I won’t break up with you.”

“Oh, good.” He kissed me. “And I promise that after Kes’ head is separated from his body, you’ll get an extra special reward.”

“Oh?”

“It’s a secret now, and you won’t be prying it out of me.”

A secret reward?

“There’s our stop now.” He stood up. “Job to do.”

I got up and followed Donal off the train. I wasn’t a fan of Revere Beach myself, it was far too attractive to tourists. I preferred more secluded stretches of coast. Perhaps I could convince Donal to go on a little trip to a private beach. Perhaps I could buy a beach... I wasn’t entirely certain how much money I actually had, but I was assured it was in the range of obscenity. Surely I had enough to buy a beach. I would have to ask James about it.

Then Donal and I could go swimming—naked.

I pulled my focus on the present as we walked out of the station and headed for the beach. I wasn't expecting to catch Kester's scent, so when I did I stopped and took another breath. Definitely the siren. "He was here," I said.

"Good."

I followed his scent from the station down to the water. Things became more muddled from there as the scent of siren mingled with the thick smell of salt water and death that was a natural part of the ocean. There was far too much foot traffic to get any tracks off the sand. I took off my shoes and socks and left them at the parking lot before walking out onto the beach. I really wasn't sure how to follow the trail from here, but I would not stop.

Donal kept close by as I walked down the beach and kept my eyes on the shoreline. On impulse, I picked up a handful of sand and dumped it in my coat pocket in case the vampire half decided to play the invisible man again. I continued to scent the air as I walked north along the shoreline.

The moment I caught a fresh bit of scent, I saw my quarry at the water's edge, knee deep in the tide. About six meters from him, Kester turned to us and smiled. His feeding teeth were exposed, but not the vampire fangs.

"Donal and his pet vampire," he said. "What a surprise. What are you doing here?"

I pulled the blade out from under my coat. "I'm here to cut your head off."

"I'm sorry, your accent is so thick all I got was cut," he replied.

I brought the blade up, motioned it across my throat and pointed it at him. "Clear?"

"Very." He stepped out of the water. "My question is, why?"

"You tried to kill me," I said. "You killed my maker."

The feeding teeth disappeared, the vampire fangs appeared and Kester's eyes went dark. "No, I did that."

I felt a momentary bit of guilt that I would be killing a person who didn't completely know what they had done, but that was deadened quickly. Sirens were killers by nature, Kester was no different. He would have pulled sailors from their ships to a bloody death beneath the waves. As a sailor at heart, I could kill a siren without feeling guilty.

Besides, I didn't know Kester very well, and what I did know of him I didn't like. I reached into my pocket and threw the sand at the vampire as I rushed toward him. Not expecting that, he recoiled. He did manage to slip away before I could cut his head off. I attacked again; I didn't want to give him an opportunity to concentrate well enough to use whatever power he was using to become invisible.

No matter what power a vampire has, they still have to concentrate to use it, and this vampire was not old enough to concentrate on an attacker and use an ability that sophisticated. I had learned a little in the last few weeks. As he dodged my newest attack, for instance, I could use my power and attack at the same time.

A power I wasn't very good at, but I was going to give myself an A for effort as I opened my free hand and brought flames to life from thin air. My mastery power terrified me, and for good reason, but the look on the siren-cum-vampire's face was priceless. He was clearly terrified, and that made me very happy. I threw the flame at his feet and caught his trousers on fire. The expression on his face made me think he was probably screaming. I threw more fire. Creatures of the sea were generally terrified of fire—vampires as well—so it was double the horror for this fellow.

I continued my attack, and he ran toward the ocean to put out the flames. I followed him in. The siren in him was pulling him toward familiar ground. Luckily, I could swim. He kept going deeper, and I followed. I stripped out of my jacket and kept going. When he dove in, so did I. And I sent up a prayer that I would make it out of here alive. After all, I had that reward coming to me from Donal. I put the blade between my teeth and swam as quickly as I could after the siren. He was born to the water, but I was not. I had, however, been swimming since before I could walk. I was also a supernatural being and hundreds of years old. I wasn't sure how old Kester was. I didn't care, I was only concerned that he didn't live any longer than he had already.

The familiar taste of salt water got into my mouth and nose as I went as quickly as I could after him. There were moments when I got close, but he kept sliding just out of reach. I couldn't use my fire underwater, but I was still a vampire. I was still dangerous.

I focused, pulled the blade from my teeth, got as close as I could and lashed out.

Blood clouded the water and Kester turned on me, lunging forward teeth first. I punched him in the face and grabbed him by the hair, kicking my legs and pushing us both backwards. I kept kicking and held on as tight as I could, getting my other arm around his neck in a choke hold until we got into shallow water and I dragged him onto the beach. I was soaked, but I still had the blade. I tossed the siren to the ground, and before he got to his feet I raised the sword and brought it down onto his exposed neck. Blood soaked the sand beneath his body as it fell onto the beach. I picked up his head and grabbed my soaked jacket, wrapping it up carefully. After all, I was going to need proof.

Donal was waiting, calm, arms crossed over his chest. When I reached him, he put an arm around me and then kissed me. He pulled back and smiled. “Good work, Cillian.”

“Let’s go home.”

“I’ll get us a cab.”

“Okay.” I felt strange. Strong. I felt like the world was mine. Boston was mine. No one, no Family was ever going to take this city away from me.

One cab ride, one shower, and a change of clothes later, I was the proud possessor of a box with a decapitated head inside it and preparing for morning. Phone calls had been made and the children were in bed. Donal was waiting for me in the bedroom, and I’d put the head box in the fridge.

There was an hour before dawn and Donal clearly intended to take full advantage of that hour. He was naked, giving me a great view of his tattoos. I was still coming to terms with my own recent inking. It was never a good thing for a god to take an interest in you, and the Morrigan was quite possibly the worst of them to do so. Right now, though, I was going to focus on what was in front of me.

A glorious, golden man with pale hair and bronze eyes, marked by a pattern of blue and a variety of scars, and all he was wearing was his dignity. I might have been drooling, but I was still high from the kill and the swim. Now I was getting high off Donal, which was an entirely different, but equally pleasant experience.

“Is this my reward?”

He smiled. “Part. I said I had something special, and I do.” He reached under the nearby pillow and retrieved something I recognized with an electric shock. “I wonder if this will leave more permanent marks?” He held up the implement.

“It’s a bit Scottish,” I remarked.

“At least it’s not English,” he replied.

I couldn’t help my smile, and I went over to him and climbed onto the bed—and over his lap. A striking start to what would become a most memorable evening. I was still riding high on a feeling of dominance and I wanted to ride a wave of ecstasy and pain. Perhaps tomorrow I would go out and eat a couple squirrels, dance in a nightclub, do something to intentionally irritate Donal and he’d put me in this position again.

At least I knew what I wanted.

“I love you.”

Two years later

It had been centuries since I had stepped foot in my homeland, and doing so now made me feel nostalgic. I was coming home, but I was also away from home. My home was in Boston now, with my fledgling family. It stung, the realization that I couldn’t really go back, but Ireland still welcomed me in her green bosom. Half-remembered music played in my mind.

In the days following my dispatching of Kester Griffin, things had changed even more for me. It was like someone sent out the word that Boston was now the place for the lonely, the damaged, the dysfunctional and banished of the vampire world. Not all had been welcome, and more than a few had been put down for the safety of my city. Some, however, had been welcome. Which was how this day came to be.

The numbers of my house had at first doubled, and then tripled, and now I was Lord and Master to a staggering two dozen. The only Family that could boast that number was in Egypt, and they kept to themselves. Cortez had eighteen, and they were the second largest. It did not take many vampires to create a force worth reckoning with. True, most of my new children were

accidents of rebirth, or lacking in some way that the others of our community shunned them for.

I would not do that. My home was the Island of Misfit Toys for vampires. The blind, deaf and mute. The broken and the abandoned. We'd had to hire three psychologists to serve in residence, and after one unfortunate incident we'd had to refurbish the basement into a group of cells to hold those having trouble adjusting. I had a system similar to baseball, except three strikes ended with a sword to the throat. I was sympathetic, not stupid. Some people just can't change.

I had left Adam in charge while I was gone. The young vampire had turned out to be incredibly loyal and there was no doubting his dedication. He had protected our home often enough from interlopers and mad vampires. I did, however, bring along a few of my family. It was a necessary risk. Joanne was along to make sure all of the scheduling went smoothly and that I didn't do anything foolish, or so she said. I thought that's why Donal was along, to be fair.

He insisted it was simply so we could use the Ways to travel and avoid airports; that, and he was determined to make sure this trip went well. It wasn't every day a new Family was recognized. It was a historic occasion. I had chosen the location for the meet with no small consideration. It was by tradition the city of your rebirth, but given that that city was firmly under the control of the Cortez family, I had opted instead for the place of my human birth. County Donegal near the Sliabh Liag. We had chosen a small town to invade for the event. Even Irish stubbornness couldn't be outdone by James with his smiles and wads of cash.

The vampire powers helped, too.

My entourage camped on the north end of the town and waited for the rest of the Family representatives to arrive. Seven of the Families would be sending representation to make my new status official. James Argent would be here for the Bourbons, and a friend of Donal's would be here for the Dublin Family. We would meet in the town hall to hold the ceremony at midnight. Everyone in my group wore my glyph on their person, Joanne as a necklace. All three of my original children had matching pendants.

I wore it as a signet ring, a ship rising off a wave carved into a deep blue sapphire and inlaid with silver mounted on a heavy platinum band. Donal said it was very fitting, I found it ostentatious. I had moved on from Armani and designers to a bespoke tailor named Dave last year in an effort to look less like the other vampire lords. I wanted to stand out. Tonight I was wearing a black suit and shirt with a blue tie that matched my eyes. Upon closer inspection, one would see the black on black embroidery on my cuffs and collar.

The buttons were hand carved ebony.

I'd gotten to know a great deal about clothes over the past two years. It had been quite a learning curve for me. Joanne and Adam and Zach had been in about as bad a state, but without having the benefit of ever having dressed well. They were young. Speaking of Zach, my still quiet protégé had joined me on this excursion. I didn't like to leave him alone. He had a tendency to retreat to his room and start talking to his stuffed animals.

We were down to six animals, which was a huge improvement, but there was still a lot of work to be done there.

"Zachary," I called. The blond turned toward me. He was decently dressed, Joanne's doing, but his tie was undone. "Your tie."

He looked down, "Right."

I sighed and walked up to him, fixing the tie. "There. We must always present a united front, Zachary."

He nodded. "Yes, Cillian."

My accent, I was told, was much improved. It was only a problem when I started speaking too quickly. At which point, according to Donal, I sounded as thick as a peat bog. I was comfortable with that. I didn't need to be perfect, even if Donal told me all the time that I was. He was perfect, though. My bossy banshee in his gorgeous green pinstripe suit, he looked like sex on two legs.

He was sex on two legs, but that's beside the point.

After this we were going to take a little vacation on a secluded nude beach. It was going to be amazing.

Joanne waved to catch my attention. "We need to go to the meeting point, Cillian."

“Right.” I kissed Zachary on the cheek. “Come along, let’s go look important.”

“I’m not important,” he said. “You’re important.”

I shook my head. “You are very important, Zachary. You’re the only person in this place I can count on to be yourself.”

He blushed and I got a smile out of him.

“That’s a lad.”

Zachary and I joined Joanne and started out for the meeting space where Donal was already waiting for us. I’d chosen to hold this meeting out of doors in honor of my roots. Some of the representatives had taken offense, but it wasn’t like it was their day. I wanted to do this my way. The Families needed the occasional reminder that I wasn’t going to toe the company line. Their egos could take it.

All told I had a company of seven, including myself, to stand with me. The other families would match that number, by prior agreement. Keeping things in balance was important. None of them were bringing a banshee though, so I think I was winning. The area had been marked with the same sort of paint we used to mark glyphs. It could only be seen under UV light, but vampires weren’t exactly limited to the typical spectrum. My group took our place at the northernmost position and waited.

The Bourbons, as my supporters, were the first to arrive. They were followed by the group from the Dublin Family and then another and another until the final section was filled by the Cortez family. They had contested, but they weren’t powerful enough to do anything given how many masters they’d lost trying to kill me over the years.

James Argent stood for the Bourbons, given that their head of family hadn’t left France in three hundred years. He called the meet to order.

“I welcome you all, brothers and sisters, to this joyous occasion. It has been over two hundred years since we have acknowledged a new Family, and this is the first Family to ever come from the New World.”

He held a hand out to me and I took it, bridging the space between our two groups.

“We acknowledge the Doone family, which shall hold dominion over the American Northeast. The boundaries of which have been determined by treaty. Cillian Doone, I welcome you as Lord of the Boston Family.”

By his proclamation I was nearly the highest ranked vampire in attendance, only Dublin and Saint Petersburg’s Lords had come along as witness to outrank me. More out of paranoia than disrespect, except in the case of Elena’s absence, which was meant as a slight. All of those vampires who were now by definition inferior bowed or knelt depending on their status, and I nodded to them all as regally as I knew how from Donal’s coaching.

“Thank you, Master Argent, for those kind words. My Family thanks you for this. We will stand by our treaties as sworn. I see this as a great step forward for our kind. I know we will be close in the coming days. Change is coming to us all, I only hope we’re ready.”

I could feel Donal next to me. I hoped he was proud.

James nodded to me and then looked to his neighbor. The acknowledgements continued from each family until we reached Cortez. They were represented by a swarthy fellow in a ridiculous white hat called Lubo.

He only nodded, but chose not to speak.

Eventually, Elena and I would come to a head, but that was not to be on this day.

With the ceremony done, our groups splintered off to celebrate, call home and in the case of Cortez, slink off home. I spent some time with the other Families, shaking hands and making enemies, before slinking off with Donal to a secluded cliffside cave I had used to hide in as a boy.

I could remember how the waves sounded when they crashed against the cliffs, and for a moment, that memory was so real. Donal wiped a tear from my cheek.

“Are you all right?”

“Just remembering what it was like to hear the waves,” I replied. “Wishing I could hear your voice.”

He took my face in his hands and kissed me, the low growl emanating from his throat vibrating to my lips. “*I love you.*” I felt the force of his words and the shape as he crafted each vowel against my lips and tongue.

He broke away for a moment. “Hear that?”

I shook my head. “Hear what?”

He placed my hand over his heart so I could feel it beating. “That’s my heart, telling you I love you.”

I closed my eyes and pulled him close for another kiss.

What did I do to deserve this man?

He brought me out of my thoughts with a slap on the ass. I opened my eyes and looked at him.

“What?”

“Stay in the moment, you were drifting.”

I smiled. “Then you should make sure I don’t.”

He gave me a grin, an evil grin that showed off his white teeth. “Oh, I intend to.”

I love you, I signed.

He returned the gesture and I couldn’t help but remember that first time I had seen him on the beach. He’d been perfect and I thought he was so far out of reach. But he was mine, and I was his.

Thank you, Ignacio.

THE END

Author Bio

Missouri Dalton is a writer of horror/paranormal contemporary fantasy and alternate historical novels. Missouri was raised mainly in transit, slowed down to finish school in one place and was then determined to be as nomadic as possible, if only because that's how things just worked out. She uses writing as an escape from her own neuroses and currently lives with her dear friend Sophia.

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TAKEN

By Kim Dare

Photo Description

Three elves crowd around a captured human. The human is bound and gagged; chains attached to his collar restrain him to the floor, and his hands are cuffed behind his back. The elves are all clothed but the human's clothing has been torn away, rendering him naked and vulnerable. Each elf is tall, slender, and elegant, with long flowing hair. All three elves are reaching out toward their captive human, beginning to explore his body.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

They aren't real; at least that's what I was always told. Yet here I am, bound and at their mercy. I have no memory of how I got here. I know that I'm supposed to be afraid and ashamed of the things they do to me, but the thing is, I've never felt safer or more loved in my entire life.

Sincerely,

Jen4067

Story Info

Genre: fantasy

Tags: BDSM, bondage, edging, ménage, M/M/M/M, fae/fey/fairies, abduction/kidnapping, homophobia

Content warnings: dubious consent, extended bondage

Word count: 10,063

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Author's Note

Please note this story focuses on an MMMM relationship involving elements of BDSM. It also references off screen violence and homophobia. Additionally, some readers may consider the main relationship to contain elements of dubious consent.

TAKEN

By Kim Dare

Maxen slowly opened his eyes and peered up into the gloom above him. It was dark—too dark. Even if it was the very middle of the night, the fire in the centre of his clan’s round house should have cast enough light up toward the roof to let him make out the thick oak supporting beams. Frowning, Maxen tried to sit up.

He’d barely lifted his back an inch off the hard ground before something tugged painfully against his neck. Cold metal chains pressed against his chest, forcing him to slump back.

He tried to force his mind into action. His brain seemed reluctant to cooperate, but facts sluggishly presented themselves for his consideration. His chest was bare, although he was sure it hadn’t been when he’d gone to sleep. A draught blew across his skin, and he realised that most of his body was equally uncovered. He shifted his position as far as the chains allowed, but the only fabric he sensed lay in tatters around his ankles and forearms.

Maxen tried to swallow down his nerves, but there was something in his mouth, resting between his teeth like a narrow bit from a horse’s bridle. It made swallowing almost impossible. He pushed his tongue against it, trying to force it out, but it was somehow held securely in place.

He should have felt panicked—some little part of his mind that was less ponderous than the rest knew that. But it didn’t happen. The beginnings of something akin to fear trembled inside him, but the wave of terror he expected to swell within him at every moment—that never came.

He tried to think, but it felt as if each thought had to wade across a fast flowing river before it reached him.

He stared intently into the darkness above him, trying to understand his surroundings—the roof looked to be made out of earth, or... no. As his sight gradually adjusted to the lack of light, he saw that the roof was made from stone. Maxen turned his head slightly, expecting to see the side of some sort of

cave—perhaps like those on the farthest edge of the land his clan farmed. Instead, Maxen’s eyes came to rest on a blank earthen wall. He was underground.

Maxen’s breath caught in his throat. There was only one place he could be, one building he knew of that harboured underground rooms such as this.

He was in Lord Brackenridge’s castle—in Lord Brackenridge’s dungeon.

Maxen no longer had to look for panicked thoughts. True horror slashed through his mind, cutting away everything but primal fear. He closed his eyes very tight, as if that could somehow save him, and desperately tried to remember what had brought him to the dungeon.

He remembered...

He remembered going to sleep at the end of a long day working in the fields, curling up as close to the fire as he dared, not sure if it was better to risk freezing or to chance his ragged garments catching ablaze. He’d heard the others in his clan falling asleep close by. The fire crackled. Someone snored on the other side of the fire.

Then, Maxen supposed, he must have slept.

And, after that... nothing.

Maxen strained his hearing, desperate for any clue about the world around him. His ears buzzed as if he had been hit hard across the head. No individual sound was audible past the dull ringing noise. He’d never guessed that a dungeon would be so quiet.

There had to be people close by, he was sure of it, other prisoners at least. Lord Brackenridge had never been reluctant to lock up those he deemed a threat to his power.

Even if he couldn’t sense them, Maxen was sure that there would be men watching him, too—people studying him, waiting for any hint that he was awake. A prison would have guards. Yes, Lord Brackenridge had lots of guards...

Maxen tried to slow his breathing so as not to draw anyone’s attention. He even closed his eyes, in case someone might see a glint of light reflected in his eyes and find him out.

Making tiny movements, praying that he wouldn't cause any sound, he tested his bonds.

Metal lay around his neck, ankles, and wrists. If it had been rope, perhaps he could have tried to untie himself, but the shackles around his limbs felt strong and firm. He'd have needed the strength of ten men to break free, and even then, he would have still been in the dungeon.

Carefully tensing various muscles in turn, Maxen worked out that the metal collar around his neck was attached to the two lengths of chain that ran across his chest. The other ends of the chains seemed to be attached firmly to the ground to each side of him, although he had no way of telling by what.

"What shall we name him?" The words tugged at the very edge of Maxen's hearing. He wasn't even sure that he hadn't imagined them. His heart raced so fast, the beat would surely have drowned out real words. Holding his breath, Maxen focused all his energy on listening for more.

"It's too soon to think of that."

"We have to call him something." That sounded like the voice of the man who had spoken first.

"Why?" That was someone new, a third person.

At least three men were close enough to Maxen for him to be able to make out their words, even while they all sounded as if they attempted to speak quietly.

His eyes still closed, Maxen frowned slightly. The men didn't sound like any of the guards Maxen had heard bark orders at the villagers during their patrols.

"Everyone has to be called something," the first speaker said. He had the lightest voice and sounded like the youngest of the three. "Even humans."

Maxen barely had time to wonder about that term before someone spoke again.

"Don't get too attached to him." That voice belonged to the second speaker. It seemed more serious than the first, but still far friendlier than any of Lord Brackenridge's men had ever been known to sound.

“He’s awake.”

Maxen tensed. Too scared to move, he lay with his eyes closed and recited every prayer he could think of, calling on all the old gods that Lord Brackenridge had sought to banish when he claimed ownership of the villages all along the plains.

Sensing a movement close by, Maxen was helpless against the instinct to open his eyes. Staring straight up, he waited for the dark metal helmet of a guard to loom over him. He bit down on the thin gag.

There was no helmet.

No guard came into view.

Elves!

The gag turned the word into a mumbled mess, but it couldn’t change the reality standing before him. Three elves appeared out of the darkness, bringing with them candles and enough light to make out their individual features. Maxen stared up at them, his eyes open very wide. Each elf was male, tall and slender, with long hair falling over his shoulders and down his back.

One of the elves stepped closer and crouched down near Maxen’s feet. Maxen tried to back away. The chains held strong, restraining his wrists and ankles, keeping his legs wide apart and secured firmly to the hard ground beneath him.

The candles’ flames fluttered as the other elves moved closer, but Maxen couldn’t look away from the one at his feet. That elf was naked to the waist, his pale skin decorated with elaborate designs the same bright red hue as his hair. He reached out one red-gloved hand. Maxen had no idea what the elf intended to do. Unable to sit up, Maxen had no line of sight, no warning before the elf wrapped his fingers delicately around his cock.

Maxen jerked against his chains. He tried to sit up, but the collar forced him back down. The elf tilted his head to one side and studied Maxen’s reaction through narrowed eyes.

It wasn’t right. This wasn’t how things were done.

Maxen had felt men's hands on him before—human men. Brief caresses in the shadows of the forest, hidden away from prying eyes, where no one could see what happened—not the clan, not the village, and most of all not Lord Brackenridge's guards.

No. Maxen's pulse raced faster and faster.

This was wrong. He felt all three elves' gazes burning into him. This was nothing like being in the forest. There was nothing hidden here. He couldn't let anyone see this—allowing it would be akin to signing his own death warrant.

The elf tightened his grip around Maxen's shaft and rubbed his thumb across the tip of his cock, sending pleasure purring up his spine. Maxen sensed his shaft harden in response.

“Einion.” The word was spoken in the same warning tone as before. Maxen tore his gaze away from the elf kneeling between his spread legs. The voice belonged to the elf with the silvery white hair and the serious eyes.

Maxen swallowed past the obstruction of the gag. He tried to turn his body, but the restraints kept him helplessly in place, unable to escape the red-haired elf's touch, unable to escape *Einion's* touch.

“No. We were right. He likes it,” Einion said. “See.” He half-unfurled his fingers from around Maxen's cock to show the others how hard it was.

Maxen closed his eyes. As exposed as he was, it was impossible for him to deny anything.

Fear pounded through Maxen's veins. He was going to die. This was why the elves had brought him to their dungeons. They saw inside him the same demons that Lord Brackenridge's guards were always on the hunt for. His secret was out. Whether it was by a human's hands, or an elf's hand, he would be dead before the nightfall, and all because of the hand now wrapped around his shaft.

Maxen tried to twist away from Einion's grip, but the elf wrapped his fingers more firmly around his cock and stroked the length in slow easy

motions. It was unlike any furtive touch he'd felt from a human man. It sent more bliss rolling through his body than Maxen had ever known possible.

He shook his head, as if that could help his cause.

“That’s enough, Einion. Our guest needs time to recover.” The silver-haired elf’s tone allowed for no argument.

Annoyance clouded Einion’s eyes, but he didn’t look away from Maxen for a moment. “Ithel—”

“No.”

Maxen looked toward the apparent leader of these elves, to Ithel. A long silver robe hid most of that elf’s body, making it impossible to tell if his skin was decorated with the same kind of markings that covered Einion’s shoulders and chest, but he had no similar designs painted on his face. His only ornaments were the jewels that sparkled on his fingers and at his neck.

Maxen looked from one elf to the other, still desperately trying to both control his body’s reactions and to make his mind remember what had happened to bring him to that place.

“There will be no argument,” Ithel went on. “The human will be given time to heal before he is tested.”

Einion’s hand left him, but Maxen couldn’t breathe any sigh of relief.

Tested?

Once more his gag stole the word from him.

Either they didn’t hear him try to speak, or they didn’t care what he wanted to say. Maxen tried to remember the old stories he’d heard of the elves. He’d been told of elves stealing humans away, but there had been nothing about a test, no detail at all about what happened to humans once elves had them in their power.

Ithel turned to the third elf. “Fetch the wine, Hefin.”

That third elf, Hefin, vanished from Maxen’s line of sight, but quickly reappeared carrying a tall drinking vessel decorated with swirling metalwork.

Ithel moved around Maxen and lowered himself to his knees directly behind him. Metal clinked against metal, and the tension on the chain across Maxen's chest disappeared. Ithel placed his hands on Maxen's shoulders and guided him to sit up.

Maxen immediately tried to look over his shoulder. Ithel was right behind him, supporting him with his body. Then Maxen tried to bring his hands forward to cover himself. Chains rattled. His hands stayed where they were.

"We don't wish to hurt you," Ithel whispered in Maxen's ear. "But if you struggle, you may hurt yourself. You don't want that. Understand?"

Maxen nodded.

"Hefin," Ithel prompted.

The third elf knelt close at Maxen's side. His body was as bare as Einion's, except for a length of black cloth over one shoulder that hid part of his torso. The marks on Hefin's skin were as beautiful as anything Maxen had ever seen, but it was the delicate curved horns growing out from between his long dark strands of hair that demanded and held his attention.

Hefin held out the elfish drinking vessel, offering it delicately to Maxen's lips.

The gag was still between his teeth. He mumbled around it, trying to draw his attention to that fact.

"You can drink past it," Ithel informed him.

Maxen shook his head.

"Yes, you can," Ithel said. "Go on, Hefin."

Hefin put the glass to Maxen's lips and tipped it up. With Ithel directly behind him and his head supported on that elf's shoulder, Maxen couldn't lean away. He parted his lips as best he could.

Warm, sweet liquid trickled into his mouth. He swallowed it little by little, taking breaths whenever the flow allowed. He stared up at Hefin, knowing that even the air in his lungs was the elf's to take away whenever he pleased. Their

eyes met. Hefin smiled. Finally, he took away the vessel. He disappeared from Maxen's line of sight, but was soon back kneeling at his side once more.

Between them, the three elves seemed to completely surround Maxen. He couldn't keep all of them in his line of sight at the same time. He looked over his shoulder at Ithel, trying to read his expression, and received no warning before one of the other elves' hands came to rest on his chest. Maxen twisted back around and peered down at his own torso.

Hefin's hand rested in the middle of his chest, very gently. His hand was warm, and his touch just as sweet as the wine had been; it clouded his mind just as thoroughly. Maxen tensed as his body responded to the elf's caress, and his cock started to swell even further.

As soon as he noticed, Einion reached out toward his stiffening shaft.

"Einion," Ithel warned. "We spoke about this. The wine will help him heal. It won't take away his fear from this afternoon."

Maxen tried to turn his head and look up at Ithel again. Fear of what? He tried to force the question past the gag, but the words were unintelligible.

Hefin moved his hand up to rest on Maxen's cheek. Their eyes met. He looked so concerned.

"Does the gag have to stay on?" Hefin asked, turning his attention back to the leader of the elves.

Ithel seemed to be the one who had the final say on any decision. Time seemed to pass very slowly until he finally spoke. "You may try."

Hefin carefully reached behind Maxen's head, undid the fastening on the gag, and took it away.

Maxen swallowed rapidly, working his tongue around in his mouth and licking his lips, glorying in the simple freedom to be found in regaining control of his own mouth.

"I don't remember." His voice was raw and harsh compared to those of the elves.

The elves all exchanged looks.

Einion still knelt between Maxen's spread legs. He glared down at him, red brows almost coming together above the bridge of his nose. "You don't remember what?"

Maxen took a shaky breath. "You said that I should be afraid because of what happened. I... I don't remember what happened." He looked from one elf to another. "I don't remember anything after last night."

"See?" Einion demanded. He reached out and put his hand on Maxen's leg, pushing aside the tattered remains of Maxen's trousers, sliding his gloved hand against Maxen's bare skin. "There is no reason to—"

"We can sense your fear," Ithel cut in. "You can't lie to us—it would be far better for you not to try."

Maxen shook his head. He scrabbled around in his mind, but there seemed to be nothing there for him to find. His memory was completely blank. "But I don't remember..."

"Then why are you scared?" Einion demanded. He moved closer, and slid his hand further up Maxen's leg.

All of the elves' hands rested against him now, warming his bare skin, sending dangerous waves of pleasure through his body.

Maxen shook his head, begging his body not to respond.

"I know it's not because you dislike our touch," Einion said, smiling down at him, stroking his fingers over Maxen's flesh, making him shiver with desire. "You can't lie about that, either." He glanced pointedly down at the way Maxen's cock curved up toward his stomach.

"They'll kill me," Maxen whispered. He sensed the air in the room change. "Lord Brackenridge, his guards, if they find out that you... that I've... Please, they'll kill me."

None of the elves pulled away from him; none of them removed their hands from his skin.

"What makes you think we'd tell them?" Ithel whispered into his ear.

Maxen tensed, looking from one elf to another once more.

“We didn’t bring you here to get you killed.”

Again, Maxen studied each elf’s expression. They seemed serious; they appeared honest. “Why... why did you bring me here?” he asked, in little more than a whisper.

“Because we saw you in the forest. Because you’re beautiful,” Hefin said, very softly.

Maxen tried to sit up further, but the chains pulled him back. The best he could manage was to half-recline, supported against Ithel’s torso.

With elves surrounding him and unfamiliar sensations dancing through his body, it was so hard to think, so difficult to breathe. Hefin settled one of his hands on the inside of Maxen’s knee. Einion toyed with the chains that kept Maxen in place.

His cock grew harder. Maxen closed his eyes. “They’ll know.” Perhaps he’d managed to keep his visits to the forest with other young men a secret, but in that moment it seemed impossible that anyone would be able to look at him and not realise how much he loved the elves’ touch against his skin. Surely, it would be obvious to the entire world exactly what he wanted the elves to do.

“Humans cannot see what lies in your heart.”

Maxen forced open his eyes and looked over his shoulder at Ithel. Did he mean to say that elves could see into a man’s desires? Was that why they took him? Because they knew, because they could tell?

“You’re no use to us if you don’t enjoy what we do with you,” Ithel whispered in his ear. “Having to keep a human bound forever would be too... inconvenient.”

“You can untie me. I won’t try to get away,” Maxen promised.

“Not yet,” Ithel announced.

“But—”

“The rules that govern us exist for a reason, and the gag is still here if it’s needed.”

Maxen pressed his lips tightly together.

“If you are afraid or in pain, you may speak. But there will be no arguing with our laws. Do you understand?”

Maxen nodded, afraid to even say yes in case that caused the gag to be set back between his lips.

“Good.” Ithel caressed Maxen’s shoulder.

Out of the corner of his eye, Maxen saw him nod to the other elves.

Einion smiled. Leaning forward, he dipped his head low over Maxen’s body and took the tip of his cock between his lips.

All remembrance of the gag disappeared from Maxen’s mind. He cried out as he pulled against his chains, and stared down at Einion in a mixture of confusion and awe. There was no comparison between feeling a human’s hand on his body and having an elf’s lips move against his shaft that way.

Einion looked up along the length of Maxen’s torso. Their eyes met. The elf’s gaze wasn’t unfriendly, but amusement danced in his expression, and so did awareness of the power that Einion had over Maxen. In that moment, Maxen was helpless, not because he was bound, but because all Einion had to do was circle his tongue around the tip of his cock, and Maxen would be willing to do anything Einion asked of him. No price was too high to pay, if it convinced Einion to repeat that caress.

Still holding Maxen’s gaze, Einion dipped his head lower, sliding his lips further down Maxen’s shaft.

Maxen’s breath caught in his throat. He whimpered, needing air, but all at once unable to make his lungs function without the elves’ permission.

A firm touch against Maxen’s cheek made him tear his gaze away from Einion, but he only managed to take one breath before Ithel’s mouth covered his.

Maxen froze. Unable to react, all he could do was glory in the way Ithel’s tongue traced the line between his lips, both demanding entry and refusing to take anything that wasn’t offered freely.

Einion's mouth moved over Maxen's cock again, taking up a lethargic, teasing rhythm. Without warning, Maxen's body took over from his mind, and he attempted to thrust his hips, pushing his cock deeper into Einion's mouth.

Einion's only response was to place both his hands on Maxen's hips and pin him down against the bare earth. Neither the elf's pace nor his actions changed in any way. Maxen whimpered. He tried to squirm away from either Einion's mouth or Ithel's kiss, desperate to gain some space to think, but it was impossible.

The elves' bodies were elegant and long-limbed, but they were also strong—far stronger than any humans Maxen had encountered.

Each touch inspired both lust and fear within him. He whimpered again, tugging at his restraints, even though he wasn't sure if he wanted to escape from the elves or merely to free himself so he could reach out and caress them in return.

Einion and Ithel's actions filled all Maxen's senses. He had no thoughts to spare. He cried his surprise into Ithel's kiss as he felt a third pair of lips move against his body.

Hefin.

Starting at his neck, the third elf traced a trail of kisses down Maxen's body. Inch by inch, he set more and more nerve endings alight. Maxen gasped for breath as Hefin's path took him across one of his nipples.

Maxen arched his back, instinctively trying to keep Hefin's kisses there. For a moment, the elf seemed to hesitate. Then, he circled Maxen's nipple with his tongue. He sucked delicately around the sensitive little bit of flesh. Added to the sensations provided by the other elves, it was almost enough to let Maxen reach his climax.

He squirmed against his restraints, trying to thrust into Einion's mouth, and desperately attempting to match Ithel kiss for kiss. He was right on the edge of his pleasure. Expectation flooded his body. His muscles tensed and—

Maxen whimpered into Ithel's kiss as Einion's mouth suddenly disappeared from his world. He tried to turn away from Ithel, desperate to know what had happened, what had gone wrong.

No—Ithel kept his hand on his cheek, holding him in place.

Hefin's mouth left him within seconds, making Maxen whimper again. Still, Ithel didn't release him. He continued the kiss as if nothing had changed. It was only when Maxen gave in and accepted the kiss that Ithel slowly pulled away, leaving Maxen abandoned and alone—even while their hands still remained on his skin.

Maxen peered up at them. The elves were exchanging speaking looks above him. Not one of them glanced down at him. It was almost as if they were so focused on each other they had forgotten he was there.

A tiny nod from Ithel, and Einion smiled. He moved his hands from where they'd rested on Maxen's hips, sliding them both down between Maxen's legs until his gloved fingers caressed Maxen's balls.

Another nod from Ithel, and Hefin moved away from them all. There was no time for Maxen to worry about that, because Ithel was moving too, guiding Maxen to lie back, flat on the earth.

“What's happening, what are you—?”

Ithel placed a fingertip on Maxen's lips. He didn't have to mention the gag aloud. Maxen remembered his earlier warning well enough. Ithel smiled when he saw the way Maxen instinctively pressed his lips together.

Metal links rattled and the chains across Maxen's chest once more pinned him flat against the floor.

Hefin returned and handed something to Einion. Maxen tried to lift his head and see what it was, but the chains made it impossible. Unable to remain entirely still, he clenched and unclenched his fists, trying to expel his energy in a way that wouldn't offend the elves.

Einion's hands left Maxen for several seconds. When his fingers returned to Maxen's skin, the gloves were gone, and his touch didn't move against either his balls or his cock. He rubbed his fingertips firmly against Maxen's hole. Whatever Hefin had brought across the room, it slicked Einion's touch, and his fingers slid easily against the sensitive ring of muscle.

Maxen stared up at the elves. Each seemed to understand what was happening without a word needing to be spoken between them. Maxen closed

his eyes as Einion circled his hole with his fingertips, teasing and testing the flesh there. No human had ever touched him that way. He bit down on his bottom lip as unfamiliar sensations assaulted his mind.

The pressure behind Einion's caresses increased. One of his fingertips slid into Maxen's hole. He twisted against the chains. Opening his eyes to stare up at the elves in shock as he saw what the other two elves were doing. He blinked rapidly, clearing his vision, making sure he didn't miss another second of it. As he watched, Ithel kissed Hefin again. Sliding his arms around the youngest elf, Ithel pulled him closer. Time seemed to stand still as the kiss morphed into another, then another.

Maxen's lips parted. He would have given anything to have been able to sit upright and join their kiss. His chains clinked. Einion chuckled, drawing Maxen's attention away from the other elves' kiss.

Maxen looked toward Einion just in time to allow Einion to see his expression change when the elf slid a second finger inside him and stretched his hole open further.

Glancing back at Ithel and Hefin, Maxen realised that the elves had cast aside their clothes. Each elf was now completely naked but for their intricate metalwork jewellery. Tearing his attention away from the kiss, Maxen turned his gaze toward the elves' cocks. Ithel had his hand wrapped firmly around Hefin's shaft—the gems in his rings caught the light and sparkled as he caressed him.

When the elves knelt, their cocks were brought closer to Maxen's eye level. He suddenly had a perfect vantage point. Head turned to the side, he watched, fascinated, as Ithel stroked Hefin's shaft again and again. He heard Hefin's breathing change as Ithel tightened his grip around him.

Gradually, Maxen managed to look at other parts of the elves' bodies, and he realised that they had rearranged themselves. Ithel now knelt behind Hefin. With one hand on Hefin's chest, Ithel tugged him back so their bodies were pressed tightly together.

Ithel looked over Hefin's shoulder, directly at Maxen. "You liked the way Einion's lips felt against your cock," he reminded him.

It would have been stupid to deny it. Maxen nodded slightly.

Ithel moved forward. Hefin had little choice but to do the same. The youngest of the three elves had his head tilted back in pleasure. He stared up at the ceiling just as Maxen had a few minutes before.

Another movement forward by both elves, and Hefin's shaft was just a few inches from Maxen's face. Looking up, Maxen met Ithel's gaze for a moment, before quickly returning his attention to Hefin's cock.

If the humans guessed what the elves had done with him, he would be killed anyway. He had nothing left to lose, no reason to do anything other than what he'd wished to do with another man for as long as he could remember. Lifting his head away from the cold earth and straining against his chains, he was just able to brush his lips against the tip of Hefin's cock.

Hefin's whole body jerked. Ithel smiled and shuffled forward again, pushing Hefin closer to Maxen, making it easier for Maxen to wrap his lips around the topmost part of Hefin's erection.

Hefin seemed to melt back against Ithel, as if all his strength had to leave him in order to make more room for pleasure in his body. Ithel whispered something in Hefin's ear, too low for Maxen to be able to make out the words. Whatever was said, Hefin nodded his agreement with it.

Maxen moved his tongue against the very tip of the elf's cock, trying to copy the way Einion had kissed his own flesh earlier. It was impossible. His mouth was so clumsy compared to Einion's. His tongue refused to curl and flutter against Hefin's cock the way it should have.

Maxen whimpered his frustration.

Hefin murmured his approval, and the taste of him grew stronger in Maxen's mouth—sweet and salty at the same time. Maxen swallowed rapidly, eager for more. He moaned around Hefin's shaft. That sound seemed to please the elf, too. There was no reason for Maxen to try to remain silent in order to please the man he held within his mouth.

There was freedom in that knowledge. When Einion's fingers moved deep inside him and found some magical point, Maxen didn't try to keep his

pleasure at the discovery to himself. Bliss unlike anything he'd ever known shot through him, and he let all the elves know.

Perhaps, in his pleasure, he'd made some sort of noise that sounded like a complaint. Einion took away his fingers, but Maxen couldn't protest—that would have meant taking his mouth away from Hefin, and he couldn't lose his connection to both elves in such quick succession. He knew he wouldn't survive such a loss.

With his head turned toward Hefin, Maxen had no way of determining what Einion was doing now. He rocked his hips, praying that his skin would brush against the elf's body and he would at least know where Einion was.

Yes!

Einion's hands came to rest on Maxen's skin once more. They settled on his flanks, pinning him against the ground. For a moment, Maxen thought that Einion intended to wrap his lips around his cock and grant him the same pleasure as before. The idea of feeling an elf's mouth against his shaft, while his own lips still caressed Hefin's cock, was enough to make Maxen's mind race.

But, no... Something pressed against Maxen's hole instead. All of the elves' hands were accounted for. That left only one possibility.

Maxen opened his eyes but the angles were all wrong. It was impossible for him to see what Einion was doing. He was blind to all details as he felt Einion push forward and settle his cock deep within his arse for the first time.

Maxen gasped around Hefin's cock and squirmed within his restraints. The sensation was unlike anything he'd ever experienced, beyond anything he'd imagined possible.

The villagers would kill him if they knew, but in that moment, he knew it would be worth dying for. He tugged at his chains, but he had no interest in getting away from the elves. He needed to reach out to them, to touch them and explore their bodies, just as they'd touched him.

He had to have everything—everything he'd been afraid to want, afraid to need from another man. He sucked more firmly around Hefin's cock as Einion thrust deep within him, and came as close to bliss as any human could.

Past Hefin, Maxen saw Ithel move away. The leader of the three elves moved around Maxen. His silvery-white cloak was gone and Ithel held his cock in his hand, gently stroking his shaft as he moved to kneel on the other side of Maxen. His skin was very pale. His glans stood out in stark contrast to his shaft as his strokes drew back his foreskin.

As he desperately tried to make his tongue caress Hefin's cock in the way that would best please the elf, Maxen watched Ithel out of the corner of his eye. He saw Ithel reach across to Hefin and slide his fingers into the long, dark strands of hair. Tugging Hefin forward, Ithel brought their lips together in a fierce kiss.

As Hefin leaned closer to Ithel, his cock slid deeper between Maxen's lips. It was too much. A wave of uncertainty roared through Maxen, and he pulled back, gasping for breath. He turned his head, looking directly up into the kiss. They were so beautiful, so perfect.

Turning his head a little more, Maxen realised that Ithel's bare shaft was now just a few inches away from his cheek. He twisted his neck and brought his lips to the head of Ithel's shaft. He ran his tongue over the tip. Ithel swayed forward, allowing Maxen to wrap his lips around the head, but he didn't push so deeply within his mouth as Hefin had a moment before.

Pleasure danced in Maxen's veins. His mind couldn't keep up, couldn't process it all. The village, Lord Brackenridge, the guards—they were all far away, in a world that barely existed.

Something brushed against Maxen's right cheek. Maxen had to release Ithel's shaft in order to turn his head.

Hefin's cock was just an inch from his lips. Both shafts were so close to his mouth. Not knowing what else to do, Maxen turned to first one, then the other, trying his best to please both elves at the same time, glorying in the subtle differences in their tastes. But it was impossible for him to concentrate completely on either elf's pleasure.

Einion's thrusts sped up. The bliss he sent racing through Maxen's body with every movement made any sort of complex thought process impossible. Maxen was now operating entirely on instinct, and his instincts said that he should do everything in his power to please the men around him. If this was to

be his only chance to find this kind of intimacy with another man, he had to take it.

Ithel and Hefin drew closer to each other, until the tips of their shafts almost touched directly in front of Maxen's lips. Maxen licked and mouthed the heads, unable to take either deep in his mouth for more than a few seconds, before the other elf demanded his attention.

Maxen pulled at his chains again, more desperate to reach out to the elves than ever. Every link held strong.

He stilled as he realised that something about Einion's movements had altered. The angles changed. Maxen looked up and saw that Einion had leaned closer to the others and joined in the kiss that arced above Maxen's prone body.

Hefin and Ithel both welcomed Einion into the kiss, tilting their heads to make space for him. Einion's mood changed then. His thrusts became harder, rougher. His fingers bit into Maxen's sides as he ploughed deep inside him several times in quick succession.

Einion yelled out into the three-way kiss, his hips jerking one more time before he stilled. Ithel's hand appeared on Maxen's cheek and guided him to wrap his lips around the tip of Hefin's shaft. He was only just in time. Hefin gasped and spilled into Maxen's mouth as he found his pleasure.

Maxen didn't have time to think, only to swallow as quickly as he could. Within moments, Ithel's touch fell on his cheek again, demanding that Maxen turn back to face him. This time, at least, Maxen knew what to expect. He willingly opened his mouth to receive Ithel's cock. He swallowed rapidly until Ithel's hips stilled and he had taken everything both elves had to give.

Collapsing back on the hard earth, Maxen looked up at the elves. One kiss between the three of them had led to another, then another. There was less hunger in their kisses now, more gentleness—even from Einion. They smiled as they kissed and nuzzled each other, trailing their lips over each other's necks and faces.

Slowly, Einion pulled away, separating his body from Maxen's. They seemed to have forgotten he was there. If they cared whether or not he'd found

his own climax, they showed no sign of it. Maxen's cock still stood proudly away from his body, aching for release. If there had been any way he could free his hands and reach for his own shaft, he wouldn't have spoken, but he didn't have that choice.

“Please?”

Watching their kiss while unable to satisfy his own needs was torture.

“Please?” he whispered again.

At least one of the elves must have heard him. They all pulled slightly back from each other and looked down at him. There was no way they could have failed to understand what he wanted. Einion smiled, the same way he had when he first realised how much power he had over Maxen.

Hefin reached out toward Maxen's crotch. He was obviously about to take him in hand, but Ithel stopped him.

“Not yet.” He spoke to Hefin, not Maxen. Any hint of apology in his voice was directed toward the other elf and not the human in their midst.

Hefin nodded his acceptance, but Maxen shook his head. None of the elves seemed to notice the gesture.

“We will leave him to rest now.”

Maxen watched as the elves calmly picked up their clothes, rose to their feet, and strolled out of his line of sight. He tried to sit up and see where they went, but the chains held strong. Somewhere behind him he heard a door close and a heavy bolt slide into place. He collapsed back.

His whole body ached with need. He closed his eyes and bit down on his bottom lip, willing his body to accept that he wasn't going to find any pleasure that night. It was impossible. His skin still tingled everywhere the elves had touched him. His cock ached and refused to soften in the least.

He tugged at the cuffs around his wrists and the chains attached to his collar, but he knew there was no way he would ever break free. The only touch he would receive now was from the elves. He was completely at their mercy. All he could do was wait for their return.

Maxen stirred, aware that something had woken him, but unsure what it might have been. He tried to sit up. The moment the chains pressed against his skin, his memory came flooding back.

Elves!

He'd lost count of the number of the times the three elves had visited him in the dungeon. He no longer had any idea how many times their hands had moved over his skin, only to refuse to grant him that final caress that would have allowed him to achieve his pleasure.

He was sure he'd been in the dungeon for days, and maybe far longer. Out of sight of the sun, there was no way to calculate the passage of time. True, the elves had on occasion allowed him enough freedom to extend his limbs, to take the food they offered him, and to move around the dungeon to attend to other needs. But Maxen had no idea if they did so once a day, more often, less.

He just knew that the chains never left his body all at the same time. He was never permitted to leave the dungeon. In truth, being trapped there had ceased to scare him. He was warm and well fed, the chains were not painful, and the elves were not unkind. Only one fact kept him on edge, desperate for a freedom they seemed determined to deny him. He had not once succeeded in wrapping his hand around his own shaft and bringing himself the release he craved more strongly with each visit from the elves.

Maxen slowly lifted his head. Just as each time they came to him, all three elves were there. Maxen looked at them each in turn. They stared back at him, unblinking.

Ithel reached out to Maxen first, stroking his fingers down his cheek. Maxen swallowed rapidly. That chaste touch was all it took now. His body responded instantly. His shaft ached as he began to harden again.

It had taken a lifetime for him to recover his composure after the elves left him last time. It felt as if he'd only softened a few minutes ago. Stiffening again so soon was more a torment than pleasure.

Within seconds, six elfish hands moved across his skin and stroked through his hair, teasing him to the point of distraction. Maxen closed his eyes and bit

down on the inside of his cheek. Hefin wrapped his fingers around Maxen's cock—that was all it took to push him past the point of all control.

“Please,” Maxen whispered.

“Tell us what you want,” Ithel ordered. The same order that had been given so many times.

Maxen blinked open his eyes and gazed up at Ithel, studying the serious eyes very carefully.

It had to be obvious, didn't it? Elves were not so different from humans—the elves had proven that to him time and time again. They found their pleasure, with him and with each other, in exactly the same way as he would—if only given the chance.

He opened his mouth, but once again the words lodged in his throat. He couldn't. Speaking of such things was wrong. Lord Brackenridge would have him killed for ever uttering such words.

He pressed his lips tightly together and turned his head, unable to look at any of the elves. The words still rose up inside him, unspeakable and irrepressible in equal measure.

“Please,” Maxen whispered, as the last of his control failed him. He tried to rock his hips and push his cock against Hefin's palm. “I need... please... your hand...”

Looking up, he saw Hefin glance toward Ithel for permission. “Just our hands, is that all you wish to ask us for?”

Maxen's breath caught in his throat. He almost wished he had the gag between his lips; that he didn't have to make a choice to answer or remain silent—almost.

Hefin kept his hand around Maxen's shaft, tempting him, making it so difficult for him to think.

“Please,” Maxen whispered again, forcing open his eyes and looking up at them each in turn.

“You may have whatever you ask for,” Ithel promised.

Einion still stood on the other side of Maxen, tracing a pattern over Maxen's chest with his fingers while carefully studying Maxen's reactions.

Maxen squirmed, trying to push his body against all three of the elves' hands, but they all moved with him, refusing to give him anything unless he found the words and asked for it.

"Everything," Maxen whispered, so softly he wasn't sure the word was audible to the other men. He barely even heard it himself, past the loud beat of his heart. But that didn't change the truth; he wanted everything the elves could offer him.

Einion leant forward. His kiss was hard and demanding, full of triumph and possession. Maxen felt another elf's mouth wrap around the tip of his cock, but he had no way of knowing if those lips belonged to Ithel or Hefin. All he knew was that wet heat filled his senses as an elf's tongue danced against his cock's head. Every thought Maxen might have possessed drained away.

He screamed into Einion's kiss as he came, jerking and pulling against his bonds. Lifetimes had passed by since the last time he had been permitted to find that sort of pleasure. Ecstasy slashed through him, threatening to tear out his soul as it cut deeper into his psyche than he'd ever guessed was possible.

His mind spun. He gasped for breath as Einion stepped back. With his eyes closed and his whole body trembling with the aftershocks of his pleasure, Maxen was barely aware of the elves moving slowly away from him.

His eyes dropped closed. For once, there was no need to lie in the darkness trying to force his body to relax and accept frustration as an inescapable part of his new life. Sleep claimed him within seconds.

Still nine parts asleep, Maxen twisted his body and tried to roll onto his side. He failed. Something pressed down against his chest, holding him in place, making any large degree of movement impossible. He tried again. The pressure against his torso eased slightly. He yawned and rolled his shoulders as he turned to his left, but he made no effort to sit up. He had no interest in waking completely.

The world around him was far too warm and comfortable for him to wish it away. He nuzzled against the fur blanket spread beneath him. It was softer than anything he'd ever felt against his skin before. He frowned slightly, sure that no such blanket had been there when he'd fallen asleep.

It had to be some sort of dream. In which case, he had even less interest in waking up. This place was far more pleasant than his patch of bare earth alongside the fire in the round house, where there was always too much smoke and never enough heat.

Taking a deep breath, Maxen tugged at the blanket draped over him—it was just as soft as the one beneath him—and reached all the way down past the tips of his toes. There were no holes in it to let in draughts, no parts of his body that extended beyond what the fabric could cover. Maxen smiled, relishing each moment of perfect comfort and contentment.

“How much do you think he will come to remember over time?”

Maxen pulled the topmost blanket up higher, trying to cover his ears and block out any sound that might wake him.

“Perhaps it is best that he doesn't remember anything?”

Hefin.

The name pushed past Maxen's slumber and forced its way into the forefront of his mind.

Hefin, Ithel and Einion.

No, those names were all part of another dream—they had to be. No other explanation made any kind of sense. He was dreaming now, and he'd been dreaming then—strange, dangerous dreams that could never be spoken of, or even thought about once he woke. One more reason not to let slumber desert him before absolutely necessary.

“We know you are awake, Maxen.”

All the relaxation and pleasure Maxen clung to disappeared like morning dew from the most fragile of spider's webs. He knew that voice. He forced himself to open his eyes.

A dream—he reminded himself of that several times. It had been a dream, and if the elves were still here, that was because it was still a dream. He cautiously sat up. The room was brightly lit by tall, narrow windows. The sun poured in, blinding him. He blinked rapidly and lifted one hand to shield his eyes.

As unfamiliar as the world around him was, it didn't feel like a dream. There was nothing insubstantial about his surroundings. Three silhouettes stood between him and the windows—men with long hair and tall, graceful bodies—men whose ears grew into points, like those of elves.

Maxen lowered his hand as his eyes adjusted to the light, and he recognised the elves' faces. Part of him desperately wanted to cling to the idea of a dream, but another side of his mind sung with excitement. Would a dream be so consistent? Was it possible that the elves were really there?

If they were real, then the pleasure he'd felt had been real. The possibility of future pleasure might also be real...

"I remember what you, I mean what I..." Maxen cleared his throat. "I do remember everything that happened in the dungeon," he whispered.

Maxen glanced around him. This space couldn't have been more different from the gloom of the underground room. If that had been the elfin equivalent of the torture chambers below Lord Brackenridge's castle, then this room had to be the elfin version of the lord's most elaborate bedchamber.

Maxen took in the drapes hanging at each side of the high, arched windows, the delicate metalwork brackets supporting candles, and finally the blankets spread out, around and over him.

Slowly, he looked down at his wrists. There were very faint marks on the skin there—the shackles he'd been kept in had been real.

"We had no doubt that you'd remember your time with *us*," Ithel said.

Maxen moved on to study other parts of his body. There were other marks, scrapes and bruises.

"Do you remember how you got those injuries?" the elf asked.

Maxen shook his head.

“Have you any memory of what happened just before we found you?”

All Maxen could do was shake his head again.

“You were in the forest,” Ithel prompted.

Maxen peered at each of the elves in turn. Hefin looked concerned, but the only emotion in Einion’s eyes was anger. Neither of them spoke. For now at least, it seemed that Ithel spoke for all three of them.

“I don’t remember,” Maxen whispered. There could have been many reasons why he might have been in the forest. He didn’t only go there to meet other men who were—

“Your human lord, his guards were chasing you.”

Maxen didn’t need to remember anything specific in order for terror to course through his veins when he heard those words. “Why?” he demanded, shuffling back toward the edge of the blankets furthest away from the elves. “I didn’t do anything.”

Ithel stepped forward, his hands held out, palms facing Maxen. “You’re safe now. No one can hurt you here. We won’t let anyone hurt you.”

Maxen pulled the blanket toward him, as if a piece of fabric as soft and as fine as gossamer could protect him from his fears. His memory was blank, but his imagination raced overtime. He felt the shock of discovery just as harshly as he could have if he was there in the forest at that moment.

Ithel knelt on the edge of the pile of blankets. “The man you were caught with ran in a different direction—they lost him among the trees. They managed to track you.”

Maxen shook his head, but he didn’t even know what he was trying to deny anymore.

“I believe you know what they think you did—what they believe it is wrong for a man to do with another man.”

Maxen’s breath caught in his throat. “They’ll kill me,” he whispered, more to himself than to the elves. Once the guards knew, they’d never stop hunting a man.

“Here?” Ithel said. “Humans do not come here—not unless we bring them. Even then, there are traditions that have to be followed, which would make it impossible for them to hurt anyone. Did you think we refused to release you from your chains because we were scared of you?” He shook his head. “You had to admit, to us and to yourself, that you *want* to be here, that you are no threat to anyone in our kingdom.”

Maxen glanced at Hefin and Einion, and then back to Ithel. Traditions were all well and good, but they couldn’t compete with several miles’ worth of distance between himself and Lord Brackenridge’s guards. “Don’t bring them here?” he begged. “Please?”

“They are not the kind of humans that we would ever bring here.” Ithel smiled slightly.

Maxen failed to see any reason for good humour.

“There is only one reason why an elf brings a human into his kingdom.”

Maxen stared into Ithel’s eyes, willing himself to understand, even when Ithel seemed determined not to speak plainly.

“Elves have always formed strong bonds with each other,” Ithel said, staring intently into Maxen’s eyes. “And elfish law does not care if those who bond are male or female. However, there are times when it does not matter how much the elves care for each other, or love each other—the bonds between elves are always stronger when each of them is also bound to the same member of another species—a human for instance... and if that human should prove to enjoy following the lead of those elves all the better.”

Maxen’s eyes darted from one elf to another. “The three of you are... you all have a bond?”

“Yes.”

For the first time, Ithel looked away from Maxen and turned his attention to Hefin and Ethel. They each stepped forward and lowered themselves onto their knees next to Ithel at the edge of the blankets.

“Not all humans are capable of forming bonds with elves,” Hefin said. “The humans fill men’s heads with so much pain, so much fear, and after the guards chased you, we weren’t sure...”

“Sometimes a human’s soul is so damaged by men’s actions, it is impossible for them to form a bond with us,” Ithel explained.

Maxen was in no condition to deal with any new source of fear. He shook his head again. “If I don’t remember then...” Maxen whispered, barely able to force the words past his lips.

Ithel reached out and placed a gentle hand on Maxen’s cheek. “You’re perfect. A far better fit than we ever hoped to find among all the villages in the kingdom.”

Maxen looked down. “The guards who were chasing me—”

“Are no longer able to hurt anyone,” Einion cut in.

Maxen stared at him for several seconds.

“A human sword is little use against an elfish bow,” Einion said, without any trace of regret. “Their bodies were delivered to the castle with our arrows still in place—the lord will know who dealt with them, and he will know why.”

“This isn’t the first time elves have stepped in when a villager would have been hurt by the guards for no worse crime than visiting the forest,” Ithel said. “I doubt it will be the last.”

At any other time, Maxen would have had a million questions. Right then, he only had one. “What... what happens to me now?”

Ithel leaned forward. “This.” He brushed his lips against Maxen’s mouth.

Maxen’s eyes dropped closed as pleasure and comfort tingled through his body in equal measure.

“It is important that the bonds between you and each of us remain strong if we are to all remain joined together.”

Maxen nodded, aware that Hefin and Einion were also moving closer to him. Einion reached out, took the blanket from Maxen’s hands and pushed it aside, completely exposing Maxen’s naked body.

Maxen hesitated, about to reach out. It felt strange not to have chains wrapped around his wrists, holding him in place.

“Having a permanent bond with an elf means never having to wear chains in our kingdom.”

“I liked the chains,” Einion muttered. Wrapping his hand around Maxen’s ankle, he tugged, causing him to slide down the blankets.

Ithel paused, seeming to think about that for a moment. “There is no reason why you shouldn’t be allowed to use them on occasion,” he decided. “If Maxen has no objection.”

Einion met Maxen’s gaze, then looked pointedly down. It was impossible for Maxen to pretend that the idea of being bound was entirely distasteful when he was already hard, his shaft curving up toward his stomach in his enthusiasm.

“Well?” Hefin asked.

Maxen blinked at him, trying to switch mental tracks for what seemed to be the hundredth time in as many seconds.

“Is this what you want?” Hefin prompted. “To be bound to us?”

The question caught Maxen entirely off guard. It had never occurred to him that he would be given a choice.

“If you wish to go back among the humans, we will take you to a new village, one where the local guards will have no reason to suspect you of anything,” Ithel said.

For several seconds, silence filled the room.

“I told you once before that an unwilling human is of no use to us,” Ithel reminded him.

Maxen glanced at each elf in turn. The idea of being within a hundred leagues of the lord or his guards was enough to send a fresh wave of terror coursing through his veins, but in that moment he realised that the possibility of never seeing the elves again was more distressing still.

“I want to stay here with you,” he whispered. “Please?”

Ithel was the first to kiss him gently on the lips, apparently in welcome, then Hefin. Einion’s kiss had little to do with any such chaste intention. Within

seconds, his body covered Maxen's. Hefin reached out to Maxen just a second later, and then Ithel's hands came to rest on him too.

Maxen gasped as his mind spun with relief and pleasure. He tried to reach out to the elves in return. For the first time, there was nothing to stop him. No chains clinked. His fingers slid against the elves' skin. The only thing that stopped the moment being perfect was that he didn't have enough hands to touch with, enough lips to kiss with. He whimpered his frustration against an elf's mouth.

"Hush," Ithel whispered in his ear. "There is time for everything. The bonds we're speaking of do not break, once formed. We have forever..."

THE END

Author Bio

Kim Dare is a twenty-nine-year-old, full-time writer from Wales (UK). First published in 2008, she has since released close to eighty BDSM erotic romance titles.

While most of Kim's stories follow male/male relationships, she also writes about characters that enjoy male/female, female/male (female dominant), female/female and all kinds of ménage relationships. Kim's titles have included contemporary stories, fairytale re-tellings, vampires, time travellers, werewolves and werelions—not to mention the occasional wereduck.

Regardless of the gender of her characters or the different genres they inhabit, from short stories to full-length novels, there are three things Kim always wants to give her characters—kink, love, and a happy ending.

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THE CIRCLE

By Ashlyn Daube

Photo Description

Two teenagers share a hidden kiss inside a photo booth, away from prying eyes.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

These two boys' story needs to be told. They are sneaking away to see each other and using one of those quarter photo machines to capture a few stolen moments together.

My only request is that it fit normal YA guidelines—all else I leave up to you.

Sincerely,

Lissa

Story Info

Genre: young adult

Tags: science fiction, post-apocalyptic, bittersweet, enemies to lovers, no sex

Content warnings: possible future HFN

Word count: 13,835

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THE CIRCLE

By Ashlyn Daube

CHAPTER 01

Today, I decided to do something very stupid.

And when I decided to do this, it was for two reasons.

First, I wanted something to change. To fill my monotonous life with something other than what I was raised for. When you feel the desperate compulsion of rebellion when you are old enough to feel the need, but too young to have control of your life. The second was because of him. Because he made me smile without trying to. Because for months he has invaded my dreams, and because he made me believe life could be different.

If you saw my life through a looking glass, you would say I was lucky. I was born in a harsh world after all. Harsh for most except the lucky few, and I was in that very small pot of lucky. It's been almost seven hundred years since the War of Division. Not much information is left on what happened back then. We do not really learn about it in class except that there was a war, that millions died, and that our nation, Gorus, was once part of a bigger nation with our neighbor, Nusa, until something happened to break them apart. Now there is a giant wall dividing the two countries. A wall I've only seen pictures of, reaching high into the sky so nothing can be seen from either side.

I do not know what Nusa looks like, all I know is that it is a rundown country, and The Wall exists to protect us. Every time we hear about it in history, I wonder, *how bad could it really be?* And how much worse was it from Gorus?

People die in this country. Hundreds every day. From crime, from disaster, from disease. But there is nothing unusual about that; that happens everywhere else around the world too. The world by nature is a harsh place, and you get no say in which corner of it you will come to life.

I did a last check around to make sure my father was still out. His office was empty. I made my way to the foyer. It was a very big three-story house.

Too big in my opinion, but it wasn't like I had a say about it. There was a full body mirror near the door.

I ran my fingers through my dark hair, making sure it didn't need a quick cut. Satisfied, I put on my light-gray jacket with blue ringlets around the wrists, the one I bought with my own money and not with the allowance from my father. I could hear as the lines of cloth clung to my form and felt it cooling me down. The display by the door read 82°.

The last thing I put on was my glasses. I often forgot to wear them at home, but they were a necessity if I was going to drive. I could have had an operation to repair my myopia years ago, but there was something always holding me back. Perhaps a little fear, perhaps hesitation, or maybe because in all the pictures I have of my mother, she was wearing a pair. Wearing them simply made me feel more like a part of her was still here.

I pressed the code on the security pad by the front door and saw my image reflected on the device.

“Father. I am going to the campus to work on my project. I will be back after dark.”

Short. Simple. To the point. And half the truth.

CHAPTER 02

I didn't own a car. I had a bike. It sounds more dangerous than it actually is. After the Secure Bike Law that was passed thirty years ago, bike companies had to construct bikes that did not lose balance regardless of speed or driver error. So even if I tried, I wasn't going to crash.

The sun was still high outside, so I wasn't running late. The neighborhood I lived in was small, private, and extremely exclusive. Only four families resided here, all political families. The world called it The Circle, and it was just my draw in the accidental lottery of birth.

My bike did not roar or flare as I turned it on; it just hummed and aligned itself automatically to the ground. "School," I said out loud, and instantly got the screen updated with road conditions, weather and travel time. The campus was not far from The Circle so I didn't bother to look at any of it.

I sped through my exclusive neighborhood. The houses rested on a large cul-de-sac at the end of a long, curved road surrounded by a forest. My home was the first on the right as you entered.

The bike swerved perfectly on the sharp turns of the road dividing the houses from the access gate. I could ride it with my eyes closed. The first bump to my day was when I stopped at the gate and pressed my palm against the ID pad. It logged my time of exit and recorded my image.

There was barely any traffic, but then again it was Saturday, and it wasn't like anyone could afford a vehicle. It made for a quick commute. I passed one of the large public buses down the road, full of weary passengers with eyes that couldn't help staring my way as I drove past. It used to bother me, but not anymore.

The campus of Aurora High was a beautiful structure by architectural standards. Four rectangular buildings connected together by a circular library. Each of the rectangular buildings was considered a minicampus, the North, South, East, and West Halls. This version of Aurora High was just nine years old, and its upgrade had to do with me, my family, and the three other families that lived on The Circle.

The government of Gorus consisted of four political parties—each headed by a single family—battling it out every two years to see who would make the rules. When a party won an election, the head of that family would be the president. This duty, this distinction, was passed down from the parents to their children. A mockery of monarchy. It had been like this ever since the war.

I am the only child of one of those families. One day I will get the chance to run this country.

My bike parked itself on the first empty spot in North Hall after two more checks of my ID. One at the campus main gate, another at the North Hall gate.

Nine years ago, they decided to move all the families together in the same neighborhood so we could pretend we got along with one another. The school was also updated around the same time so that the children from each family got their own hall. Mine was North. I never shared classes with the children of my father's political rivals, never saw them as long as I stayed in North Hall. There was only one place I could possibly see my neighbors on campus—the central library, better known as the CL.

I made sure my bike was logged off before pulling my backpack from the seat compartment and making my way to the CL. A machine scanned my hand for the fourth time, and I made my way to the second floor of the library. History and Politics. I thought it would look less suspicious than fourth floor fiction.

The beating of my heart was not its usual calm self as I slowly made my way up the stairs, and I scanned my hand a fifth time to get access to the floor. I walked to one of the many rows of ancient books, pretending to look for a specific title. I usually enjoyed going to the library, any library. It made me forget that everywhere I went there was a digital stamp with my name and picture on it saying where I was, when, and for how long.

I enjoyed the simple pleasure of running my fingers across the edges of the books, feeling the different materials they were made from. Books made from paper were not made anymore. They could only be found in a library like this, and only a few of them had relevant collections.

I waited five minutes, and then grabbed whatever book my fingers were touching and pulled it out, barely glancing at the title or cover because it didn't matter. I wasn't there for a book or to study. I sat in the east section of the library and opened my borrowed book. I read a few lines, but none of it stuck to my memory. It was a boring political opinion piece and I had zero interest of one man's assumptions about me.

I heard someone sitting a few tables across from me and looked up.

It was a boy my age, with messy brown bangs and eyes darker than his hair. His name was Maxwell Torres; he studied in West Hall and was looking at a book that appeared to be three times bigger than mine and definitely more relevant.

I remembered the first time I saw Maxwell. Nine years ago. I was six and struggling in elementary because my father was too busy to help me with homework. Back then we lived in a nice large neighborhood with plenty of homes and plenty of kids my age. Our neighbor, Ms. Tolken, took me in whenever my father had to work late and I would get to play with her son, Danny, until my father came home to pick me up. I was happy with the routine, but it ended the night my father dressed me up in my very first formal suit. I remember his serious face as he fixed my tie. I had gone to his parties before, but never dressed like him. It was very exciting until he told me that we were moving. To this day, I'm not entirely sure why my father told me about the move before the party and nothing else but that. Maybe he thought I was too young to understand. But I understood enough. I understood that I wasn't going to live next to Danny anymore, and that I would have no one to play with while my father worked.

The party was a sea of frown-faced adults. I remember looking up and seeing so many serious people. No one smiled, no one laughed.

"Did someone die, Father?" I remember pulling my father's hand when I asked, but he just pried my fingers away and dropped my hand.

"No," he said. "Now stay here and behave, do not talk to anybody. I need to converse with some of these people."

I pressed my back against one of the walls of the room and obeyed, picking the loose strings from the rugged wall. I stood there for a long time waiting for

my father to come get me or call to me. This had to be another Meeting People Party, as I called them. I usually just waited in a corner or next to him until he thought it was appropriate to introduce me. I never had a problem waiting, no matter how boring it was. I was used to it.

And then I had to pee.

I had not gone to the bathroom before leaving the house, even after my father reminded me, because I wasn't sure if I could put my fancy shirt back inside my pants. I wasn't exactly coordinated at six; a suit was just such a grown-up thing. I didn't want my father to be mad. So I pretended to go, flushed the toilet and everything, but now I had to go for real.

At six, I thought I was a pretty smart kid. Even back then I was planning ways to avoid my father's judgment. My mission was to go the bathroom without my father noticing, and return with a well-tucked-in shirt.

The exit was easy to find. The bathroom, too. The shirt was the problem. It did not look the same as when my father had tucked it in no matter how I tried.

"Don't make it too tight." I still remember those words. The first time I met Maxwell we were the same height, and he looked as out of place as me in a child-sized suit.

"Like this!" Maxwell said, and stepped next to me as he pulled out his perfectly tucked in shirt. He took the hem of his shirt and started tucking it all the way around, reaching with difficulty to his back. "The back is hard, but it doesn't matter because your jacket will hide it." I imitated what he did and slowly tucked in my shirt, pulling on the hem as much as I could. "When you finish, just pull a little on the shirt so it doesn't look too tight, that way no one will see that the shirt's a little ruffled."

"Thank you." My shirt wasn't as perfect as before, but it wasn't noticeably different either. I was happy.

Maxwell was all smiles. He looked like he had been as bored as I had been at the party. "What's your name?" he asked.

I hesitated. I wasn't allowed to tell people who I was; my father always introduced me. "Andy."

“I’m Maxwell!” We shook hands just like the grown-ups and I thought maybe I wouldn’t miss my friend Danny so much.

I don’t remember what we talked about after that. Kid stuff. I do remember that we left the bathroom, walked around the hallway next to the room where the party was being held, and that’s when a man with light hair approached us. The man was a photographer for the event. He took a picture of Maxwell and I without asking. I was instantly terrified. Pictures were not a good thing. My father had warned me against picture taking. Fear is never a good feeling, much less when you are a child. So I reacted like any small child would—I burst into tears and caused a commotion. People came. A woman with dark hair and a frightened look on her face shoved her way through the crowd, and when she spotted us that frightened look morphed into something grittier. She grabbed Maxwell’s hand and took off with him right before my father made his way through the crowd and took me away. As I held tight to my father’s hand, I saw men talking with the photographer. He didn’t look happy. I was lucky that my father’s anger concentrated on the photographer instead of me. He didn’t even care when I told him I had gone to the bathroom.

This blurry memory was the first interaction. When I was still in the dark.

The truth of what happened that night became clear to me just a week later, when my father had men put all my things in boxes and we left the house I had lived in since the day I was born.

CHAPTER 03

As I sat in the library, I actually managed to read a chapter of the book I had grabbed from the shelves. It was worse than I imagined, but I could at least add a quote or two for a paper I had due next week. I made a note on my calendar to remind myself to finish the research, and then put my pad to sleep. I raised my head and noticed Maxwell was still invested in his large, old book. Maybe he could feel my eyes on him, because he stopped and for a moment raised his eyes until they spotted me.

A week after the party, my father and I moved to The Circle. I was roaming around the front yard, waiting for the movers to bring all the boxes inside the house and unpack them. I carried my Senty with me, but the games I had were not as entertaining as watching my father scream at the movers.

One hour after the show started, another large moving truck, followed by an expensive car, drove into the cul-de-sac and stopped in front of the third house. A man stepped out of the driver's side, followed by a woman with a bun of dark hair. The man didn't waste any time taking charge of the movers, pointing and commanding. The woman stood next to the car seemingly waiting. She looked familiar, but she was too far away for me to tell why.

I thought it was amusing how the adults carried on, happily giving orders instead of actually helping. It looked more fun to carry the boxes than give orders, but I was still too small to help and I was certain my father would disapprove. I wandered farther and farther from the house, first stepping into the yard of the second house on the cul-de-sac, right between the two moving trucks. I waited to see if anyone would notice. Father was yelling at one of the movers. Nope.

Each step was like a challenge, to see how far I could go before my father noticed. I pretended to play with my Senty, in case he caught me, so I could say I didn't notice that I was so far away. I felt a surge of pride when I crossed an entire stretch of grass, stepped on the concrete driveway of the empty house and stood right in the middle between my house and the other one. The woman had finally noticed me; her face wasn't clear from this far, but I could tell she

had seen me. She was still waiting next to the car when the back door opened and a boy stepped out.

The second time I saw Maxwell, I was holding my Senty in the middle of a driveway while he asked his mother something. I felt instant happiness when I saw him. He wasn't just a random face in an unknown place. I was going to have a new friend for my neighbor. Maxwell's mother must have said something about me, because Maxwell turned around and smiled when he saw me. I didn't run to Maxwell's house. I wanted to, but I didn't. Maxwell's father was still walking around and he looked scary. My own father wasn't even in the front yard anymore. He must have gone inside the house.

I put my Senty back in my pocket, but didn't move. I was already halfway between the two houses and didn't dare go any farther. I didn't have to. Maxwell ran to me.

"Is that the new Senty?" Maxwell asked excitedly, pointing at my pocket. It felt like we were already friends.

I nodded, pulling the system from my pocket and showing it to him. "I'm playing Truders."

We talked about the little tactical game for a while. Not very long. I let Maxwell play with my Senty and he died twice. It was fun. We were sitting in the middle of the driveway next to each other, our heads bumping as we both looked at the screen. Our own little world.

Then a man yelled.

Maxwell and I both raised our heads. Maxwell to the direction of his house—me towards mine. My father was back in the front yard; I hadn't noticed. He had not been the man that yelled, because he was also looking towards Maxwell's house. Maxwell's father was heading towards us, pointing and yelling Maxwell's name. It only brought us to the attention of my father who started heading our way too.

Maxwell and I sat there, frozen. Too afraid to move. The yelling became a noise I could not make sense of. Maxwell must have been more frightened than me because his small hand wrapped around mine, but there was nothing I could do to protect him. When Maxwell's father reached us, we both looked

up, and without hesitation he grabbed Maxwell by the right shoulder and hoisted him up. Our hands disconnected. I didn't stay on the ground for very long because my father was there, grabbing my arm and hoisting me off the concrete as well.

They didn't say anything at first, just held us back in a strange mix of protectiveness and disapproval. Both parents stared at each other with distaste, and I stared at the ground the entire time, except for a brief second when I glanced at Maxwell just to see his head completely down.

My father was the first to speak. "I think we can both agree that this cannot happen again."

"Yes," Maxwell's father replied through gritted teeth. Later I would be told his name was Benjamin Torres, and my first impression of him was that he was a man much like my father.

I heard a snuffle and saw Maxwell crying. It was low enough that the adults didn't notice. I still wasn't sure what was going on. Maybe we were not supposed to play in front of a house that didn't belong to us. Maybe Maxwell's dad didn't like video games, which would explain why Maxwell didn't have his own Senty. I tried to pull my arm free from my father's hold, but he held on tighter and it hurt.

"I'll make sure my son understands," my father said. "Make sure yours does too."

There was no reply, just a nod, then Benjamin pulled Maxwell away and they headed back to their house. My father started to pull me the opposite way, but I didn't want to go. I still hadn't asked Maxwell if we could play after school. "Just walk, Andrew. I'll explain it to you in the house."

Explain what?

I tried to pull my arm free again and looked back. Maxwell was still close enough to hear me. "Maxwell! You can borrow my Senty if you want!"

My father stopped abruptly and slapped me. My eyes watered instantly from the sting. "Don't you dare cry," he ordered, and dragged me the rest of the way to our new house. Once the door was shut, I let my tears flow freely. I cried. I bawled. I wanted to throw myself on the floor and die, just so my

father would blame himself. When I eventually stopped, my father was there, standing tall above me.

“You are not allowed to talk to that boy.”

“Why?” I knew my father didn’t need a reason to order me to do things, and he could have lied to me, he could have said *because I say so*, but he didn’t. He sat me down and explained to me why I could not be friends with the boy across the street.

I always knew that my father was an important man to our country. That many important decisions depended on him. I also knew that I would inherit that responsibility when I was old enough. But until that day, I hadn’t known that we were not the only family that lived like this, with responsibilities passed down from fathers and mothers to sons and daughters. An enemy was a foreign concept to a six-year-old child. Hate even more so. All I knew was that Maxwell was nice, we liked the same games, and I wanted him to be my friend.

Hate.

It didn’t make sense when my father told me that was the feeling I was required to have about Maxwell. I had no reasons to hate him. The only reason I had to feel that hate was because my arm hurt from where my father had grabbed me, and my face burned from his slap.

My father told me I had to hate every one of our neighbors. To never speak to them. That I had to live with the people my father hated as a sign of solidarity to the country. That was why we moved—why Maxwell’s family moved—why there were only four houses in that cul-de-sac surrounded by trees.

It was why Maxwell and I could not be friends.

Pretend solidarity, my father once said. The families still hated each other. They had been on opposite sides of the spectrum for too many generations, and the simple act of living in close proximity did not change that.

If anything, it made it worse.

CHAPTER 04

I quickly learned to live with my new reality of having neighbors my father hated and that I should hate too. With time I forgot the feeling of having friends, and slowly became the son my father wanted.

I went to school. I learned. I got older. Whatever the goal was in having the four families live close together, it was not achieved. From my experience, families lived in their own worlds created within the walls of their homes. They rarely got involved with the humans living next door, and that was in a normal neighborhood. In *The Circle*, everyone pretended everyone else was invisible, so I spent most of my childhood with video games, schoolwork, and a window.

I learned a lot about my neighbors and rivals, watching through my third-floor-window. Silly things. Like when the Mason family moved in next door, the movers dropped a box and a mass of books fell on the floor. If that had happened to our movers, my father would have been very mad. But Ms. Clare Mason, who at first I thought came out of a fairy tale because her hair looked like fire, did not scream like I had seen my father and Maxwell's father do. When she noticed the mess and the men hastily putting the books back in the box, she went over and helped them.

The Lambert family was the last to move in. The mother, Krista, was so busy with crying twin newborns that her daughter, Dianet, had to help her. Dianet didn't seem too happy, but none of the families moving in had come with smiles on their faces, so it wasn't surprising.

I saw Maxwell's older sister, Chloe, arriving a week after the rest of the family. I thought she resembled their father because she looked just as angry as he did, but remembering Dianet's sullen face, maybe it was a girl thing.

I wondered if the families noticed how similar they all were or if they only saw the differences. They all had children; they all ran like crazy in the mornings, and too often the parents got home late at night. Too late to spend time with their kids as their children got taken care of by strangers.

An old lady moved in with the Mason family two weeks after we had settled in. I never saw her leave the large house, but I could see her cooking in the kitchen almost every day. The smell of cookies drifted all the way to my house. More than once I wandered to the edge of our property just so I could smell the cookies. Danny's mom would sometimes make cookies, and I associated the smell with fun and home. My house never smelled like cookies.

There were no fences between the houses, but I knew where the properties separated. I couldn't even look at Maxwell's house without being obvious, but I could pretend to play in my yard. I thought of the property line as an invisible high rope I had to walk while smelling the cookies from the Mason house. I did this for days because our new house still felt unfamiliar to me. It was a simple game that helped me pass the time and forget that Maxwell was in the house after this one.

I was happy with the yummy scent until the day the back door opened and the old lady walked out with a plate of cookies. My first thought was to run back to my house, but she didn't yell at me or look angry, so I stayed put. Slowly, she made her way to the border between our homes and simply hovered the plate of cookies in front of me. I didn't even think twice before snatching one up and taking a bite. Chocolate chip.

She never said a word, just smiled, and took the plate back into her home. I waited on the same spot the next day and the day after. Both days the old lady waited until there was nobody around to see her give me a cookie. On the third day, I thought Maxwell should have a cookie as well.

"There's also a boy in that other house," I pointed to Maxwell's house. "Maybe he wants a cookie too."

"Are you friends?" Her voice was gentle. I wondered if all grandmothers sounded like her, because I never had one.

I shook my head. "I'm not allowed."

"You are not allowed to have friends?"

I shook my head again. "I can have friends. I just can't be friends with Maxwell."

She smiled again, but it wasn't a happy smile. "That's a shame. If my grandson were your age, I'd let you be his friend."

"How old is he?"

"He's ten now, almost eleven."

"That's too old. I'm only six." I finished my chocolate chip cookie and licked my fingers. "Can you take a cookie to Maxwell?"

The old lady broke the invisible border and reached out to me. I stiffened when she did, but relaxed when her fragile fingers patted my head. "I'll try," she said.

She walked away. It was the last time I saw her. The next day an ambulance showed up at the Mason house and took her away. I never knew if Maxwell ever got a cookie.

This and many other memories filled my life of growing up in The Circle. I have no doubt that this would have been the rest of my life there: a rigorous routine of individuality with hints of our shared lives. A routine that wouldn't have changed if the bombings had never happened.

CHAPTER 05

Five years after we moved, on a chilly spring night when I was eleven, my father woke me at two in the morning and made me put a jacket on top of my pajamas. When I asked him why, he didn't say a word, just picked me up in his arms, and ran down from the third floor all the way to the foyer. My father grabbed the first pair of shoes from the entrance closet and ran out of the house. Before I could ask again what was going on, I noticed that the other families were running out of their homes as well, carrying sleeping children and pulling grumpy teenagers.

My father's breathing was fast-paced and restless. He ran to the center of the cul-de-sac, to the empty grassy lot in the middle. He held me tight for another second, then put me down as he handed me the pair of shoes he had grabbed from the closet. "Put these on," he said, catching his breath. "It's cold." I sat on the grass and did what I was told as the other families stopped close to where we were. It seemed the silent consensus was that this spot was safe.

I saw Maxwell holding his big sister's hand. His hair was messy from sleep and he looked frightened. His pajamas were blue. I was wondering if I could say hi to him when my father said something.

"Maybe it was a prank call."

"Maybe." Clare Mason and her son, Noah, didn't look as tired as the rest of the group.

"I'm not going back until the police say it is safe." Krista Lambert was holding one of her twins, and Dianet was holding the other.

I had finished tying my shoelaces and was standing next to my father when the first bomb exploded. One of the women screamed loudly, and my father quickly picked me up from the ground and made a shield around me with his arms.

I looked up and saw the back of my new house on fire.

Shane Lambert and Benjamin Torres were both calling the police. They were screaming into their mobiles. Clare Mason was holding her son's hand,

who suddenly looked much younger than fifteen. The twins had woken up and were both screaming. Everyone was unharmed.

The adrenaline had just settled in the group when another bomb went off. This time from the Mason house. Benjamin Torres must have decided it wasn't safe anymore, because I heard him tell his wife to hide with the children in the forest just down the road. She didn't even hesitate, and with Maxwell and Chloe in hand, Sophia Torres ran to where her husband pointed.

This act was not lost on Krista Lambert, who placed her crying five-year-old, Owen, on the ground and told her daughter to take both kids and run, too. Dianet struggled with the two five-year-olds, carrying Enian with one hand and pulling Owen with the other. She was about to drop Enian when Noah Mason offered to help her. He picked Owen up from the ground and carried him securely while he told Dianet to follow him. It was the second act of solidarity between the families I witnessed. The first being when Grandma Mason gave me cookies.

My father put me down on the ground and told me to go with them. I didn't go at first, but he pushed me. "Hurry, you'll be safe there." I ran as a third bomb went off. I quickly passed Noah, Dianet, and the twins and made it to the edge of the tree line. Sophia and Chloe stood there on the edge with tears in their eyes. I was too scared to cry.

Police and fire vehicles rushed up the road to The Circle and stopped just as the fourth bomb went off. All four houses were now in flames. Sophia held tight to her daughter's hand, but she let go and went back to where the other adults conversed. Chloe was left behind crying.

A small hand reached out from the brush, grabbed mine, and pulled me inside the line of trees.

"It's me," Maxwell said. "Are you hurt?"

I shook my head and looked back at the fire. Noah and Dianet finally made it to the tree line. "My dad woke me up."

"Mine too. He said someone called him and told him there was a bomb in the house."

That explained why my father had been so rattled when he woke me up. He must have gotten a call too.

I could see my breath in the air and pulled the jacket tighter around me. It had been five years since Maxwell and I had sat on the Mason driveway playing with my Senty. I didn't even know where it was anymore.

"I'm taller than you now." Maxwell smiled and I found it reassuring that even in the midst of chaos we could still create our own little world. Maxwell must have been thinking the same thing, his smile told me so. I felt happy. Even after such a long time, Maxwell was still my friend.

"Here," he said, and pressed my palm against his. "My hand is bigger." He seemed so proud. I felt disappointed that I hadn't grown as much in the past five years.

It felt strange, talking so nonchalantly when so much chaos was happening around us. Another explosion roared through the night and Maxwell ran back to where his sister was. I followed, slowly making my way through the trees. When I reached the tree line where everyone was waiting, Maxwell was standing in front of his sister and she had wrapped her arms around him protectively. I stood next to them with Dianet, Noah, and the twins on the other side. The seven of us watched as adults ran around, putting out the fires in our homes. There were so many people running around I couldn't tell who was who.

I heard Chloe crying as she held Maxwell tighter, and when I turned my head Maxwell was looking at me. For that moment I didn't hear anything around me. Not the noise. Not the cries. Not the voices that rose high in the night. The world was just me, the wind hitting my skin and Maxwell offering me his hand. I took it, because I didn't want to feel alone in all this, and because five more years might pass before I had another chance to talk to him again.

After all, I was not allowed.

CHAPTER 06

I returned the horrible book and grabbed three more that looked more promising. Working on my research gave me a distraction, an outlet for my thoughts, and I could stop worrying about the next twenty minutes.

I decided I was going to do something very stupid in twenty minutes.

There was no unity between the families after the bombings. Just opportunities for them to act like they got along. Sometimes Sophia Torres would share a recipe with Krista Lambert. Dianet invited Noah and Chloe to her sweet sixteen two years ago, and everyone had to attend Clare Mason's wedding when she married Thomas Fleck.

I had hoped to see Maxwell when I finally went to high school, but of course, that beautiful building had been designed to keep us apart as well. Every class, every after-school activity, all took place in North Hall, my family's hall. Maxwell was in West, and the only space we shared in that building was the CL. I spent weeks avoiding it—even though I wanted to see him, I was afraid I'd discover we no longer had anything in common. We were not children anymore. We did not carry handheld video games in our pockets, and there were no bombs to scare us. Our first year of high school we were fourteen years old and we had spent most of those years living as strangers. Would we even have things we could say to each other, or had we been twisted enough by our parents' enmity that we'd allow their hate to cloud our thoughts? But above all, why after so much time, did I feel the need to connect with him in some way?

I started the cycle when I finally worked up the courage to go the CL to see if Maxwell was there. When I spotted him hanging out with some friends, I just stood there stupefied, debating if I should talk to him or not. After a few minutes Maxwell noticed me, but he just kept talking to his friends as if nothing had happened.

This was followed by a series of coincidences where I would find him sitting a few tables away from me, or I would sit a few tables away from him. Our little cycle of coincidences, where neither of us dared to do more.

This went on for weeks. Maxwell was the one who broke the cycle. I remember that day and how the sun shone bright through the windows. I spotted Maxwell as soon as I walked into the library. He was lounging on one of the corner chairs, antique headphones over his ears while he jotted down notes on his pad. For a second I thought about sitting in the empty chair next to him, but instead I sat at the closest table, facing him. I pulled out my pad, but only pretended to look at it. I was still too afraid of what could be. Afraid of what would happen if I closed that final gap. Why did I feel like the worst thing would happen if we just talked?

Perhaps because every time I did, someone told me it was wrong.

The chair across from me scraped as it was pulled out and Maxwell sat on it, putting down his headphones.

“I’m tired of just watching.”

It took a lot out of me not to look up.

“Andrew.”

“Please,” I begged, because I didn’t know what else to do. Catching glances of him had been hard enough. I remembered every single time we walked past each other. But hearing his voice? Hearing my name? Our little game of coincidences had more of an effect on me than I thought.

“I’m going to start talking to you, and if something happens, then it will happen.”

I glanced up. Maxwell was looking at a paper magazine.

“I want to, but—”

“We’ve always been afraid of our fathers. I’m not letting mine do that anymore, but if you tell me that you don’t want to talk to me—that all the times I spotted you looking at me were figments of my imagination—then I will walk away and never talk to you again.”

“No.” I said the word so fast even I was surprised. “My father—”

Maxwell wasn’t looking at his magazine anymore. “What will they do? Pull us apart again like when we were children? Hit us? They’ve already done that.”

It was an uncomfortable silence. Everything he had said was true. All my life I had done nothing but what my father told me to do. I lived by his vision of right and wrong. Happiness was something fleeting for me. Because when I met Maxwell, I discovered what happiness felt like. The strongest memories of my life, the one's burned into my core, were the ones I had with Maxwell.

“Andy.”

I was so tired of being my father's son.

“Yes,” I said. “Yes.”

That was the beginning.

CHAPTER 07

The CL quickly became my favorite place in the world.

It no longer was a place of just books and things to know. It was a place of books, things to know, and something I never thought I would have.

When I was a child, friendship was synonymous with happiness. It equaled not being alone. Since it was the one thing forbidden to me after moving to The Circle, I naturally craved it more than anything. I tried making friends in school, but no matter how nice they were, I could always feel that their friendship came because of my position. They didn't want to be friends with me. They wanted to be friends with an heir to this country.

Maybe that's why I yearned for Maxwell, because his friendship came with no conditions.

Yet friendship was barely a word I could use to describe my feelings. Maybe at first, but that had come and gone long ago.

At first we just sat at the same table, each with our own things—books, pads, notetakers. We talked quietly to each other while pretending to do something else. Little by little, the gap of chairs between us got smaller and smaller, until every time I sat at a table, Maxwell was right next to me. I expected the world to implode. For a teacher, librarian, or supervisor to tell us we were wrong, or for someone to rat on me to my father. But days turned into weeks, weeks into months, and by the end of the semester, after we had both turned fifteen, there wasn't a project, paper or assignment I didn't complete in the CL with Maxwell by my side.

The other students didn't even gawk at us anymore.

When it got busy, and every table was taken by students desperate to pass, we could disappear among them. We would find a bookshelf aisle in the back, sit next to each other, and talk. We talked about our families, about the memories we could have shared if we had spent our childhoods together. And we talked about our fathers, who expected the world from us, yet never asked us if we wanted it in the first place.

Maxwell was luckier than me when it came to this. He wasn't the firstborn. He wasn't expected to inherit his father's responsibility. Chloe was. Maxwell dreamt of studying law, becoming a lawyer or maybe a judge. "I want to help people individually," he told me. It was the little desires, the little secrets that closed the gaps of our friendship, and with that we did what generations of our families had sworn to never do. We didn't hate each other.

We were so busy talking, we barely noticed that the CL was buzzing. It was close to finals and it was prime freak-out time. Maxwell and I sat in the far end of our favorite aisle by the fiction section. Our shoulders brushed and there was nothing but silence until it was broken by Maxwell's voice.

"Sometimes I think we should just take my car and run away."

I imagined us driving down empty roads, the wind on our faces. "We could drive to the edge of Gorus. No man's land. Maybe even The Wall."

I saw the corner of Maxwell's mouth raise up with a smile. "That would be different. The unknown."

Maxwell's fingers inched towards mine until his pinkie looped around my own.

I could no longer call what we had a friendship. We had been falling in love all this time. Every smile, every brush, every word was just another form for me to sink deeper in.

I was so in love with him. I was in love with the only person I could never be with.

CHAPTER 08

Maxwell closed his book. That was the signal.

I read a few more lines of one of the books I had, counting the seconds in my head. Forty-five. Time to go. I put the books back, keeping count in my head as I made my way out of the CL. Maxwell was already gone.

Instead of heading towards the door that would take me back to North Hall, I turned left towards the main entrance of the CL. I never hesitated, walking with sure steady steps.

I could see past the clear windows of the building. It was January. The windless chill outside made the trees look fake. The information staff and security barely gave me a second glance as I walked past them towards the clear double doors. I quickly pressed my hand to the scanner and let out my breath. The second I pushed the door open, a beautiful metallic-grey, ridiculously expensive car pulled up to the curve.

I took in a gasp of air and stepped out the door. For the first few steps I held my breath, but then realized that was stupid. Cameras didn't care if I breathed or not. It took everything I had not to run to that car. It was the most terrifying eight seconds of my life. I only relaxed once I was sitting down next to Maxwell, and the door was shut behind me.

I tried to breathe calmly again. Maxwell was already messing with the shift and stepping on the accelerator. He drove like we were being chased, but when I looked behind us, there was nobody there. I tried to relax, but it was impossible. I couldn't relax, at least not until I knew we were safe—when we were out of the city and into the older derelict districts. Somewhere where cameras were scarce, and there were no gates to take our fingerprints.

Once we got on the highway, I heard the click that signaled the car had aligned with the road. Maxwell pushed the Auto button and let go of the wheel. His hand reached out and grabbed mine. The fire flared through my fingertips.

It was madness, this detour of ours, an impossibility—and still I was willing to risk it all to spend one day with the person I loved.

Back in December, when Maxwell had told me we should run away, I played along, because it was just pretending. Then two days ago he begged me to run away with him for real.

But just for a day.

One afternoon outside the city, where no one would know who we were. I tried to stop it, because if we got caught, we would lose what little time we did have. But then I thought of the day we would graduate. The day the CL would no longer be our haven, and I thought of how the only memories I would have of us would be hiding in the dark.

I pressed a button until the roof of the car pulled all the way back and disappeared. The wind was an insanity at this speed, and it was the closest I had come to feeling free.

The beauty of Aurora became a dot in the distance and it hit me. This was the first time I had ever left its boundaries. The modern highway ended and became something abused by time. Maxwell took back the wheel, slowed down, and closed the roof.

I saw an old, bent, muddy sign by the side of the road.

Welcome to Orth

“We’re in Orth?” I asked, still dumfounded. This was an ancient, mostly abandoned city that had been destroyed during the war. I’d seen pictures of its skeletal buildings, but nothing else.

If I was expecting to see broken reminders of the war, I had to deal with disappointment, because Maxwell drove into an area where people actually walked around, and I saw shops and restaurants.

“I came here three months ago with my father,” Maxwell explained. “He knows some people that are trying to develop this area. This is their first push.”

Maxwell drove past the busy street and parked the car in a private garage. I waited while he talked to the garage employee, watching a few people walk past. The air here smelled different, or at least I thought so. Maxwell bumped

his shoulder against mine, I smiled, then turned towards the street with the shops and restaurants.

Maxwell stopped me. “No. This way.” He nodded towards the opposite direction. It was darker down there, emptier. Maxwell pulled my hand and I followed blindly.

CHAPTER 09

I quickly discovered why Maxwell went towards the quieter side of the street. It was empty—just us and the world. The majority of the buildings showed clear signs of being in the middle of repairs, but had not yet opened except for a couple of shops. We ate sandwiches at a tiny shop where a woman carefully prepared everything to perfection. She spoke soft words in another language that I didn't understand, and Maxwell replied in the same voice.

“What did she say?” I asked after we had left.

“Thank you, in Spanish.”

“I didn't know you spoke Spanish.”

Maxwell shook his head. “I don't speak it. I just remember a few phrases that my grandmother taught me. Thank you. You're welcome. Hello. Good-bye. I love you.”

“Teach me,” I asked. Maxwell repeated the five phrases and I failed miserably at pronouncing all five of them. I gave up pretty quickly, and while I was laughing at my failure, Maxwell closed his hand over mine and held it firm. It felt like the most natural thing in the world.

We wandered far enough that I thought we should turn back. It started to feel unsafe.

“Look at that.” Maxwell pointed to a lit-up machine, oddly placed outside a store that appeared to be full of trinkets, toys, and things you could touch. Maxwell tried to open the door to the store, but it was locked. Our attention turned to the machine.

“What is it?”

“I'm not sure.” Maxwell read the instructions and his eyes lit-up. “It takes old pictures. *Paper* pictures. Looks like it was altered to take mobiles.” Maxwell pressed the screen of his mobile against the small pad and it beeped once, confirming the purchase. Maxwell pulled the curtain aside and tugged on my hand, forcing me to follow him into the narrow closet space where we sat uncomfortably on a small bench.

I looked in front of us and saw a clear window with something on it. Next to it was a button that read START. Maxwell rested his head against my shoulder and pressed it. We waited until I heard the click and saw the flash. It startled me, but just for a second. I laughed, now knowing what to expect. I held Maxwell's hand and bumped my head against his as another flash went off.

Maxwell squeezed my hand, raised it to his mouth and pressed his lips against it. Another flash.

I could feel our hearts beating through our fingertips, and for the life of me I could not think clearly. Everything was that touch, wanting more. I heard the camera click again. We turned our heads at the same time and I felt the brush of Maxwell's fingertips against my cheek before we closed the gap between us and kissed... I had no idea what I was doing, and even if Maxwell pretended to, he didn't know either. We were clumsy and hesitant, and there was absolutely no doubt in my heart that I wanted him to keep kissing me. I heard another click and opened my eyes. Maxwell was right there, staring at me, and from the look in his eyes it was obvious he was just as sure as I was.

My first kiss was with the boy everyone told me was my enemy. The boy that lived across the street and I never saw. The boy who held my hand and kissed me even as a camera created the evidence that we could never allow the world to see.

I caught my breath as Maxwell held on to me, as if holding on would make the time stop. But time was an unstoppable thing, and we could not stay here forever, holding each other and pretending the rest of the world did not exist.

Sooner or later we had to go back.

"The pictures are outside," Maxwell said against my lips and I nodded. Yes, they were. "This is a good memory, isn't it?"

What an odd thing to say, I thought, but it was true. It was an unforgettable memory.

I grabbed the pictures and looked at them carefully. The one with his head against my shoulder, smiling nonchalantly like we had no worries in the world.

My head against his. Trusting. Kissing my hand. The look in my eyes said everything. And then the kisses. There were more than one. And each one wasn't just a kiss. It was a reflection of everything we felt and how much we just wanted to forget our reality. It made me wish to be someone else, anyone else, as long as it gave me Maxwell.

Sometimes it sucked being able to dream.

I held the small evidence of our affection, not sure what to do with them. If I kept them it was a risk. If I threw them away—*No*—As soon as the thought of destroying the pictures crossed my mind, I knew I couldn't do it, no matter the risk. If this was the only night Maxwell and I could share, then I wanted a reminder of it for as long as I lived.

CHAPTER 10

I slid back in the house with ease and closed the door noiselessly.

“Young master.”

I turned around rapidly to see Douglas, my butler. He preferred to be called personal assistant, handpicked by my father to be there at my beck and call. He had been by my side since the bombing. I guess my father had gotten tired of the countless nannies and finally decided to hire someone that would always be present.

I remember when I first met him. We were staying at a lavish hotel while the house was being repaired and my father introduced me to a sour-looking seventeen-year-old. I don't know the story of how a seventeen-year-old Douglas ended up in my father's debt. Because why else would a teenager with a black eye and a cut on his cheek ever tell a child that he was at his beck and call, that his life no longer belonged to himself, but to me?

I remember hating him at first. He was always there, never left me alone, but through the years I learned to lose him and get rid of him when I wanted.

No, I did not hate Douglas, but I didn't harbor any familial feelings for him either. I didn't trust him, even if I should. Too many times he promised me he would keep my secrets, just to turn around and tell my father. Now he had caught me coming in late. *Great.*

I ignored Douglas and went to my room, two stairs at a time. I wasn't going to let him ruin what had been the best day of my life. I wanted to change my shirt, which still smelled of Maxwell. I put on one of my shirts that had a picture of an eagle. The symbol of my father's party. When I turned, I saw Douglas, waiting by the door with his hands behind his back.

“Young master,” he said again, and I wished he'd just go away. “Your father requests your presence in his study.”

I cursed and bolted out of my room. Who knows when my father had actually called me, and Douglas just stood there without telling me. The fact that I was running to my father's study said a lot about our relationship. Fear is a powerful motivator, but what did I really fear? Getting caught breaking

curfew. My father's disappointment that I didn't present myself when called. Or him finding out what I had done today. It was combination of all of them. The fear was ingrained in my brain so hard I didn't even think—just reacted. Almost like a survival instinct that right then was solely focused on being in front of my father as fast as I could.

I took a second to catch my breath before knocking on the door to my father's study. I counted to five like I always did, then simply opened the door.

"I'm here, Father." I announced my presence and waited for him to acknowledge me. This little ritual hadn't changed the slightest since I was a child, from the time I was old enough to understand that this was the way it was done. Only once did I break the ritual—when I was five and I fell and scraped my knee. My father was the only one in the house, so I burst into his office that time without knocking, hoping to claim his attention from his papers to my scraped knee. Sometimes I can still feel my knee burning from when he grabbed it, and still hear his voice yelling that it was just a scratch and calling me a weak child. I learned more than just knocking on the door that day.

My father was not an old man—he had just turned forty-five—but you wouldn't know it from looking at him. Half the tabloids rumored that he lied about his age to appease a younger demographic. His hair was graying early around the edges, and his face already carried the sunken look of an old man. But mostly it was his behavior. He didn't act like a man that, more than likely, still had another forty or more years of life ahead of him. Life had hardened my father. The life of being the head of a political party, of succeeding my grandfather when he was so young, and of losing my mother after I was born.

My father easily looked ten years older. His eyes were the only thing that retained some of his true age. His brow furrowed as he looked at me, then quickly returned to the stack of papers on his desk.

"You should not take so long to take a bath, Andrew. You kept me waiting."

I hid my surprise well. I didn't even flinch when he spoke. So Douglas had lied and covered for me. It was something to keep in mind.

"I am sorry, Father. Douglas neglected to tell me it was urgent." I didn't feel an inch of guilt in blaming Douglas for my lateness.

“You need to take responsibility for yourself, Andrew. You know I dislike when you place blame on others.”

It was really hard not to scowl. “Yes, Father. Why did you need to see me?” I was ready to get this done so I could go back to my room.

My father’s hand went to the display on top of his desk, his fingers moving nimbly across the surface until the television screen on the far wall turned on, his fingers continued tapping until the screen displayed the channel he wanted. They were talking about him.

“Latest polls have us five points ahead, but I have better news.” He was talking to me, even though his eyes never left the screen.

“What could be better, Father?” I asked predictably. I didn’t care about any of this. Heck, deep down I wanted him to lose; our party hadn’t won since my mother died. Maybe if he kept losing he’d realize this was a waste of time. That our party was a dead horse and there was no use beating it. It would make it easier for me to leave. Because deep down that’s what I wanted. To leave. To get in a car and never look back. Even if I was scared when Maxwell drove us to Orth, I secretly wished he would have kept driving down that decrepit highway and taken me so far away we could never go back. Run away to a life where I wouldn’t know what the next day brought. An unscripted life.

“I got good word that Torres will drop out from the race.”

My daydream vanished. I tried as best as I could to not show my reaction, but my body language changed and it was hard to keep my voice uncaring and monotone. “Why would he do that?” I knew immediately that wasn’t the right thing to say, but if it bothered my father he didn’t let me know.

“To avoid scandal, of course.”

That was a long list. Pretty much anything in our society was considered scandalous. Even the fact that Clare Mason remarried was scandalous.

I wasn’t really listening to the next words my father said, because all I could imagine was Maxwell having to move out of The Circle and into the unruly city. It was one thing to escape for a one-night escapade where the danger was brief, but to reside in its midst?

My father must have asked me something because he was looking at me as

if waiting for an answer. I said the safest thing that popped in my head. “When will we know if it is official?” When in doubt, ask a question.

Father was about to answer when there was a knock on the door. The man that opened it did not wait the five seconds like I had to. His name was Kane Reeves, a fair-skinned man with blue eyes and light hair. He had also come into my life after the bombings, even if he should have been in it long before. He was the face the public saw whenever my father was unable or unwilling to make an appearance, and one reason why the party had had a surge of popularity recently. The other reason was me.

The political update ended on the screen and the show switched to another segment, this one presented by a bubbly girl that looked too young to be on a reputable show. My picture popped up on the screen. Kane turned it off immediately.

I knew my father trusted him implicitly, but he was a douche as far as I was concerned. He also hated me—he had told me as much for most of my life.

“I got an update on the Torres scandal—” he said before he noticed I was in the room and shut his mouth. He glowered at me briefly before ignoring my presence, and stepped next to my father. He whispered whatever information he had discovered and I couldn’t hear what he said, but I heard my father’s reply and it shook me.

“The son?” my father asked, not following Kane’s need to whisper.

I stood still, hoping they’d continue the conversation, because otherwise I might never know. My head was swimming with possible dreadful scenarios, but one haunted me more. Maxwell’s father had discovered he was gay and was leaving his political career because of it. Once the possibility entered my mind, I had no doubt that was the case. This explained Maxwell’s behavior—it explained why when he told me he would see me tomorrow, it sounded like a lie.

Kane continued whispering the update to my father and I took the chance to excuse myself from the room, citing overdue schoolwork as the reason. My father paid little heed as I left the study. It took sheer willpower for me to not run back to my room, and when I finally got there, I wasted no time in running to the window and opening it.

I realized I was doing something incredibly stupid for the second time that day. But my need to know was so intense, I couldn't help it. *What if Maxwell left tonight? What if today had been the last time his hand touched mine?*

I rationalized my actions for an entire three seconds before I swung my leg over the windowsill and grabbed the edge of the wall for balance. I knew in theory what I had to do to safely climb down the window, but suave climbing maneuvers were not really my priority. The third floor seemed higher than it actually was from the ground—a rule of the universe, I guess. I could see myself running across the street that divided the two houses, climbing the side of the Torres residence all the way up to Maxwell's second floor bedroom, and knocking on the window. Maxwell would open and get a pleasant surprise. He would invite me in, and I would hug him as hard as I could, kiss his lips until we both needed air, and tell him that I would go anywhere he went. That I was willing to tell my father that I was in love with a boy and that I no longer wanted the future he saw for me. It all played perfectly inside my head in the short seconds it took me to climb down halfway to the second floor.

The sad thing about a perfect scenario in your mind is that it is just that. A figment of your imagination. As I slowly lowered myself another foot, I heard the sound of a vehicle driving around the cul-de-sac. I turned my head and saw Maxwell's car. I suddenly felt the need to rush, for my feet to touch the ground *now*. I ignored every warning bell in my head that told me to slow down and miscalculated the distance left between my feet and the small ledge that divided the second and third floors. Instead of telling Maxwell that I loved him and wanted to stay with him no matter what—I slipped—and fell down the rest of the way before my back crashed to the ground.

CHAPTER 11

There was an annoying beeping sound when I woke up, and I squinted my eyes to see a slick-looking machine next to me. I recognized my room once my vision settled, and the feeling of my bed was familiar on my back. The little machine was placed on my bedside table and there was a very small tube running from it and disappearing under the skin of my left arm. I remembered seeing a similar tube on the only picture I had with my mother; she was sitting in a hospital bed with me in her arms, her golden hair messy and looking drained but happy. A picture taken just days before she died.

I didn't feel scared. I didn't really feel much of anything. I realized there were other people in the room with me. Closest to me was Dr. Peters, my personal physician, a man in his early thirties with unmoving brown hair and dark eyes. The fact that he was at my bedside was not only expected, but required. Contracted by my father as soon as he finished med school at the top of his class, and offered such a ridiculous salary that no one would have been able to resist. When I was younger I noticed that Dr. Peters was plenty happy with this arrangement. He had an easygoing job that paid well, he could enjoy his youth flushed with that wealth—and had. One time there was an emergency and he appeared wearing a wet suit. But in the past few years something in his eyes had changed, and he didn't tend to me with the excitement he once did—he did it because it was his job and he couldn't leave.

“Are you feeling any pain in your back?” he asked me with a smile. I could tell he cared about my well-being. He cared about me specifically, but his heart wasn't in his craft anymore.

I just shook my head; my lips and mouth were dry when I tried to talk. Dr. Peters raised a cup of water to my lips. No matter how much the medicines kept me hydrated there was nothing like a real cup of water.

There were two other people in the room—Kane and someone behind him. I really had no idea why Kane would even bother to be at my bedside except to report to my father immediately, or because I was seriously ill. I didn't feel like I was about to die, so it had to be option one, but why?

Kane moved, revealing the person behind him and my question was answered. Maxwell was leaning against the wall, trying to look bored. I knew immediately why Kane was there. To see my reaction. That meant only one thing, he knew I loved Maxwell or at least suspected it. And if he knew—my father knew.

There are many things you can do to hide your true reaction to something. Laugh it off, shrug it off, pretend to be clueless. I've had lots of years of practice in hiding my real feelings. How else would I have survived the scrutiny that is my life? It is not that hard to hide your true feelings. People lie all the time. But then there are the moments when you hold so much affection for someone, that no matter how practiced you are, the shock of the moment sneaks up on you, and you can't hide that affection for a brief second.

A second was all that Kane needed to know my true feelings. His plastic visage grew a little catty with a slight raised of his brow, a slight upward twitch of his lips.

Maxwell noticed.

It was too late, but I still pretended to be shocked and appalled that Maxwell was in my bedroom. "Why is he here?" I asked, trying to make my voice sound like venom.

Dr. Peters was the only one apparently clueless as to what was really going on. "He found you after you fell. Somehow the press got wind of it, and well—"

Kane continued the explanation. "The press has taken this little incident as a rare moment of union between the opposing parties. It's become quite popular. This fictional *friendship* between the sons of men on opposite sides of the coin." He spat the word *friendship* with such contempt it made me feel wrong inside. "All the readers are waiting breathlessly to see how Mr. Lee reacts to Mr. Torres' show of *friendship*." He spat the word again.

"I'm fine," I said, not knowing what else to do. "I feel grateful for his help." Maybe that would be enough to make Kane go away. It wasn't. He wanted this over, here and now. He wasn't going to report anything different to my father.

I felt immense sorrow at how my life had fallen apart around me in the last few hours. From feeling such joy as the wind brushed my face and Maxwell's hand encircled my own while we rode down the road, to the shock of knowing he was going away. Planning to run away with him. Imagining a pretend life together.

Maxwell was looking at me nonchalantly, but his eyes told me something else entirely.

"I'm grateful," I repeated, "but nothing more. It was just an accident. Accidents happen. I would feel equally grateful if any other person had come to my aid and—"

"That's enough." Dr. Peters interrupted me and pushed a button on the machine next to me. He stood up and started repositioning my body on the bed. "Mr. Reeves, I'm sure you need no reminder that young Master Lee is still recovering from breaking his back, and that thanks to young Master Torres finding him so quickly, Master Lee will have a full recovery. Another minute or two and the re-gen would not have worked as swiftly. He might have been paralyzed or worse.

I wanted to hug Dr. Peters right then.

"I don't need a reminder, doctor. It's the only reason Mr. Torres is here in the first place, but I'm sure there will be no more need for Mr. Torres to hang around anymore." He looked at me. "Right, Andrew?"

I barely moved. "Yes, Uncle."

"I'll give the press a call." He exited without saying anything else, and left Maxwell in the room with me. It was as if he let us be in the room together on purpose.

Dr. Peters finished rearranging my position and I felt much more comfortable. "I need to get some things from my car. I'll be back in five minutes."

Was this really happening? Were they really giving us permission to be alone? It made me happy to realize this. Exhilarated, but the feeling vanished quickly, because they weren't letting us be alone. They were letting us say good-bye.

Maxwell walked towards me. And unlike the childlike steps in my memory from the day I discovered we were not allowed to be anything, these steps were not the ones of a child, they were not hesitant nor innocent.

I raised my hand for him to stop. I still held fear from being seen. I knew there was a camera in my room, right above the door. Maxwell stood still just a few feet from me, waiting for me to decide. I decided I didn't care.

Maxwell sat carefully next to me, so as to not jostle the bed. "I feel fine," I said. "I feel normal."

He squeezed my hand then smacked it once. "Why did you try that?" he asked, but I knew he didn't blame me. "I was just getting home when I heard this horrible noise. You should have seen that man's face when he opened the door and I was standing there asking for help."

I laughed when I imagined Kane's face.

Maxwell pulled his glass pad from his pocket and turned it on. "Here," he said, and handed it to me. I scrolled through the pictures displayed on it. They were the headlines from the accident. One of them even had a picture of me surrounded by Kane and my father while Maxwell stood in the background. The headings were all over the place. From simple "Torres saves Lee" to exaggerated, "Torres risks life to save enemy."

None of them were the truth.

Maxwell sighed and his hand touched mine. "I am going to miss you."

So it was true. He was leaving. I gave him back his glass pad and swallowed the lump in my throat. "Did your father find out? How? When are you moving?" I asked. I knew the answer. They had to have found out about us. Maybe someone told what we had been doing in the CL every day.

What else could it be?

Maxwell let go of my hand and stood up. "I am not moving." He shook his head and I saw the struggle in his eyes. What could be worse than him leaving? "Chloe has decided to cede her position as heir."

It took me a moment to really understand that. I've never really given much thought to the real meaning of my position in this world. That my father's mantle would be given to me. That I was his only child. His firstborn.

Maxwell was the second child. He wasn't heir. Chloe was. She *was*.

Because she was female, she had the option to let go. Maxwell had no such luxury. That little line that divided us and our situation had been broken. Now we were both heirs, and what we had been doing was the worst thing we could have possibly done.

A dozen situations crossed through my head. None were a happy ending. Not like I ever believed we could have one, but the fact that Maxwell wasn't heir made those dreams just remotely believable. That dream was dead now, and only truth remained. "In a few years, we will run against each other." My voice sounded alien, even to me.

"Yes."

I saw it. Our future. I had lived through enough of my father's campaigns to know how they were run. How all the effort, money, and voice were used to demean and darken your opponent. I saw myself sitting behind a desk while men told me what to do. What to say. My father just behind me, whispering in my ear. All telling me to say the most horrible things about the person I loved.

I squeezed the bed sheet tightly. Maxwell stood between me and the door, waiting for me to say something. I was so powerless.

I couldn't let it end here. This couldn't be the last memory of us. Me in a bed watching him leave.

I sat up, turned off the machine, and pulled out the needle from my arm. No alarms rang. I started to get out of bed.

"Hey." Maxwell was quickly by my side.

"I'm fine," I reassured him. "Help me up."

I thought I would be weak, or that my feet would wobble, but they didn't. I stood steady. I felt fine. I grabbed Maxwell's hand and headed towards my closet. I didn't care if they taped or recorded us in my room. Knowing my father, he would hide the evidence. But not caring didn't mean I was going to give them a free show.

I stared at the little camera above the door then flipped it off.

I pulled Maxwell with me inside the closet and pressed my lips against his. If we were going to end then I would create our last memory. That way, every time someone told me a lie about him, every time someone made me sign something that would hurt him, we both would know what the reality was.

I winced when Maxwell ran his hand up my back, but I bore it, replacing the pain with the memory of his lips. The memory of his touch. We said the things we carried in our hearts, made promises we knew we couldn't keep. And when he finally left, I closed my eyes so I wouldn't see him go.

I remained there even after he had gone. Afraid to move.

“Let's get you back to bed, Andrew.” Dr. Peters held my arm. I didn't remember him coming in.

I didn't sleep well that night. Or the next.

EPILOGUE

Noah Mason was frowning with his arms crossed while his mother and stepfather watched silently.

Our quiet street had been overpowered by news vans and reporters. All of them dying to get the story of the hour. That Chloe Torres had declined a position many would die for. That Gorus had a new heir.

Confined to my room, I sat on the windowsill watching the spectacle, trying very hard not to cry.

I had a lot to think about since Maxwell told me he was becoming heir, and I had made a decision. I wasn't going to wait for fate to intervene in my love. I was going to do something about it. I never wanted my father's position. It was handed to me like a wrapped gift, with no effort on my part. I never wanted it until now. Because that position meant power. Power to get almost anything you wanted in life. I'd seen my father doing that most of his life. I never wanted anything. Never needed that power.

Until now.

I was going to change this country. I was going to shape it to get what I wanted.

And unlike my father, I wasn't going to be a puppet whose strings were pulled by every greedy man that came knocking on the door.

Maxwell was standing in his front yard with his father as he spoke to the reporters. I turned on the television.

“According to the latest polls, it looks like Lee will win the next election. Are you concerned that naming your second born as heir may lose you votes?” a reporter asked.

“Why should I be?” Benjamin smiled for the cameras, confident as ever. “He may win this round, but just wait two years. My son will surely take this party to a new era.”

Yes.

I was ready to claim my place as heir.

But first?

I had to grow up.

THE END

Author Bio

Ashlyn is a long-time fan of all things geeky. Admittedly addicted to reading manga, love stories, and anything that makes her cry. She dreams of one day seeing something she wrote at a library and keeps a notebook just to write story ideas, because you never know.

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LIFE DRAWING

By Jane Davitt

Photo Description

The man in the photograph wears black stockings and lace suspenders, and his back is to the camera. He also wears leather: gloves, a belt cinched around his arm, and a double strapped harness over his shoulder and looping around his waist. Under the ankh tattoo in the small of his back, his ass is bare, and a faint blush of pink from a spanking is barely visible...

Story Letter

Dear Author,

It took some guts to pose for this photo. But I wanted to be true to my desires at last, and yeah, impress this guy I met. In my street clothes, most people wouldn't even guess I am gay and those who know assume I am a top, but I am not. This guy, he is really cute, quite petite, and kind of flamboyant, but he has a core of steel. Perhaps he is the one who will see me as I am and complete me.

Please dear author, tell me how it works out. I wouldn't mind some BDSM, but it is not a must.

Sincerely,

Dorome

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: cross-dressing, light D/s, bondage, visual arts, underwear fetish, role-play

Word count: 15,953

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LIFE DRAWING

By Jane Davitt

Walking in on the life drawing class was a genuine mistake on my part, but from the scornful glances thrown my way, no one bought my stammered excuses. The class was taking a break; the artists standing in groups admiring, or more likely criticizing, each other's work, and the model wrapped in a robe, munching an apple.

I muttered a final apology, my face burning, and groped behind me for the door handle.

“Poor guy,” the model said in a voice designed to be heard by everyone in the room, though he directed his words at the group nearest him. “Probably hoping for a look at some nice perky tits and got me instead.” He threw his apple core at a trash can, scoring a direct hit, then jerked his chin at me, blue eyes unfriendly. “On the plus side, if you'd barged in five minutes ago, you'd have gotten an eyeful of my cute gay dick and who knows how much therapy you'd have needed to recover from something *that* traumatic.”

He got some giggles, but I didn't crack a smile. “Like I said, I made a mistake. I thought this was the home remodeling class.”

Eye roll and sigh. He was wringing every drop of drama from this, the jerk. “Right. Because the sign on the door telling people there's a life drawing class in progress so keep out and keep quiet obviously turned invisible. Or can't you read?” He covered his mouth in mock horror. “Oh God, did I put my foot in it? Were you looking for the adult literacy class? Because that's Thursdays, sweetie, and today is Monday.”

“Jamie, that's enough.” The woman who'd spoken seemed uneasy, but I didn't know if it was because Jamie had gone too far or if she was scared of becoming his next target. She cleared her throat and drew herself up. “Break's over. Back to your easels everyone. Jamie, new position, three-minute pose, facing the window, looking over your shoulder.” She met my gaze, a hint of apology showing in her eyes. “The class you need is next door. Please make sure the notice is in place when you leave.”

It sure as hell hadn't been there when I arrived. I was about to point that out when Jamie dropped the robe and stood facing me, silently challenging me to blush or glance away. He was a redhead, long straight hair brushed back from a face too pretty to be described as handsome, waif-like without being skin and bones. From a cloud of red hair, his cock hung in a sweet, beckoning curl, but by the time my gaze reached it, I was already wishing we'd met differently. Not a good choice as a model, though. My mom wouldn't have picked up her pencil, eyes gleaming, at the sight of him. Pretty didn't equal paintable. A community college short on funds—and they all were—wouldn't be fussy though.

I met the dare and studied him, careful to keep my desire hidden. The tongue-lashing, the bright, clear confidence he projected—I craved more, though part of me stayed indifferent to his appeal. I like being controlled, but I've got to respect the person giving the orders and so far Jamie wasn't meeting my standards. Too quick to judge; too cruel. Okay, not too cruel. I could take that. Could take anything he handed out, in fact.

Didn't look as if it was a theory I'd get to test. With a dismissive shrug, he got into position, staring back over his shoulder, not at me but through me.

I put myself on the other side of the door, found the sign a few yards away, facedown and trodden on, judging by the muddy footprint, and stuck it back in place.

Then I went next door to get told off for being late to the first class of House Remodeling 101. That scolding didn't get me going at all.

It's all in the delivery, I guess.

I hung around the college for the rest of the afternoon, checking out some books I'd need from the library and sharing a coffee with a few people from the class. Like me, most of them had signed up because they wanted to tackle a job around their home. I was the only one gutting my place from attic to basement.

The food on campus was cheap and I had nothing waiting for me at home but leftover curry that had started life as Bolognese sauce, then morphed into a chili. Throw in enough curry powder and any original flavor is wiped out. I'd

been eating my way through a vat of sauce since Friday, accompanying it with pasta or rice, and I was bored of glop. I treated myself to a hamburger, fries, and salad, and watched the September rain lash against windows too grimy to see out of even when the sun was shining.

I read as I ate, jotting down anything interesting or useful in the notebook I carried everywhere since I'd begun the remodeling. It held measurements, phone numbers, rough sketches, and a dozen paint chips tucked between the pages. Painting was a long way off, but I liked seeing the chips. They were a reminder that one day this would end and I'd have a home, not just a house.

After the meal, I dropped the books off at my truck and walked over to the college gym. If I was able to work out there it would be a big saving on fees and convenient too. I'm not a body builder, bulked up to the point where I look cartoonish, but I'm strong and yeah, there're plenty of muscles on display for those who like them. Ironically, when I stared in the mirror I didn't see anything I fancied. I go for long hair on a guy, and mine's buzzed short. Easier to wash the dust out.

I couldn't get Jamie out of my head. Twink is my favorite flavor. Sprinkled with slender, imperious, cute, and snarky if I can get it. Jamie had stamped hard on my buttons today. Shame he was a total jerk. Even more of a shame he wasn't bright enough to guess I was gay. From the moment I'd walked in, he'd grabbed my attention. If he thought my slack-jawed lust was straight panic, more fool him.

A helpful trainer told me as a registered student I could use the gym, small pool, and showers for a nominal monthly fee and I signed up. I had to shut the water off sometimes when I was working on the plumbing and having a place to get clean would be a real help.

Pleased with how my first day back at school in twelve years had gone, I went back to my truck. It was dark now, rain bouncing off the concrete, the wind making each drop feel ice-encased. Vermont gets chilly in the fall. I kept my head down and hurried, jeans sticking to the front of my thighs, the denim cold and clammy. God, it would take forever to dry my leather jacket out. I had a few space heaters but the forced air system was weeks away from being installed. I'd need to get it in by the time winter arrived or the pipes would freeze.

Mind occupied with plans, I vaguely registered the whine and cough of an engine trying and failing to turn over, but when I drew level with the car responsible I glanced inside.

The driver was Jamie. Face tight with frustration, he turned the key again, this time producing no sound audible over the wind.

My truck wasn't far away and I carried jumper cables with me, but I hesitated for a moment before rapping on the window to offer help. *Do as you would be done by* is a good principle to live by, and I'd needed a jump start a few times in the past, but with rain trickling down my back and my feet in a puddle, the prospect of more insults thrown my way didn't appeal.

What the hell. I knocked on the glass and he opened the door, the change in his expression from hopeful to chagrined making me smile. Karma biting his ass hard enough to bruise, I guessed.

"Yeah, it's me," I said before he spoke. "Save the chitchat for a sunny day. Battery dead?"

He hunched up a shoulder, his irritation with the situation and me plain to see. "Looks that way."

Ignoring the flat, unfriendly tone, I asked, "Want me to bring my truck over and see if we can jump start it?"

"With all those muscles, why not just drag my car over there?" he countered. "I'm sure you'd get a kick out of the caveman routine."

I was losing patience with him. Cute and hot only bought him so much goodwill. "Funny guy. Do you want help or not?"

He glanced around the deserted parking lot. Plenty of cars but no people. I was the only choice he had. "Guess I do."

We got the cables hooked up, but it didn't work. I revved until my pickup was shuddering, but his engine stayed resolutely silent.

"It's too flat to take a charge," I told him after replacing the jumper cables in my truck. "You'll need to buy another battery." I was getting used to the rain. I was soaked and aside from the annoyance of the water trickling down my face and into my eyes, I didn't mind it. Jamie was shivering, the oversized

purple sweater he wore hanging limp and heavy from his shoulders. No coat. Leather boots.

His teeth were chattering, but he smiled. “Going to take me to a parts store?”

“No.” I’d had enough of him. So far not a word of thanks had passed his lips. “The closest one shuts at eight and by the time we get your battery out and drive over there, it’ll be too late.”

“Then I’ll leave the car here and deal with it tomorrow. Get a ride in with a friend.” He nibbled at his lower lip, frowning as if he was working his way down a list of suckers who’d help him when he snapped his fingers.

He didn’t know my name, so if I was on that list, it’d be probably be under “muscle-bound, illiterate straight guy”, or something equally inaccurate.

“Well, see you around,” he said, snapping out of his reverie and finally remembering his manners. “Thanks for trying.”

I completed his sentence in my head: *even if you failed.*

By the time I’d gotten into my truck he’d locked up his car and was heading for the main gate on foot. I took my time getting settled, and using a towel from my gym bag to dry my head, then drove after him.

“Get in,” I called over the rising howl of the wind when I was level with him. “Unless you live miles out of town, I’ll give you a ride home.”

He clawed a hank of hair out of his mouth, making soaked to the skin and shivering work for him. “I don’t take rides from strangers. Getting gay-bashed isn’t my exercise of choice.”

Oh for God’s sake. “My name’s Rob Grant, I’m gayer than a pink fucking flamingo, and you’ve got ten seconds to get your ass in my truck before I drive off, making sure I spray water all over you.”

“My, aren’t we macho,” he mocked, but there was some relief there too.

Door shut, the heater blasting tepid air at us as the engine slowly warmed, I drove, Jamie a silent companion, only speaking when he gave me directions. He refused to tell me his exact address and I couldn’t fault him for being careful. He also texted a friend telling him what had happened and whose

truck he was in. It seemed like overkill but who knew what his past held. Maybe he'd been on the receiving end of a fist and was wary. I'd never been in that situation. People take one look at me and assume I'm straight eight times out of ten. If they guess I'm gay, they picture me in leather wielding a whip.

People see what they expect, judging on the basis of fuck all. I'm gay, and I'm kinky as shit in my own way, but in my fantasies I'm neither on my knees licking leather boots, nor wearing them, thank you very fucking much for assuming.

What gets me so hot I can't breathe I've never shared, not even with the most sympathetic partner. I've tried to speak up, but fear's always held me back. Fear of being laughed at, word spreading until no one wants me in their bed.

Jesus, I'm such a fucking coward.

As I drove, it became clear we lived in the same area. I was following the route I would've taken anyway, every turn, every shortcut. That put soaking in a hot bath, cold beer in hand, temptingly close and took the edge off my irritation with him.

"You can stop here," he said.

I pulled into a small plaza. I did my shopping at the supermarket there and bought as many tools and supplies as possible from the hardware store to keep it in business, but there weren't any houses nearby and the rain was still torrential. "I live around here. 52 Ashbury. I can take you to your door without going out of my way and if I wanted to find out where you lived, and I don't, it'd be easy to look you up online. Stop treating me like the enemy and give me an address."

"I'm farther up," he said after giving my words some consideration. "Third house on the left after you turn down Wilton."

It was an apology of sorts and I took it, swinging the truck around and heading back into the traffic. We drove past my house and I nodded at it. "That's mine."

He craned his neck. "*You* live there?"

Why the surprise? "Yeah. I'm renovating it."

For the first time there was warmth in his voice. “It’s a great house. Loads of character. Shame it was left to rot for so long. The rose shade of the bricks is incredible when the sun’s on them.”

After falling in love with the house from the street, I’d appreciated the potential of the interior even more. It was why I’d made an offer after a day or two sitting on my hands so I didn’t appear too eager. But I’d also seen damp plaster, rotting wood and exposed wiring. Jamie wasn’t exaggerating its condition. “God, tell me about it. Every job I start I find something else that needs to be done. I end up going around in circles. Like that guy in the song with a hole in his bucket.”

Listen to us having a civilized conversation.

“Be honest; was I an asshole earlier?” Jamie asked.

I wasn’t letting him off the hook. “Yeah. And in the parking lot. Total, complete, no room for doubt asshole.”

“People do walk in,” he said after a moment. “On purpose, I mean. They think they’re going to see someone gorgeous and when they don’t, well, their reaction’s hurtful. Insulting to the model.”

“I know what most life models look like,” I told him without elaborating. As a kid, I’d grown up playing in a corner, keeping quiet as my mom worked. I’d been taught to view sagging, wrinkled flesh as paintable and interesting, not gross. I didn’t have many hang-ups about nudity. Skin was skin.

“I was filling in because Sarah couldn’t make it,” Jamie said. “She became a grandmother last night and she’s with her daughter, cooing over the baby.”

“Uh-huh.” I kept the conversation going with a question. “So you’re a student there like me?”

“I was. Now I teach a night class—watercolors for beginners—and I’m a substitute teacher for the art department. It pays the bills. Well, it pays one bill. Two if you count what I spend at the coffeehouse. I’m hooked on their ginger molasses cookies.”

“Life’s not cheap,” I agreed. I’d inherited a chunk of money from my mom but it felt too soon in my life to have it. I’d expected her to die at ninety, clutching a paintbrush in arthritic fingers. Losing her before she reached fifty

left me floundering. The money was a burden, not a lifeline, restricting me by giving me too much. After flailing about for a while, I'd set up some art scholarships in her name, bought a house to flip, and invested what was left in an attempt to put it out of reach for the time being. With no desire for a champagne lifestyle, I was getting by on the interest. The current house was my third project and the most challenging because I was doing it myself. The first two had required makeovers, nothing major, and I'd hired contractors where needed. I planned to live in this house, so once the remodeling was finished I'd look for work. I wasn't sure what I wanted to do. Maybe flip another house, maybe something new.

"I sell my own stuff too," Jamie said. "Some of us get together and take a stall at the local market in the summer. Don't make much. If I had a dollar for every time I heard someone mutter their kid did better at the age of four, I'd be rolling in it, though."

I didn't tell him I'd love to see his work. Lying about how good someone's paintings were was beyond me. He was mid-twenties, if that; too young to have anything to say through his chosen medium that was worth listening to. Instead I gave him a grunt he was welcome to interpret as interested, indicated a turn, and pulled into a space outside his house.

A nearby streetlight allowed me to make out his features and the same held true for him because he studied me in silence instead of getting out of the truck. "You're really gay?"

"Yep."

"Attracted to me?"

Well, that was direct. "I like assholes," I told him. "Not sure I like them attached to giant egos, though. Giant cocks, yes."

Jamie grinned, clearly over any guilt at his earlier rudeness. Fine by me. I was willing to move on. "We've got something in common then."

"Mmm." I cleared my throat as a gentle hint for him to get moving. "See you around."

Maybe it reassured him I was safe because he asked, "Want to come in for a coffee? My way of saying thanks for the ride."

And now not so direct. “Is that code for come in, get naked, and fuck? Because if so, I’ll pass.”

He laughed, low and husky, the intimacy of the sound emphasizing the barrenness of my love life. “Just the coffee, I swear. If I’d wanted sex, I’d have said so.”

“Well...” I hesitated, sensing an opportunity but unsure whether to grab it or turn away. “I’m soaked through. I want to get changed.”

He kicked my gym bag, taking up space in the passenger foot well. “Nothing in here that would do?”

“Yeah, if you want me drinking coffee in a T-shirt and shorts.” At least they were clean. I’d planned to work out before going to the college and I’d run out of time doing some errands.

“I’d enjoy the view.” He turned to face me. “Coffee? Please?”

I gave in. Now he’d opened up and showed me his smile, he was irresistible. “Okay, but I’ll be pissed if you only have instant.”

He threw me an amused look. “You can grind the beans yourself if you like. By hand.”

“I’ll crush each one like a walnut,” I promised.

His place was a top floor apartment in a converted house. The building was edging toward seedy but he didn’t apologize for the scuffed walls and worn carpet on the stairs. His apartment smelled clean when I walked into it, the air redolent with the familiar scents of paint and brush cleaner. It was one large space with a bedroom and bathroom off it and the walls were crowded with artwork, some of it probably his, some not. Unframed prints overlapped each other on one wall in a collage that became an art piece in itself, a vivid splash of color. After I’d changed, relieved to find a pair of sweatpants at the bottom of the bag, I toured the art. I stopped in front of a print of my mom’s most popular piece, *Pirouette*. She’d disowned it on the grounds of its popularity, an attitude I considered pretentious, but it’d never been my favorite either. Jamie joined me, holding two mugs of coffee.

“I cheated and used the capsule coffeemaker. Quicker and a step up from instant, but a step down from freshly ground.”

“It’s fine,” I said. The first sip sent welcome warmth spreading through me, but Jamie standing close turned it to a simmering heat.

“That’s by Jenna Valens,” he told me.

“I know.” I pointed at her signature, bold and large, but somehow part of the painting, not an intrusion. “I can read. You were wrong about that too.”

“Oh God, stop reminding me! Let’s pretend I was taken over by aliens or something.” He ran his hand over his wet hair and shivered. “My turn to get changed.”

“Do you like it?” I asked before he turned away. “The Valens, I mean.” If he trashed it, I wouldn’t care and she wouldn’t have either, but I was interested in his take on it.

He stared at the print as if he’d never seen it before, eyes narrowed. “It’s got a latent eroticism to it I love, but it’s juvenile in execution. Her later work’s much better. She was from around here, you know. Died a few years back in Mexico, caught in a landslide after a storm. Real loss to the art world.”

“Yeah,” I said under my breath when he’d gone to get changed. “And to me.”

I hoped it’d been quick, but how could it have been? She’d stood there with the side of the hill coming at her, a vast wave of mud and rock, impossible to outrun or control. And along with the rest of her party, she’d been swallowed by the earth. I’d had her cremated and her ashes scattered in the ocean. The earth wasn’t getting her a second time.

Jamie returned, his hair still damp, darkening the eye-catching copper to bronze. He wore skinny black jeans and a roll-neck black sweater. Earlier I’d seen him naked; now the only skin exposed was his face and hands. Still hot. I noticed a leather cuff on his left wrist when he tucked his hair behind his ear. Leather boots replaced by a cuff... I wasn’t sure what to make of that. It probably meant nothing, but I’d gotten the ability to pick up on details from my mom. Shame I could barely draw a straight line, but she’d always laughed at my crap grades in Art and said one artistic temperament in the family was enough.

“How’s the coffee?”

I drank some, getting more of the taste now it'd cooled a little. Too weak. "Fine."

"Want another?"

I shook my head, on edge from more than my sixth cup of coffee since breakfast. If sex wasn't what we were here for, and we'd been clear enough on that point, then what did we have to talk about?

Turned out quite a bit. He got my ass on the couch beside him and seduced me with questions and anecdotes, showing a flattering interest in me that didn't seem feigned. I let myself be lulled, part of me wary, but willing to stick around. It beat sanding walls, dust choking me even through a mask.

"So have I done enough to wipe out the bad impression?" he asked after we'd finished topping horror stories of dates from hell.

If that was all he'd been aiming for he'd hit the target in the truck, but I wagged my hand. "You're on probation."

He arched slender eyebrows. "Good behavior required at all times?"

Oh, I knew the moves to this game. "I didn't say that. Good manners, yeah, but you can misbehave all you want."

Jamie ran a finger over the leather cuff on his wrist. "I'm a fan of manners. Not so much of misbehaving. That's why I overreacted to what I saw as you ignoring an order. I'm a control freak in some ways. You get my drift?"

It wasn't subtle of him, and his kink wasn't mine, but I ached from throat to balls. For a moment I wanted to slide to my knees and murmur "Please, Sir" a dozen times, thank him for any touch, gentle or harsh. I couldn't work out why he had this effect on me but the strength of his hold was increasing with every minute I spent listening to his husky voice, getting fleeting glimpses of the man behind the snarky, bossy brat he showed the world.

"Loud and clear, but I don't play those games or at least not seriously. I've gotten spanked and tied up a few times, but more out of curiosity than anything else." I shrugged, aroused not by the memory, but the intimacy of telling Jamie about my sex life. My frankness was a measure of how comfortable I was around him. "It was hot with one guy, not so much with the others."

“It’s part of me I’m exploring,” he said, matching my shrug. “Not a deal breaker if it’s not your thing.”

“I’m just here for the coffee,” I reminded him though I knew now we wouldn’t leave it at that. I wanted it—wanted him—but I knew the end of the story. We’d have sex, and I’d enjoy it and do my best to make it good for him, but I’d know I was holding back and if we kept seeing each other, my inability to share would sour everything after a while.

I didn’t consider sharing my kink with Jamie in a tit for tat exchange. BDSM verged on mainstream these days and it sounded as if he was experimenting anyway, not committed to the lifestyle. It wouldn’t be a fair trade.

In the end, I let it go and made my excuses, walking out into a still night, the rain ended, the sidewalks glossy with puddles. I didn’t glance up at his lighted window, but the connection between us was still in place and I knew he was watching me drive away.

The bedroom I’d more or less completed so I’d have somewhere to sleep and keep my clothes free of dust felt warm after the chilly drive home. The truck’s heater would need fixing before winter. Another chore to add to an endless list. I went into the en suite and showered, ignoring the scarred walls and chipped tiles because I could see what the room would look like eventually if I squinted just right.

Back in the bedroom, naked and damp, I reached for a sweatshirt and the loose jogging pants I wore around the house because they were warm and easy to work in. Didn’t do more than pick up the pants before I let them fall and went to the chest of drawers in the corner instead. What I was after was in the bottom drawer, so I had to kneel to open it, an act that got my cock hardening in anticipation.

It wasn’t a ritual. At least—no, it wasn’t. It was a turn-on, as simple as that, saved for times like this when I jerked off with my gut roiled with frustration, and needed the extra sizzle. I wasn’t sure how it’d work if it was part of sex with someone else. That was another reason I’d hesitated about telling anyone. Even if they didn’t laugh or judge me, what would be the point? I got naked to have sex; I didn’t dress up.

But when I jerked off at times like this, my body humming with desire that needed a voice, I did it wearing silk, satin, and lace.

They're not designed for women, these delicate, sensual scraps of clothing; they're made for men. Men like me. And, no, as a horny teenager, I never jerked off wearing my mom's panties. God, just the thought of it made my balls shrivel.

I took out a pair of panties, simple pale blue satin, just a tiny navy bow on the top edge to relieve the plainness. The satin caught against my work-roughened fingers and I made a mental note to wear gloves more often when I was sanding walls or scrubbing down surfaces.

Lying back on the bed, I slid the panties on, shivering as the cool satin raised goose bumps on my skin. I raised my ass and tugged them into place, settling them with a few unnecessary adjustments just to drag out the moment before I touched my cock through the satin.

Looking at myself wearing them was part of the thrill. I pushed the pillows up and leaned back, luxuriating in the sensation of being caressed by fabric as smooth as glass.

Then I stared down. Mmm. Yeah. I'd never seen another guy wearing lingerie in real life, only on the websites where I ordered mine, but if I did, I'd whimper. If Jamie wanted me on my knees worshipping, all he had to do was slide into a pair of these. Even knowing he was wearing them under his jeans would have me ready to drop and open my mouth.

I traced the outline of my erection with a fingertip, biting back a moan, denying myself the pleasure of voicing how good it felt. Soon I wouldn't be able to do that and I'd hear myself pant out broken phrases that whipped my arousal until it spun dizzily out of control and I came, soaking the satin with spunk, staining it dark.

Soon. I cupped my balls, warming the satin, molding it to the bulge, and let my thoughts drift to Jamie. Was he jerking off too, or had I blown it by telling him I wasn't into being his sub?

What would he want to do to me if I'd said I was? Spank me? Probably. Over his knee wouldn't work well; I was too tall, too heavy. On a bed, hands

and knees, head down, my ass up... oh God, if he spanked me while I was wearing the translucent white panties, the blazing red of my ass making them look patterned in pink—

I shot hard, way before I'd expected to, hips jerking, fucking air, spunk trickling warm and wet down my cock, still held in satin. My heart was pounding, my body tingling, skin so sensitized when I recovered enough to peel the panties away, a final spurt of come left the head of my cock slickly coated.

Jesus. What the hell was *that* all about?

It was a few days before we met again, this time in the college library. He was part of a group clustered around a table in a study room, their voices a low hum from where I sat with my laptop in the main section. I'd noticed him when I walked in and chosen a seat where I could see him without my interest being obvious.

The group session ended and he came out, talking to a few of the students who'd packed up quicker than the rest, but with his gaze locked on me as if I was a fridge and he was a magnet. *Click.*

Oh yeah. Connection. Big time.

He ditched the students and came over, taking a seat across from me with a friendly smile, picking up from where we left off. "Hey, Rob."

"Hi." I wasn't tense around him even after opening up more than I usually did. He felt like a close friend, not a stranger. On the basis of an hour spent with him that was a giant step forward. It left me wondering if that could happen more often; if the long process of getting acquainted with someone was padded with filler easily ditched, pointless diversions, and scenic routes.

I had to know if he wanted me. It wasn't the ideal location for a discussion like this, but I'd heard a group of women comparing vibrators in the cafeteria lineup and a loudspeaker announcement earlier congratulating the Gay Straight Alliance Club for reaching one hundred members. Maybe I needed to readjust my thinking, shaped by years at a high school where you'd need to be brave or stupid to tell anyone you were gay.

“Can I ask you something?”

“Sure.” He leaned in, elbows on the table, chin propped in his cupped hands, and winked. “Anything but my star sign. I only share that on the third date.” I was getting the public face of Jamie now, bright, flamboyant, engaging, and fake. It made me wonder if he was regretting what we’d shared more than I was.

“You said you were, uh, experimenting with... yeah. That. And I said I wasn’t interested, but I’m sure as hell interested in you and I wondered if...”

“I’d experiment with you?”

I didn’t need a mirror to know I was blushing. The heat under my skin took me back to the fantasy of being spanked, doing nothing to cool my face.

“Just answer my question.” My throat was tight with anxiety but that wasn’t why my words came out as a growl.

Jamie’s gaze met mine, affectations dropping away. “I don’t want you to get the wrong idea. You saw my place; no whips and chains. I just like being in charge during sex. I don’t plan scenes ahead of time, nothing organized, but with the right guy I do some role-playing now and then. Not into pain play... well, just a little. God.” He exhaled, a faint flush showing, the pink of strawberry ice cream rather than the fruit itself. “Intense stuff to be talking about to someone I just met. Kind of personal, you know?”

“We don’t have to talk about it here. We don’t have to talk about it at all.” I closed my laptop. “I guess I got my answer.”

He reached out before I stood, and grabbed my arm. “The hell? The answer’s yes, so where are you going?”

Shit. “I thought you were brushing me off. Sorry.”

Jamie rolled his eyes. “Yeah, I always turn down hot guys asking to sub for me.”

“I didn’t—” I stopped. I kind of had.

“God, I am so turned on right now,” Jamie said, blowing out a breath through pursed lips.

It was unexpected enough to surprise a laugh out of me. “Not shy about sharing, are you?”

He leaned in again and shook his head, eyes glinting. “I’m not shy about anything much. Okay, we’re on the same page. Good to know. Time to stop talking and do?”

I nodded slowly. He wasn’t the only one who’d have to stay in his seat for a while before standing and walking away was an option. My dick was a solid, eager weight against my thigh and I was focusing on every movement he made, reading him, automatically searching for cues to obey. I wanted to please him. The novelty of it was a rush, leaving me shaken, overwhelmed. What was I doing? I could’ve gotten into his bed without committing to this.

“Okay. My place at eight.” He didn’t make it a question.

With a lick of my lips to draw his gaze, I suggested, “That’s a long way off. Why don’t we find somewhere quiet and I can show you what I look like on my knees?”

If he was tempted, he didn’t let it show. He knocked his foot against mine under the table in a reprimand I accepted as earned. “I said tonight at eight, Rob. If I’d wanted a blowjob, I’d have told you to get your ass to room 320. Don’t make me repeat an order again.”

My face still burned, but with excitement, not embarrassment. This was a new game and I was learning the rules and testing him, finding his limits and mine.

So I’d moved my piece too many spaces and had to apologize. Four simple, short words came to mind. I whispered them as if they were a confession, my gaze lowered, fighting rebellion—not me, why was I doing this—“Yes, sir. I’m sorry.”

A jolt of desire rocked me. Oh God. So fucking hot to say that and watch the desire rise in him, a hunger I recognized.

“Impatient,” he said reprovably, but he tapped the side of my foot as he said it, leather on leather, and this time it felt like a caress.

Jamie's apartment was illuminated by two floor lights and a waver of candles burning in a glass bowl on the coffee table. Shadows painted the corners, making the space seem smaller. I didn't care. The focal point for me was Jamie. His hair was tied back with a strip of leather and he was wearing a plain white T-shirt and jeans so faded in places they matched it. His feet were bare. No black leather, no boots. He was doing this without the uniform. I didn't expect to stay dressed for long; I'd gone for black jeans and a T-shirt in a shade as close as my wardrobe came to lilac. Whether he'd get the hint, I wasn't sure.

I let him take my jacket and kicked off my boots, leaving them next to his by the door.

He looked me over, a slow, considering stare I met, anticipation rising.

“Still up for this? With all the trimmings?”

I nodded. All the trimmings? That was one way of putting it. “Yeah. Sure.” I studied him in return. “You seem nervous for a man who likes being in charge.”

He crunched up his face; an endearing grimace he must've realized made him look years younger, because he relaxed his features a moment later. “I blow this, and something tells me I won't get another chance. I compromise too much and *I* won't enjoy it. So, yeah, I'm nervous, but I'm going to do what feels right and if I screw up in a way that's spoiling things for you, tell me. I'd prefer that to talking it to death and ruining the mood.”

“Sounds fair.”

He walked over to the couch, with me following automatically. We sat next to each other, not touching and my anticipation kicked up a notch. With the willingness to jump right in I'd noticed before, Jamie said, “There's something I want to do with you. No pain, no bondage, but something more than a straightforward fuck. You'd need to give up control to me.”

I envied him his ability to say what he was thinking, and ask for what he wanted. Being invited to share in his fantasy was like being offered a gift. I didn't know what was inside the box, but it was still a nice gesture. “Sure. I said I'd give it a try and I meant it. If I don't like it, I haven't lost anything but a few hours.”

He grinned. "I'll make sure you like it. Okay, before we get into that, I've been asked to take some photos and make them into paintings for a magazine. You know; the way Tom of Finland used to work. They're running an article on vintage gay porn and they thought it'd be an interesting tie-in with the theme."

I'd been taken aback by his abrupt shift to discussing work, but when what he said sank in, I realized this wasn't a pause before the game, but the opening round. I'd loved Tom's work for years as a teenager after finding a copy of *The Art of Tom of Finland* in a used bookstore. The rampant, eye-watering, impossibly huge cocks, the muscles, the leather... My reaction to it had been visceral. I'd jerked off until my cock had friction burns and my wrist was strained. I hadn't felt that way again until I'd discovered if the smell and feel of leather got me horny, so did lace and silk.

Was the article real or invented for the role-play? It didn't matter. "Yeah, I'd heard he used photographs as a basis for his stuff."

"You could've modeled for Tom and fit right in."

"If my cock was six inches longer, sure."

We shared a grin, then Jamie was all business again.

"You wouldn't need to be naked, or at least not full-frontal, but obviously we'd be talking some skin showing. I'd pay you, of course. Standard rate. Is that what you usually get?"

A model? Yeah, I could be one for him. Not something I'd ever done, but easy enough to fake. "Standard's okay and I don't mind showing some skin. My agent's fine with it if it's tasteful." I stretched my arms over my head, blatantly posing, and pretended not to see the appreciation in his eyes. "Okay, I'm all yours, dude. Want me to get out of these clothes and into something else?" I stripped off my T-shirt and tossed it over the back of the couch. "Or do you want to play first, work later?"

Appreciation hardened to steel. I'd pushed just a little too much there. "I don't like models who think for themselves," Jamie said. "In a shoot, there's one person in charge and that's me."

I dropped my gaze, giving him an abashed glance up through my lashes. "Sorry. I guess I got excited about the idea of being in a magazine."

“Let me see how excited you are. Stand up and show me.”

I swallowed. We were playing, but it didn't mean my responses were fake. I was hard, aroused, and I wouldn't need to pull down my zipper for him to notice.

“You don't take direction very well,” he commented when I stayed in place. “Models like you don't last. They get a reputation for being difficult, then no one will book them, no matter how much they beg. I've seen a model blow three guys one after the other for the chance to audition, sucking them until his lips were swollen and his eyes were watering. They had fun with him for hours after that, making him hold ridiculous poses, wearing slutty clothes, humiliating him for kicks before they threw him out. Is that what you want to happen to you, Rob?”

His voice was bored, cool, but when I caught his eye, he raised his eyebrows, silently asking for some input. I pursed my lips and gave a small shake of my head, letting him know he'd gone too far without breaking character. “No! No, sir. Please, I didn't mean to be difficult. See—”

I got to my feet and turned to face him, the shape of my erection visible, my chest rising and falling as I took quick, panicked breaths, as if there was a real danger of being thrown out of his apartment.

“Much better,” he said, approval softening his voice. “I like a quick learner. Mmm, you really are into the idea. That's good. Get undressed and I'll find you something to wear for the shoot.”

“Yes, sir.”

I stripped, my hands shaking as I fumbled with the button on my jeans. What would he put me in? If I'd let him play out the harsher scenario, would I have found myself in something that wouldn't have been a punishment, but a pleasure to wear?

He dressed me in a leather jacket and nothing else, and posed me straddling a chair. Cheesy but effective.

“Probably won't use this, but it'll let you relax and give me an idea of how you photograph.”

I heard his words through a roar in my ears, lost in arousal.

He stared at the stiffly emphatic thrust of my erection and pursed his lips. “Now should I let you keep that to juice up the photos or take care of it so you can concentrate?”

I tried for casual. It wasn't easy. “Whatever makes you happy. You're the boss.”

He smiled. “Oh, you have no idea how happy you could make me, but I don't want you to feel like I'm taking advantage of you the way some photographers do. If you want me to get behind the camera and stay there, just say the word.”

“You're paying me to make you happy,” I told him. “Just tell me what to do.”

“I might shock you.”

I answered as me, not the model. “Really fucking doubt it.”

The sincerity in my voice must've gotten through to him because he stopped sending out feelers and got down to what we both wanted to happen.

He walked away from me, confident steps, unhurried, purposeful, and picked up a brush, not a camera, choosing it from half a dozen in a jar on his easel. It was flat, about the width of my thumb, the long wooden handle rounded at the end.

I allowed myself to speculate about the possibilities of that brush, but shut my thoughts down. Let him show me. I wasn't tied in any way and he'd already proved he was willing to tailor his ideas to suit me. In some ways, I liked that, but if we did this again, I'd tell him to push me harder. I knew my limits; I was curious about his.

He drew the brush around my nipples until they hardened for him, then along my cock slit, working the bristles in until I grunted, ass rising an inch.

“Hurt?”

“No.” The whimper I'd held back burned my throat, seeking release. “Tickles.”

“Okay, this is what I want.” Flat voice. Made me shiver with pleasure to hear it. He was such a contradiction, just like me. Cotton candy cute and

behind the froth, a core of steel. “Jerk off. Come for me and catch it in your hand.” He held up the brush where I could see it, even smell the faint salty tang of my juices on the damp bristles. “I want to paint you with it.”

I didn’t question it. Maybe he was braced for protests or shock, but I couldn’t fake those. He was showing imagination and patience and he deserved a reward, so I gave him one.

“Yes, sir.”

He drew in a breath. “God, you said that just right. You’re so fucking hot, Rob. These photos are going to be incredible.”

He watched my face as much as the quick efficiency of my hand. It made me slow down, intimacy building between us with each upward drag, each downward slide my cock received. I was doing this to myself, but at his order, and it changed it from a solitary act to a shared one.

When I came, it was Jamie who moaned, raw relief and pleasure mixing, and he brought his hand to mine, a splatter of come clinging pale and thick to his fingers.

I leaned back, wet hand held out, cupped, giving him my torso to work with. The leather jacket fell back, dragging at me. I held the increasingly painful arch, my breathing shallow, my heart thudding fast. My climax left me needing more. Satisfaction was a long way off.

He dipped the brush into the small, fast drying pool and wrote on me. A single, unambiguous word in a cursive scrawl: mine.

I felt each letter as keenly as if he’d etched it into my skin with a knife. Held the pose as he photographed me, tortured on a rack on my own making, the skin tightening as the spunk dried and flaked under the hot lights.

Then I drew his cock deep into my throat, thirsty for him, swallowed what he let me have and took the rest on my chest, obliterating the word he’d written with a new claim.

I loved giving head, but after a blowjob I was usually ready to pull back and work out the stiffness in my jaw. When Jamie eased his cock out of my mouth, I wanted to chase it for one last lick, but he was already picking up his camera.

“Got to get you like this,” he said. “Yeah, look up at me... No, don’t lick your lips. I want them just like this.”

What we’d done earlier hadn’t tested my ability to obey him, but this did. I’d come and so had he, but the scene was continuing and accepting it was Jamie’s call when it ended was difficult. I wanted to take a shower, self-consciousness rising as my arousal dwindled, but he was intent on getting his photos. If he picked up on my growing rebellion, he didn’t comment, but sooner than I’d expected, he set the camera aside and told me to clean up.

I took a quick shower, disappointed he didn’t join me, but not too surprised. The shower stall was tiny; I knocked my elbow on the wall a few times soaping up my chest.

There was a beer waiting for me when I came out and the photos ready for viewing on Jamie’s computer. They weren’t all good; he deleted some without commenting, winnowing them down to a dozen. We stared at them in silence. I tried to see them objectively, focusing on the ones where my face wasn’t visible, because it was easier that way. They were pretty fucking steamy.

“I’ll delete them when you go if you’re worried about it.”

“No need. But I wouldn’t mind a copy.”

That pleased him, I could tell. He sent them to my account as I waited, then brought one of them up, with the light catching the word written on my chest so it was legible to my eyes at least.

“They’re stunning photos of you and you played the scene perfectly, but is this you? All of you?”

His skepticism was clear and I couldn’t decide how to answer. I went with a bluff.

“I gave you what you wanted. You knew being a sub wasn’t something I’ve done before, but I tried—”

He shook his head, dissatisfied, uneasy. “You were amazing, but it’s not *you*. That’s not all you are. I can see it in the photos. You’re holding something back.”

Fucking artists and their perception. My mom had been like that; blissfully oblivious to me for the most part, then focusing in on me and peeling back

every layer until she was staring at the quivering rawness I'd have preferred to keep shielded.

“Look, it was fun. Hot. Something I'd like to do again, with or without the games. But we only just met. Don't assume you can read me because you can't.”

My skin was clammy, the stink of fear souring every breath I took. If I told him about my kink, it was going to be on my terms, when I chose, not because he'd forced it out of me.

“Hey.” Jamie cupped my face. It wasn't a gentle touch but a firm one, grounding me. “I didn't mean that and you know it, but I won't push you.” He kissed me, ignoring the brief moment when I refused to respond, continuing the kiss until I yielded, kissing him back with a need that went beyond the physical. Jesus, I clung to him when it was over, shaky, lost.

“You don't feel like a stranger,” Jamie murmured into my ear, stroking my back soothingly. “Don't treat me like one, huh? Share a little or a lot or nothing at all, but don't make what we just did count for nothing.”

There was something he'd have to know eventually and it was as good a test as any of his ability to keep his mouth shut. I pulled free of his arms. “Okay, I'll tell you something I don't tell everyone if you keep it to yourself.”

“I promise.”

He said it after a moment's reflection, which I liked. I didn't trust quick and easy. I waved at the section of the wall with the *Pirouette* print. “Jenna Valens was my mom.”

People reacted in different ways. Some asked “Who?” some called me a liar and some assumed I was rich and just dying to spend money on them.

Jamie drew in a quick, sharp breath and said with clear sincerity, “God, I'm so sorry. I know it was a few years ago, but you don't get over losing a parent. Does it upset you seeing the print? I can take it down.”

Relief flooded me, a cleansing wash of pleasure that Jamie hadn't let me down by being predictable or tacky. “I don't mind at all, though she'd agree with you it wasn't her best work.”

He didn't apologize; another point in his favor. "No, but it's still pretty fucking good. The way she used color to shape an object was so..." He shook his head, frustration showing. "I suck at putting it into words. Do you paint?"

"I don't even doodle."

That got me a grin. "Then I'm not going to bore you with telling you what I think about her work, but trust me, I'm a fan."

"How about you show me something you've done?" I regretted the words as soon as I'd said them, but he shook his head.

"I'd be terrified."

"I know nothing about art except what I've picked up from being around Mom and her friends. The only thing I'll be able to tell you is if I like it, not if it's any good."

"You'll be forced into politeness and I'll know," he warned me. "The same way I could tell from the photos that—okay, not going there again. No. You can ask me again in a month if you still want to see them."

"You're assuming I'll still be around?"

Jamie ran his thumb over my mouth, an intimate, possessive caress, leaving me tingling. "Hoping, not assuming."

I bit his thumb, capturing it long enough to add a lick before releasing him. He gave me an amused look and I grinned back. "I sometimes bite," I told him.

"Next time you blow me, I'll do my best to forget you said that." He tilted his head. "Will there be a next time?"

"Yeah." I rubbed my hand over my mouth, over lips he'd kissed, fucked, stroked. "I've got some work on the house I need to finish so maybe in a week?"

"Too long." He shook his head. "How about I come over one night and help you with whatever it is you're doing? I'd love to see inside."

Me or the house? I thought it; didn't say it.

"Come over on Saturday if you like and I'll give you the guided tour, but whether you help or not, wear something you don't mind getting dusty or ripped. The place is filthy."

“Saturday morning I’m busy, but I could bring you lunch if you tell me what you want on your sandwich,” he offered.

I couldn’t remember the last time anyone had bought me lunch. Or dinner. Or breakfast. Or hell, even a drink, unless they were trying to get laid. We’d moved around a lot when I was growing up and I’d learned friends who said they’d keep in touch rarely did. I had relatives, all on my mom’s side, but not many and none close. When my mom moved back to her hometown, I’d been living in Baltimore. After her death, I’d returned here to sell her house and fallen in love with the town, vague memories from my childhood making it seem familiar until I came across a new shopping mall or a park with trees I remembered as saplings standing tall, their trunks sturdy.

My dad was an unknown quantity. He’d gotten my mom pregnant, then disappeared before marrying her or waiting to see if I arrived safely. I’d never bothered trying to find him. Mom had painted under a name she’d chosen at random, and if it’d been her intention to hide from him, it’d worked.

“I’ll eat anything but liver and seafood.”

Jamie gagged. “Now I’m picturing a sandwich with liver and lobster in it. Gross.”

I shuddered. “Don’t go there.”

He arrived at one, when I was getting hungry enough that waiting for him to show was an ordeal. I’d been working since six, taking advantage of a mild fall day with brilliant sunshine and a light breeze to paint the study. It was tucked away at the back of the house and fairly self-contained so once it was done, I could shut the door on it and keep it looking good. The hallway was going to be the last room I tackled; I was forever tracking in dirt and dust.

I needed an office space, but I wanted it in keeping with the age of the house. The room was dark, though once I got around to landscaping, I’d prune the overgrown bushes outside the window, which would help. Instead of going for pale walls, I’d chosen forest green paint and chestnut wood for the desk and shelves of reference books. Lots of shelves. I read a lot and I planned a separate library for my fiction. I’d never owned many books because Mom had

traveled light, but I'd joined the local library as soon as we'd gotten an address I could use. Now that I had space and a home, I was going to stock the shelves with all my favorite books. I'd fallen in love with the idea of an e-reader and mine was crammed as full of as many books as it would hold, but I wanted what part of me still thought of as "real" books too.

Jamie's knock came just as I'd finished the first coat of color and was wrapping my brushes and roller in plastic to keep them from drying out. I picked up a rag to wipe my hands and walked toward the door, my gut clenching with a different kind of hunger.

"You smell good," Jamie told me, taking a sniff. "Paint. Mmm."

"And hello to you too."

"Is that all I get when I brought you the best egg salad sandwiches in town? No hug, no kiss?"

I eyed the bag. It was a plain brown one, free of logos. "You made it?"

"Yeah." He glanced around the hallway for somewhere to put it, gave up, and shrugged. "It's about the limit of my culinary skills, so don't go expecting anything fancy when I invite you over for dinner."

"Okay, for homemade, you get a blowjob."

Jamie blinked. "You must be hungry. A kiss will do. I came over to help, not jump your bones, though we could do that later. See? I'm wearing clothes that don't matter."

There was a hole halfway down one leg of his jeans and a splatter of paint on the other, so I didn't check my overalls for wet patches before I gave him the requested kiss. I hadn't been serious about the blowjob, but if he'd wanted one, I'd have been on my knees without thinking too much about it. It should've worried me how easy I found it to follow his lead, but I felt safe around him.

The kiss went from a casual greeting to a slow, intense lip-lock neither of us wanted to end. When we pulled back, the rag I'd been holding was on the floor and the sandwich bag was squashed.

"You're addictive, you know that?" Jamie patted my arm as if he didn't

want to stop touching me. “God, shove a brush in my hand before I change my mind about the sex.”

“I’m waiting for the first coat to dry,” I told him. “How about a tour if I can eat as we go? I’m starving.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

I did my best not to talk with my mouth full, but Jamie helped, enthusing over the high ceilings and original hardwood floors, scarred and dull now, but solid enough to be worth the cost to refinish. The hidden cupboards, the window seats with built-in storage space, and the huge attic, accessible by a proper staircase, not a pull-down ladder, had him spinning around, arms wide, eyes bright as he sketched out possibilities.

“I didn’t expect anyone else to see it the way I do,” I said as we came back from a look around the garden. It was a walled in space, so neglected the shape of the flower beds was lost, a shed at the end no more than rotting planks precariously balanced, but that would have to wait until spring.

“Are you kidding? It’s perfect, or it will be. Though if you go through with stainless steel appliances in the kitchen, I might chain myself to the sink in protest.”

“I’m not recreating the way it would’ve been decorated when it was new. I want it to be functional.” I brushed a lock of hair back off his face, an idea occurring to me, sparked by its color. “Though I’ve seen copper fridges and sinks out there. Expensive, but I could swing it.”

“Copper would be incredible,” Jamie said, “but I was only joking. It’s your space and—”

“No,” I said, adjusting my ideas, a mental click telling me I was on track. “You’re right. The steel is too cold, too expected. Copper against butter yellow walls... hmm, not sure about the floor, but the cupboards could be black...”

Jamie tugged at my arm. “Hey. You’re not allowed to drift off into a creative haze. And don’t say you weren’t; I recognize the signs.”

I shook myself free of my thoughts. “Sorry.” I kissed him full on his mouth, an exuberant smack of a kiss that left us grinning. “That’s for the idea.”

“Now I’m getting some different ideas.” He rapped the side of his head with his knuckles. “Focus, Jamie. Ignore the hot guy in overalls who keeps kissing you. There’s work to be done.”

“I’ve been working since six,” I told him. “I’ve earned a break.”

“Show me the study and then your bedroom again?”

I’d skipped the study on the tour, but with the window open in there, the paint should be close to dry on most of the walls. I led the way, already thinking ahead to what we’d do in my bedroom. Would he fuck me this time? I was sweaty and speckled with paint, but if he didn’t mind, I sure as hell didn’t.

I pushed open the study door and walked in. “It’s easy painting with no furniture in the rooms and a floor I don’t care about because it’s going to get sanded down.”

What happened next would’ve taken skill to duplicate. I turned to point up at the molding around the ceiling and Jamie, standing closer than I’d realized, jerked away to avoid my hand in his face. Before I could apologize he caught his foot in the drop cloth and staggered backward, knocking into the stepladder and sending the paint tray flying up, flipping, and landing on his arm, the remnants of the paint coating his shirt thickly.

“Shit!”

“Oh God, I’m so sorry.” I took a step toward him, but he warded me off, chuckling helplessly.

“That was pure slapstick. And green’s so my color. I think I’m going to need to borrow a T-shirt though.”

“It’ll be huge on you, but sure.” I gestured at a clean paint tray in the corner. “Put your shirt in there.”

“At least it missed my hair,” Jamie said, peeling off his shirt and dropping it into the tray with a wet splat. He examined his arms and torso. “I’m okay.”

His skin was pale, free of freckles, red hair dusting his forearms, and forming a slender line from his navel down. In the cool breeze from the open window, his nipples tightened, looking like small brown buttons on his chest.

I wanted to trace the hollow at his hip with my tongue, wet the skin and rub my cock against the groove, his body tight against mine, his breath loud in my

ear as he gasped my name. Pictured myself braced against the step ladder as he drove into my ass, the metal struts cutting into my palms as I held whatever position he'd put me in.

He put his hands on his hips, looking at me as if mind reading was one of his skills. "Your bedroom," he said softly. "Now, Rob."

Naked, I let him push me onto my bed and stared up at him. "You want a quick fuck?" Jamie asked, and for a moment I was stupid enough to think I had a choice. Before I told him I'd been aching for his dick in me for days and yeah, fast and hard would suit me just fine, he shook his head. "Not gonna happen."

I stirred restlessly against the sleeping bag I used as a quilt on a mattress ready for the dump. The bedroom was habitable but it wasn't furnished with anything worth keeping. "Is this your way of punishing me for ruining your shirt? I'll buy you a new one. Two. Just fuck me already." I gestured at the bathroom. "Condoms. Lube. Help yourself."

He patted the back pocket of his jeans. "Got my own, thanks. And this isn't punishment. Why would I punish you for an accident?"

I ran my hands down my chest and stomach until they were framing my erection, showcasing what I had to offer without touching what I guessed he considered his property from the possessive gleam in his eyes. "So what is it?"

"A pretty fucking picture," he said. "Show me what you've got, Rob. Make me drool. Make me so hot for you I fuck you with my jeans around my knees because I can't wait long enough to kick them off."

Uncertain, exposed, I shook my head. "I don't know what to do."

As if he'd expected it, he smiled. "I could tell you," he suggested. "Is that what you'd like? Someone to tell you exactly what to do, so you know you're doing the right thing, know you're pleasing me?"

Was it? I didn't like the implications, though in some ways it was tempting. I shook my head. "I'll try, but if I fuck it up—"

"You won't," Jamie interrupted. "And if you did, I wouldn't get angry. Or punish you. Not sure if you keep mentioning that because you want it or you

don't. But I know you like this. You proved it at my place. You just need to let go."

I'd fantasized about a spanking, but it'd been his hand on me when I wore the panties that'd turned me on, not the discipline itself. I wet my lips and thought about how I'd like to see him lying naked on my bed.

After that, it was easy.

From the shower, I heard Jamie ask me something, but the rush of water made it hard to decipher. I called back to him, but got no reply. The water ran cool so I turned it off and stepped out, snagging a towel and drying off as I walked back into the bedroom.

"Did you say—"

My voice stopped working. My throat constricted, panic gripping me. Jamie was crouched down, tugging out the bottom drawer to reveal a billow of color.

"No!" The sharpness of my barked out word matched the way it felt in my mouth, glass shards, barbed wire... I was bleeding. "Don't look."

"Rob?" Jamie twisted his head to glance up at me, shoving at the drawer with clumsy hands, leaving it half-open. "I wasn't being nosy. I asked where your T-shirts were and I thought you said—" He faltered, bewilderment widening his eyes. "Is this stuff... was it your mom's?"

"What? No, of course not." The idea was so far from the truth I was annoyed with him for being slow, my panic pushed aside for a moment. "Jesus, what kind of a freak do you think I am?"

Okay, I could've phrased that better.

He rose in a smooth movement, stepping toward me, not away. "I don't think you're anything. It's yours then? You cross-dress?"

His voice was a shade too careful and it rasped my nerves. God, I'd rather be called a freak than be tolerated in a cozy, condescending way. "It's not women's underwear, if that's what you mean. It's designed for guys. It's just..." Anger faded, leaving me light-headed and numb with shock. I was

abruptly aware I was naked and I fastened the towel around my waist, fumbling to secure the thick fabric. “It’s...”

I couldn’t finish my sentence. Jamie nodded. “Okay. So what drawer should I have opened?”

“Second one down,” I said dully.

I watched him choose a plain white T-shirt and shrug into it as casually as if he was alone in the room.

“I’m guessing you want me to leave.” Jamie sat on the bed and pulled his boots on, still moving without haste. “So you can wallow in shame.”

“What?” I took a step forward, then stopped. I sensed a barrier between us, solid, if invisible. “I want you to leave, yeah. You invaded my privacy, you—”

“I opened a drawer by mistake.” Jamie’s voice was flat. “That’s all. And I want to leave as much as you want me to go, but not for the reason you think.”

“Right.” I nodded, pinning a smile on my face as if I believed him. “You’ve gone from planning to cook me dinner to never wanting to see me again, but it doesn’t have anything to do with finding out I like to wear silk panties and suspender belts. Of course not.” I raised my eyebrows, taking refuge in sarcasm. “Going to tell me how I managed to end things when I was twenty feet away in the shower?”

Jamie stood and pointed at the drawer. “Is anything in there stolen? Trophies from a kill? Used to belong to a child?”

“God, no!” The implications sickened me. “It’s all mine. I—you can buy them online.”

“Then why are you ashamed of what’s in there?” Jamie demanded. “It turns you on. It hurts no one. I’ve told you I get off on the idea of tying a man up and spanking him. Consensual, yeah, but let me tell you, in my head things get pretty fucking dark when I’m jerking off. I’m not ashamed of that, any of it, but what gets me hot carries a risk. Your kink? Not so much.”

“No one would laugh at you.” Why couldn’t he see the difference? “They’d laugh at me.”

“‘They?’ Who the fuck are *they*?” Jamie stabbed a finger into his chest. “If we’re seeing each other, I’m the only one who matters and I’m not laughing. Not smiling. Not judging you for having the kink, only for being ashamed to own it. I’m disappointed in you, Rob and *that’s* why I’m leaving.”

Did he expect me to beg and plead for forgiveness? “Fine. Go. Just fucking go.”

He turned in the doorway. “I would’ve loved to see you wearing something out of that drawer,” he said, regret in every word. “Seeing all of you, not just what you thought was safe to share.”

I stood in place until the front door slammed.

There was a scrap of scarlet lace caught in the bottom drawer. I went to my knees, tugged the drawer out, and pushed the panties back inside.

My lace, satin, and silk. Jamie’s leather.

They weren’t the same, no matter what he said.

I sat cross-legged on my bed, staring at every piece of lingerie I owned: the panties and suspender belts, the sheer lace-topped stockings and the camisoles. Some of the items I’d bought out of curiosity and never worn more than once; it was the panties I loved the most. Running my hands through them, the cool, slippery fabric teasingly difficult to grasp, was as erotic as caressing a lover.

This was my kink. My secret; my sensual, taboo, delicious secret.

And now it wasn’t a secret. Jamie knew.

I picked up a white camisole and brought it to my face, breathing in the light scent of the soap powder I used to hand wash the delicate items, following the care instructions to the letter.

I’m disappointed in you.

I ripped it, splitting the seams, shredding the silk.

I want to leave.

Dry sobs shook me. I grabbed another piece of silk, another wet-dream-worthy piece of clothing, panting harshly, the fabric twisting as I tugged at it,

resisting me. Tears welled up and spilled down my face, impossible to stem. I cried in a way I'd only done once before, when my mom died, unrestrained, primal sounds accompanying each breath, sounds I heard vaguely, unconnected to me because I was in a different place right then, lost in loss and anger.

My hands hurt. Silk is stronger than it looks and lace scratches. Half-healed nicks and grazes from working on the house opened and small smears of blood marred the garments. The red was stark against white and ice-blue fabric; lost against black.

I fought for control, despising myself for giving way so completely. My head ached with the dull throb of blocked sinuses from the tears. I went to the bathroom and grabbed a handful of toilet paper. Blowing my nose and washing my face relieved some of the physical aftereffects but none of the emotional fallout.

I wanted sleep. Deep and dreamless. Escape.

Instead, I dug out a garbage bag and set to clearing the bed with shaking hands. What the fuck had I been trying to prove by tearing and ripping? That once ruined, the sin of wearing them was wiped away?

Why are you ashamed?

"I'm not," I said aloud, talking to an empty room. It was a habit of mine, springing from too many hours alone. "I'm not ashamed. It's just... private."

Being gay wasn't something I hid; never had. But no one shares specifics about what gets them hot with the world; often not even their partner. And this was a solitary kink.

I would've loved to see you wearing something out of that drawer.

"You're not here," I told the echo. "You left, so shut the fuck up."

It wasn't easy to silence an imaginary Jamie. I carried on a conversation with him in my head at intervals during the days that followed, days when I saw him in the distance on campus once or twice, never getting close enough to be sure he'd seen me. Eloquence and victory were achievable under those

circumstances but I didn't fool myself that face-to-face, I'd come off the winner.

What he'd said remained lodged in my memory, a splinter I couldn't tease out. Drove me crazy. The shock faded and when no one at college gave me sidelong glances or smirks, I realized Jamie hadn't shared what he knew.

He hadn't laughed. I lay in bed one night, hands cupping the lax curve of my disinterested cock, and wondered why I'd assumed everyone would. Drag queens weren't funny. Striking, strident, brimful of confidence, yeah, but they weren't laughable unless someone was a total asshole and their opinion didn't count. So why did I think what I liked doing would make people snicker? I liked the sensation of silk against my skin. I loved the sensuality of the rich, pure colors, the clean lines of the lingerie. Loved seeing my junk sheathed in translucent sheer fabric or peekaboo lace, my ass showcased by skintight fire engine red satin, the seam running down the crack of my ass making my butt look ripe for a bite or slap.

I was fucking hot in it, all of it.

My cock hardened under my hands as I pictured posing for Jamie. Would his eyes gleam, a carnal twist to his smile? What would he like me in best? If I begged him, would he bend me over, pull my panties aside just enough to bare my hole, then fuck me with them on?

More importantly, would he give me a second chance?

I guessed I'd find out when I asked him, but maybe show, not tell, would work better.

I found Jamie in the room where we'd first met, setting up the chairs and easels for the class. He glanced at me, nodded, not quite meeting my gaze, then went back to work.

"You said you were disappointed in me." My voice seemed too quiet to reach him, but he paused and looked my way again, leaning on a chair he'd positioned with more care than the task merited. "By the time I'd thought it over, I was disappointed in myself too."

He didn't say anything, but he wasn't ignoring me. His gaze pinned me in place. "Jamie..."

"I'm sorry." Jamie paused, dragging his teeth over his lower lip slowly. "Really sorry."

Sorry? Was it a rejection or an apology? I didn't want either.

"I was a jerk. Again." He muttered the words so I had to strain to hear them. Impatient with the distance between us, I walked forward until I was close enough to touch him if I'd dared. "I was a jerk, Rob. Condescending, too quick to judge you... *again*. God!" He shook his head. "Who the hell am I to preach about putting it all out there when you're the one who'd have to deal with the fallout? Why can't I just leave people alone?"

"Jamie..." I exhaled, surprised at the way he saw our argument. "You came on strong, but I needed to hear it. I'm still not telling the world what gets me off, but from now on if I'm in a serious relationship with someone, I'm going to tell them about it. Not hide that part of me and ruin everything because I'm a coward."

"*If you're—*" He swallowed, grimacing as if it hurt him. A surge of relief lifted the worry from me. He thought it was over between us and it was upsetting him? I wanted to punch the air and give an exultant yell. "Oh. Yeah. Good plan."

I didn't let him suffer for long. Why would I? I wanted us both happy. Together. And I knew how to build a bridge between us.

"So if I'm putting that into practice..." I cleared my throat and hooked my thumb in my jeans, tugging down on the waist to expose an inch of red lace. "First time I've worn these out of the house. I got into my truck and I came close to running back inside, not to change, but to jerk off. So fucking turned on all day and if you still want—you said you'd like to see me—"

I couldn't force another word out, gagged by sudden anxiety in case I'd misread the situation and hope. Jamie stared at the edge of the panties, color flooding his face, then moaned, a desperate whimper of pure need, and launched himself at me.

“God, you’re killing me. If we didn’t have class in ten minutes I’d make you show me right now,” he said between kisses, rubbing against me until I gasped for breath, too turned on to process where we were and how likely it was we’d be interrupted at any moment. “Make you pose for me over there. I want to see you. Every angle. Jesus, how the fuck am I gonna calm down enough to take the class?”

I laughed, my arms around him, the warm, familiar smell of paint and leather I associated with him scenting each breath. “I wish I could say I’m sorry and mean it, but I can’t. Fucking love the idea of you being worked up over me.”

“It’s more than an idea.” He took my hand and brought it to his erection. “Feel that. I could use it as a hammer.”

“Ouch.” I rubbed my palm over it, suffering as much as Jamie and for exactly the same reason. “Can we maybe—”

Jamie’s cell phone beeped, alerting him to the time, and we reluctantly stepped away from each other. Jamie threw back his head, his frustration as plain as the outline of his cock. “God!” He pointed at me. “You. My place as soon as you can make it after six. And don’t think I won’t have words with you about your timing.”

“Bad enough to earn me a spanking?”

The glance I got made me shiver. Longing and heat wound through it until it was like a caress on skin. “Don’t put ideas into my head if you’re not ready to follow through. Don’t joke about it. It matters too much to me.”

I met his gaze squarely. “I’m ready. Maybe not for everything you want, but for that? Yeah. Not as a punishment, but because I trust you to make it hot.”

He caught his breath, studying me as if sincerity left a trace. “Looks like it’s going to be an interesting date.”

“Looks like,” I agreed.

In the end, he did punish me, but not with his hand striking my ass. Worse than that. I arrived expecting to be naked soon after walking through the door, or at least not wearing much, and yeah, I got that at least. But he made me wait for what I needed from him.

Made us both wait.

I'd brought along a bag with a selection of lingerie lining it, a captured rainbow. He emptied it and sorted through the contents, studying each item with his lips pursed in thought.

"This," he said finally, and scooped up a white camisole and a black thong. "The contrast will look stunning."

I changed in his bedroom. I wasn't an artist and I wasn't an actor, but I knew how to make an entrance.

He was messing around with the lights when I walked back into the room and I saw him react, a moment of utter stillness as he took me in, head to toe. Then he gave an appreciative hum that broke the silence.

"God, you're so hot. But you know that, right? You can't see yourself in a mirror and not see what you look like." He came to my side, hands sketching a shape in the air without touching me. "Muscles and strength, all man... then there's this deceptive fragility over it, hiding nothing, just making you look more, well, more everything you already are."

"Gayer?" I suggested, with a flash of humor lifting the last of my concern.

He grinned at me. "Well, my cock approves, so, yeah."

His smile faded, replaced by what I'd come to think of as his professional stare. It turned me on being the focus of his attention rather than putting distance between us. I shivered as if I'd stepped into a cold shower, nipples hardening, already stiff cock getting a fraction stiffer.

Twenty minutes later, I was sweating under the lights and wearing my third outfit, black stockings and suspender belt with red lace briefs. Jamie was quiet, the camera hiding his expression. The instructions had dried up and I was winging it, moving from pose to pose at my own pace, losing myself in the thrill of being watched.

But this was foreplay and I couldn't take much more of it. The lace briefs were damp with sweat, darker where the slick head of my cock lay pressed against the scanty fabric. I'd played the angles, never giving him a full-frontal shot, but now I walked to the sheet covered wall I'd been posing against and turned to face him.

He lowered the camera, staring at me. As slowly as possible, I ran my hand down my chest and plucked at the suspender belt. My cock strained to break free, my balls drawn up, ripe and full. I teased at the wet head with a fingertip then brought my finger up, sucking at it with a moan. It was a move lifted from a dozen porn movies, but I wasn't acting.

Jamie set the camera down with exaggerated care. "I hope you're not attached to those lace panties," he said, walking toward me.

"Why?"

He stroked my thigh, then hooked his fingers into the briefs, twisting the fabric tighter still. "Because I'm going to ruin them. If you mind, tell me now."

"Do whatever the hell you like to them and to me."

"Kind of my plan."

He tore a hole across the front of the briefs and reached in, working my cock through the gap, enlarging it until the lace was a tattered frame for the thrust of my erection. We stared down at it and I caught my breath on a groan.

"I want this in me," he said, fondling my dick roughly. "Want to feel the lace against my ass."

He'd never said he didn't bottom, and I wasn't going to complain about anything that let me come, but I'd be lying if I said I wasn't surprised. "You want me to fuck you?"

"I didn't say that." He tapped my cock with two fingers, making it bounce. "I like being in control, remember?"

He tied my wrists together with a black satin belt off a short robe I'd brought along and anchored the belt to the headboard of his bed. "Don't pull on it too much," he warned me. "It'll tighten."

I couldn't help one tug. The cool, light satin wrapped around my wrists was unbearably erotic. I didn't need chains or handcuffs; this was perfect. I lay on my back, posing for him again, and let trust take the edge off an arousal verging on torment.

Jamie draped a scarf over my eyes without tying it, red like the lace briefs, translucent enough that I could still see his lithe body as he straddled me, but the outlines were blurred, the details lost. It was wide enough to cover me from forehead to lips.

"If you move, the scarf will slide down," Jamie said. "It slides, I stop."

"I won't move," I promised without knowing if it was a promise I could keep.

Jamie chuckled. "Yeah, you will. But do your best, huh?" He kissed me through the scarf, his breath and tongue leaving the dry fabric clinging to my lips by the time he'd finished, like a faint continuation of the kiss.

I didn't move when he smoothed a condom over me and slicked up my hole. The sensation of his finger in my ass was a promise of a different sort and I stopped myself from thinking too far ahead. If Jamie wanted control, I needed to give it to him. I knew he wouldn't demand it.

He rode me, slow rocks of his hips to get me deep inside him, barely moving once I was. The warmth of his flesh, the tight, but yielding constriction around my cock, made me want to stay like this for hours.

Then he rose and fell, fucking himself on me, thigh muscles taut, reaching down to brush his cock now and then, teasing touches, making him bite his lip and moan as if it were someone else torturing him who could be moved by the sounds he made.

Content was a state of mind that shattered when he quickened his pace. I'd soon found I couldn't get away with lifting my ass even an inch off the bed. Jamie punished me for it with a pinch of a nipple, or a kiss, leaning forward so only the tip of my cock was inside him.

Coming seemed impossibly distant given Jamie's intent to prolong this, and yet close enough for me to salt its tail. Every time he ground against me,

the lace scratching his ass and my thighs, a shudder of arousal shook me but it was never enough to trigger my climax. Not when it would be pleasure bought at the cost of disappointing Jamie.

He told me I was hot; ran his hands over my legs where they were sheathed in nylon and sighed at the smoothness; stroked his cock and told me it was hard because of me, just because of me.

I watched him use me and learned lying still didn't make me passive. I wasn't fucking him, no; he was fucking me as surely as if his dick was ramming into me in forceful strokes, but I was more than a dildo. He held my gaze, touched me often, and when the scarf finally slid down my face, catching for a moment on my lips where my breath had made it stick, there was as much regret in his sigh as there was in mine.

“You're not going to leave me?” The room seemed too bright without the scarf. I blinked up at him, ready to beg, but he shook his head.

“Are you kidding me? No.” He eased off me, a gentle withdrawal, wincing as he knelt beside me. “You're big all over, Rob. And if you apologize...”

“Wasn't going to.”

He peeled the condom off me, wrapped it in a tissue and tossed it at a wastepaper bin in the corner without following its path to see if it hit the target.

“Let's make another hole in these poor, abused panties.”

He rolled me to my stomach, the belt twisting, and made me move up the bed until the strain on my wrists eased. On elbows and knees, my butt up, I waited for his cock. I got his mouth instead, teeth nipping at the lace, biting a hole in it.

I heard the fabric tear and his satisfied murmur. Then he kissed the skin he'd exposed, sliding his tongue between lace and flesh. I loved being rimmed, but I didn't get it often. Having it done to me through a pair of panties blew my fucking mind. Usually, I'm quiet during sex, holding back, but Jamie made it impossible. I cried out for him, whimpered and begged, cursed him and pleaded with him as he drove me insane. The belt left red marks on my wrists,

but I was past caring, writhing as I tried to get his tongue deeper, sobbing when he pulled back and played with the elastic strips holding up my stockings.

“I’m going to fuck you again,” he told me, a tremor in his voice telling me I wasn’t alone in being close to the edge. “Don’t you dare fucking come until I tell you. I want to see you shoot over the lace. You come too soon and I’ll rip those pretty red panties off you, gag you with them, and spank you until the color I turn your ass makes them look pink.”

“Jamie—” My voice broke on his name but I didn’t need to talk for what came next. He pushed inside me, cool lube coating a warm, solid cock that filled me. He kissed my shoulders and the back of my neck, nuzzling fiercely into the hollow behind my ear, then straightened. I’d been fucked rough and hard before, but Jamie got me to the same state of bliss without leaving my asshole raw and swollen. He made every thrust count, and he changed the angle until I was panting, openmouthed gasps as eloquent as screaming. I couldn’t speak. Breathed when I had to. Spread my legs wide and prayed to heaven he didn’t reach around to stroke my cock, because if he did, it would end there for me.

He came, his final plunge inside me like an arrow’s flight played back in slow motion. The hammering slams of his body against mine were distilled into that last perfect thrust and I held back my climax by biting my arm, using the pain to ground me.

When he turned me to my back and gathered the torn lace, rubbing it against my shaft, I came, spunk painting me as high as my chest. I closed my eyes reflexively, then forced them open because I didn’t want to miss a second of Jamie staring at me, face flushed, eyes wild, as wrecked as I was.

My favorite photograph, the one Jamie turned into a painting that hangs in my bedroom—our bedroom now—doesn’t show my face. I’m in black stockings and lace suspenders, back to the camera, and I’m wearing the leather Jamie put on me; gloves and a belt cinched around my arm with a double strapped harness over my shoulder, looping around my waist.

Under the ankh tattoo in the small of my back, my ass is bare. If you look closely at the photograph, you can see a faint blush of pink from a spanking, but you'd need to get really close for that.

My arm hides my smile, but Jamie says he can still see that I'm happy.

He's right.

THE END

Author Bio

Jane Davitt is English, and has been living in Canada with her husband, two children, and two cats, since 1997. Writing and reading are her main occupations but if she ever had any spare time she might spend it gardening, walking, or doing cross stitch. She's recently taken up yoga and loves discovering her ability to bend.

Jane has been writing since 2002 and wishes she'd started earlier. She is a huge fan of SF, fantasy, erotica, and mystery novels and has a tendency to get addicted to TV shows that get cancelled all too soon.

She owns over 3,000 books, rarely gives any away, but is happy to loan them, and is of the firm opinion that there is no such thing as 'too many books'.

Jane has sixteen books and a dozen or so novellas in print with more on the way. She's been published by Torquere, Loose Id, Total-E-Bound, and Ellora's Cave. She loves writing about hot men in love doing wonderfully wicked things to each other.

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NOR SUB NOR DOM

By Gabbo de la Parra

Photo Description

Black and white picture of two handsome men in their thirties sharing an intimate moment. Both wear leather pants, their T-shirts hanging from their belts. The one comforting has aviator glasses over his head, hands protectively touch his lover's waist and a smirk as if telling a joke to alleviate the tension. The other has a leather harness and the expression of someone who has just discovered a truth that would change his life forever.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

What's happening with this tough, but oh so tender, couple? The guy on the left seems upset, maybe embarrassed, but the guy on the right seems almost amused as he gives comfort/encouragement. I've been drawn to this picture since I saw it last summer and would love to know more.

Sincerely,

Sunny

Story Info

Genre: futuristic

Tags: unconventional leather daddies, unusual boy toy, versatile sex, M/M transforming into M/M/M, encouraging spanking

Word count: 24,752

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Author's Note

The expression “Nor Sub Nor Dom” comes from the title of the English translation of an ancient Persian Poem by Redden Mard, who was the stylistic love child of Whitman and Wilde. We cannot reproduce the poem here because it will not be in the public domain until the year 2099.

Nevertheless, the poem exalts the beauty of the power exchange, and how (even while being dominated) the act of submission is one of control, because one yields willingly, becoming thus, both Master and Slave or none at all.

NOR SUB NOR DOM

By Gabbo de la Parra

PART ONE

Aurora City – Novel California – Year 2084

Folsom Fair – 100th Anniversary

For the BDSM community, '84 was too much of a hallmark not to act on it. After the San Andreas Fault snacked on a considerable chunk of California, the Folsom Fair wandered through the west until Aurora was erected.

Fabian Acre never had the courage to don a pair of leather pants and show up until today. If everything went well, maybe next year he would wear some assless chaps. He waited for his best friends, Lucian and Balder Lux, at the corner of Spain West and 4th North after leaving his turbo in a parking garage. It was the last Sunday of September and it was a farewell of sorts.

The two six-foot-two and sleek-framed blonds approached him, one arm around each other's shoulders and all bright, sensual smiles. They had what Fabian wanted, and if he was truthful in his heart, he wanted to be part of what they had. An impossible feat he'd long abandoned since these cousins were so absorbed in their love that nothing could penetrate their passion cocoon. Good thing they weren't in China where people still couldn't marry someone with the same last name even if they were two guys or two girls.

"Fabulous Fabian," Lucian mocked, sizing him up. "You look dashing in your leathers, and what a crotch." His silver-bullet eyes twinkled mischievously, "Ready to get kinky?"

Balder elbowed his lover, chuckling. "You can't push him like that. It's his first time."

"Hey, it's not like he's barely legal. We're all adults here. Just because we have a child now doesn't mean we're fossils."

"That you are not, even if your child is a teenager and because of that you should be on your way to bone density loss," Fabian chortled.

Jokes aside, Fabian appreciated his friends. They looked so much alike that people were usually scandalized during the first minutes of meeting them, thinking they were brothers. Tanned and athletic, they weren't just easy on the eyes but witty and fun. Both wore black and green kilts, twenty-eye leather black boots and nothing else. A lot of people would try to find out if they were wearing those outfits the right way. "Let's get moving. I've got some hunting to do."

Not taking the previous old-timers bait, Lucian beamed and gave Fabian a bear hug, "That's more like it." Balder followed suit with a healthy dose of lumberjack smacks on his back. As they broke their embrace, Fabian stared into those seemingly aloof, winter-sky eyes. When Balder's parents died and he came to live with Lucian's family, they became fast friends. When the cousins adopted that cute baby with the purple highlights in his abundant hair, they made Fabian the boy's godfather. Now, before they moved their operation to Mars to establish the first permanent human colony, they coerced him to stop being a pussy and come to the frigging fair to see if something tickled his fancy.

Working at Space Expansion Commission would never be the same without them. At least Fabian had a new batch of recruits coming soon. As Chief Trainer of the security forces spread around the S.E.C. space bases, it was his duty to oversee that his lackeys didn't eat those fresh asses alive.

They walked a block along 4th North to scan their ticket-chips at the entrance of the fair. At fourteen hundred hours, the line of people (in various stages of undress) moved pretty fast under the scanning arches. For eight hours, Thailand Avenue from 4th North to Sigma Street transformed into the biggest leather and fetish festival of the northern hemisphere. Not even the festivals held in several European cities could come close. The Folsom Fair was a staple of Aurora, as it had been for San Francisco.

The sounds of flogging, moans, and laughter permeated the air, and the aroma of leather, roasted meats, and sweat tickled Fabian's nose. The throng zigzagged and recoiled, looking for the ultimate fantasy, the voyeuristic experience. Hot men peddled their favors, exposing hairy (and sometimes rosy) cheeks and leather encased crotches, many with assorted piercings over

muscled (and not so muscled) bodies. Women in vinyl thongs and nipple tassels strutted beside bald mustachioed bears.

Lucian studied the holographic screen emerging from the ticket-chip. “Hmm, the Leather Opera Pack is presenting an adaptation of Puccini’s Tosca in fifteen minutes. I’d love to see it.”

“Whatever you want, sweetheart. Fabian, up for some arias?” Balder arched an eyebrow in his direction.

“Sure, I saw the actual Tosca last spring at the Opera House. Isn’t the LOP an all-male ensemble?”

“Uh-huh,” Lucian uttered, dodging a guy walking a man in a dog leather mask who swaggered on all fours and wagged a tail-like butt plug.

Fabian opened the screen of his own ticket-chip. The adaptation was called Harsh, a nice interpretation of the meaning of the word Tosca. Bruno Ouatu was the countertenor playing what, in the original masterwork, was the role of the sultry songstress. “Ouatu? Why does that name sound familiar?”

“He’s the Aurora Fire Department Commissioner. You must have met him at some point. Don’t your boys do some training with the Fire Department?” Balder answered, steering them toward the stage close to Beta Street.

“Yeah. That must be it.” But Fabian wasn’t completely sure.

Sunny Developments: Making life on the Moon a beach walk. The moving billboard almost toppled Fabian. “Sweet Mother,” he exclaimed, just to trip on another. Jaye’s Extravagant Toys: They hurt so good.

“What’s going on?” Lucian pulled him up. “Are you all right?”

“Yes, I got distracted for a second.”

“You might want to move aside because here comes another.” Balder looked at him like he was a newborn calf.

Flying Apes Circus: It’s all about Monkey Business.

The billboard hovered an inch from Fabian’s flank. “I hate those things.”

Fabian was a magnet for the moving advertisement. LARKEANE. If you go KEANE you return fabulous.

The cousins guffawed and hauled him through the mass of bodies assembling in front of the stage where Harsh was about to start.

Instead of a chapel, they were in the temple of Apollo, and the lead role was not a painter, but a sculptor making a new image of the handsome god. Puccini's music started—the LOP was using the original score, and had not only adapted the lyrics to an all-male cast but translated them to English as well.

The fugitive entered the temple in nothing but a collar and a jockstrap. The spectators gasped and cheered as he sang and moved about the stage when they realized he had also been flogged, visible paddle marks marring his perfect round ass. Hearing noises offstage, the singer rushed to hide.

The priest of Apollo appeared, bitching about the mess the sculptor was leaving around his temple. His long, transparent robe was metallic mesh and the only thing underneath was a leather cup guarding his genitals; his bald head sported some kind of coronet. The sculptor emerged from under the stage (perhaps because in the original work everyone descended stairs, Fabian was not sure). An imposing, long-haired, muscled blond, he sang to the priest and sent him on his way, asking for privacy so he could work in peace.

The fugitive came out of his hiding place. Fabian was getting bored; he couldn't feel the adaptation even though all the participants had been excellent so far. Balder and Lucian both looked enraptured, and Fabian was about to tell them he was going for a walk when Bruno Ouatu started singing from the back of the crowd. The surprised masses parted for this six-foot-five god-like creature with dark curls and body paint over his shoulders and back. He walked toward the stage, offering his arias like it was the smile of an angel to soothe frightened little children, shirtless and with red leather covering his sinewy legs like a second skin.

Rooted to the spot, Fabian could only watch, enthralled, as Bruno embraced the blond sculptor and berated him for being a cheater and carving the attributes of another lover into Apollo's face. The baritone caressed Bruno's cheek, and Fabian felt the strange urgency to jump on stage and whack the man. More singing, and the on-stage lovers kissed (it didn't seem

fake at all). Fabian was consumed by the desperation to take Bruno's square hand and run away from the Fair, from Aurora, from the planet, until they were ensconced somewhere only thinking of devouring each other.

What the fuck?

Was it the angelic female voice coming from the manly, otherworldly features? Or the ebony mat of hair covering the chiseled chest until it disappeared into that low waistband? Fabian couldn't fathom what feature of Bruno Ouatu had dealt the deadly blow. But he was positive he would find a way to steal that man's heart, especially after their eyes clashed and Bruno had sung for him and only him for an entire minute.

"You have got to be kidding me."

"It's not a joke, Bruno. And I truly hope you don't force me to make it an order."

Bruno stared at his friend and boss, Callum Stone, mayor of Aurora. "I don't think it's appropriate for the Commissioner of the Fire Department to be spanked in public."

"What's this, 2014? Your cheeks don't even need to be exposed; you can be spanked with your pants on," Callum growled, "Besides it's for charity. The LOP does a lot of charity work, so what's the difference?"

"There's a big difference but, apparently, you don't get it."

"You know what? If Camilla wasn't such a jealous bitch, I'd do it myself. It isn't my fault that adult entertainer had an accident. We need someone famous."

"I'm not famous; I am a mere public servant."

"You're a hero who has a voice like a fucking angel and is well-known in the leather and opera circuit. You didn't pursue a musical career because you're a chickenshit. So stop it."

A total chickenshit who, after a year and a half since being dumped by Rogan (after confessing his deepest yearning), couldn't find a way to go out there and find another man.

Time to reclaim his balls, and one had to start somewhere, right? “Okay, I’ll do it, but you owe me like Hell, so be prepared.”

“Yeah, yeah, whatever. I’ll buy you a condo on the moon, blah blah.”

“Oh, shut up and leave me alone for a minute.” Bruno wanted a moment by himself to understand what had happened while he was singing. That dark brooding man between the two kilted blonds had mesmerized him. There was such a blatant possessiveness in the man’s eyes that Bruno couldn’t look away. Perhaps if Bruno hunted that man down, his growing balls would be luscious and tasty and who knew, might end in that hunk’s mouth.

Not even a second after Callum departed, Hans stormed into the LOP trailer parked behind the stage. “What the heck was that?”

“What?” Hans couldn’t know that in less than thirty minutes Bruno would be publicly spanked *for charity*.

“That guy you were singing to. You almost broke character!”

“Hold your rockets, Scarpia.”

“How dare you. You know I’m Mario, not the damned baron.”

Bruno rolled his eyes. Hans was an insufferable drama queen. “Did I stutter?”

“No.”

“Was I out of sync?”

“No.”

“Then what is your problem?”

“Well... you were looking at him instead of me.”

Bruno shook his head and *tsked*. “Buddy, you need to go get your meds. I have things to do.” And like that, he left Hans standing there, a broken, un-medicated automaton.

Elevated cage dancers gyrated in time with the pulsing music around them, enticing the passersby with their oiled, scantily-clad bodies. Bruno stopped to appreciate a couple of girls that looked like the cage was their personal paradise, exotic birds enjoying their momentary captivity. Not far from them,

an ebony Adonis jumped and squatted within his cage, showing more than was necessary to his enthralled spectators. Bruno chuckled and moved toward his spanking doom.

The spankees waited behind a curtain. There were around twenty total, and equally divided between men and women. Bruno recognized several adult entertainers, a few football players, one soccer luminary, and a couple of gold medalist swimmers, among those who were an actual part of the lifestyle crowd. Tattoos, piercings, and crazy hair styles were the common denominator.

One by one they were called, amid the cheers and thuds and (now and then) unexpected moans. The spankers didn't need to be experts, this was for charity after all, but Bruno was sure that more than one Dom had paid to have a chance at some celebrity butt. Since the pairing was random, nobody knew what to expect.

“Some of you saw him on the artist's stage, enchanting us with his awesome voice. Now, none other than our Fire Department Commissioner has consented to replace our beloved Tristan York, who had a surfing accident this morning. We have been advised Tristan is doing fine and regrets not being able to participate. But we are here, and we have a butt to spank! Let's give a warm welcome to Bruno Ouatu.”

Chest puffed, Bruno parted the curtain, and the applause became louder. Men and women clapped and whistled and whooped, and he was fine until he saw who his spanker was.

Oh. Fuck. No.

How was he supposed to confront that man, after he had been spanked without even knowing his name? Bruno was going to murder Callum.

“C'mon, Commissioner. Don't be shy,” the emcee, a tangerine-wigged drag queen, teased him.

Stiff and angry, he walked toward his executioner. As he lay across the man's lap, he growled between his teeth. “At least tell me your name before you put your hands on me.”

The man had the nerve to rub Bruno's back as if they were longtime lovers. "My name is Fabian Acre. I'm gonna go easy on you, and if you're a good boy, I'll buy you dinner later."

The taunt should have aggravated Bruno, but it did exactly the opposite. His traitorous cock began filling, and Fabian exhaled a low hum, almost savoring Bruno's discomfort.

"Well, well, well. Seems like we have a lucky, lucky match here. Give it up for the commissioner and his spanker. Let them hear you, people."

"How many?" Bruno gritted out and tried to control his wayward cock.

"I bought twenty, but I can settle for ten here and the other ten somewhere more private." Fabian rubbed his back again. Those thick fingers ignited innumerable things that had been asleep for a while.

"Do your twenty, Mister Acre. If you hurt me the right way, you might get your dinner."

"Deal. Start counting, handsome."

And before Bruno could take a proper breath, the first whack descended, leaving him befuddled by its intensity. With each spank, the crowd went wilder. They were counting; something Bruno hadn't heard them do before.

Around the twelfth blow, the crowd had dissolved and all that remained was one of Fabian's meaty hands between his shoulder blades, and the rhythmic thud of every spank handed by the other. On the nineteenth whack, Bruno creamed his pants, unable to control the pleasure riding him since Fabian had growled in his ear, "I'm gonna make you mine."

A strange calm settled over Bruno with the twentieth swat. Fabian turned Bruno over in his lap to face him. And kissed him. Anyone with some experience in riot control could understand the turbulent noise that erupted from the spectators. But not even that made Bruno pay attention to anything but those lips covering his, the soft scratch of the stubble framing the handsome mouth. He only cared for the deadly grip of powerful hands, the lump poking his ass where it rested on Fabian's crotch.

"I think you two should get a room, before the officers start throwing tear gas to control your admirers."

Officers? Shit.

Bruno jumped out of Fabian's hold. "This is wrong." He took the microphone from the fairy-winged drag queen. "People calm down. Remember, we're doing this for charity. The fair must continue without incidents. Please disperse and enjoy the events. We still have a couple of hours to go."

The scuffle stopped as quickly as it had started. The crowd slowly scattered, but many blew kisses and waved at Bruno, eyeing Fabian with dreamy eyes.

Swiveling, Bruno found Fabian waving back and blowing kisses too, with that insanely big hand. "You think this is funny? People could have been hurt."

"You cannot say a show was good unless there are some concussions left behind. Or black eyes. Or tender parts wrongfully grabbed." The last sentence came out of Fabian's sultry mouth as his eyes zeroed in on Bruno's cock: half hard and on its way to monolith.

Brandishing the microphone like a rapier...

Hold on, did I just think of it as a weapon, not even a revolver, but a rapier? Where am I, in fucking Narnia?

"You, need to stop this." Bruno stalked toward Fabian. "I really want to smack that grin off your face."

Fabian stood up, drew his wallet from his back pocket, pulled out a card, and handed it to Bruno. Their height difference was minimal, but Bruno felt like he was the one being looked down at, "You can smack whatever you want tomorrow at nineteen hundred hours at my house, after dessert." He turned around and walked away without waiting for a response and disappeared behind the curtain.

The response-time of a newborn would have been quicker than Bruno's muddled mind. He ran after the smug bastard. "Who do you think you are?" He yelled to no one in particular, since only chairs remained behind the stupid curtain.

Now he had to go, even if it was just to beat the shit out of that fucker.

He was like a freaking schoolboy waiting for his first date to arrive. All his cockiness had evaporated at the thought that Bruno might not show up. He couldn't even wait in his apartment like a normal person; he had to be here in the lobby, freshly shaved and dressed to the nines.

Never before had Fabian slaved in the kitchen for a date. He usually took them to restaurants and, if things worked out, he'd rent a hotel room. With Bruno, he needed the man at the ready for whatever was possible between them. Who was he kidding? He wanted to fuck that man senseless and then offer him the rest of his life on a silver platter.

Finally, Fabian saw Bruno alight from a long black limo. The bodyguard, scanning the perimeter as the scissor door ascended and Bruno emerged, would make a fine addition to Fabian's staff. He hoped Bruno wasn't planning on taking that bodyguard to his apartment. He didn't have a problem with people watching him have sex, but in Bruno's case, his possessiveness had no boundaries. He hadn't seen any bodyguards at the fair, but he knew that they didn't need to be visible to do their job. Here, it seemed more like a show of force.

Fabian rose from the settee where he had been perched but refrained from rushing toward Bruno. Not because of the bodyguard, but to save some dignity, since he was waiting for him in the lobby instead of in his apartment like any regular fellow on a simple date. Well, it was Bruno's fault, he was thirty minutes late.

The glass doors slid open, and with the bodyguard like a shadow, Bruno found him, offering a smile and then a scowl, as if he'd remembered something unpleasant. That scowl didn't discourage Fabian. *Never*. If anything, it made him want the damned commissioner even more.

"Good evening, Mister Acre." Bruno offered his hand.

"Just call me Fabian, because I'm not gonna call you Mister Ouatu or Commissioner." He shook the proffered hand.

Dressed in a deep burgundy shirt, Bruno's fairly tanned skin appeared as glowing caramel, and Fabian had every intention of licking and sucking that caramel until he found the gooey center. Dizzying grey eyes flashed, and Bruno sighed, "Fabian... it is then."

“Much better. We’re not gonna need an extra plate for your boy there, right?” Fabian nodded toward the bodyguard, who waited at a prudent distance.

“No. He’s not eating with us, but he’ll wait outside your apartment.”

They reached the elevator (waiting for the bodyguard to enter behind them) and were on their way up. “What if I want you to stay for breakfast?” Since he had been waiting in the lobby, images of Bruno flush to the elevator wall while Fabian ravished his mouth, barked at him. Now, with the bodyguard between them, that action seemed a *little* out of place.

“If *I* choose to stay for breakfast, he will be relieved at midnight.”

“Sounds like a plan to me.” Fabian chortled, sizing up the square muscles of Bruno’s shoulders, framed by the rich fabric. The slacks were a blend of silk and leather that made the roundness of his sweet ass absolutely mouthwatering. What could be a better dessert than his face between those cheeks?

“You still have to convince me to stay.”

With the ding of the opening door as background, Fabian murmured, “I’ll do my best.”

“Welcome, Commissioner. I took the liberty of contacting your office and house computers to request your favorite music and ambient temperature choice.” The husky feminine voice of Fabian’s house computer floated around them.

“That voice...” Bruno seemed taken aback.

“It belonged to a soprano, Jennifer Owens. I think she died like ten years ago.”

“She was my mother.” The way Bruno said this didn’t leave any doubt about how that wasn’t a good thing.

“Of course, your last name. Your father was that Romanian countertenor who had a fairy tale romance with Jennifer Owens in his old age.”

“Yes.” And his expression became even sourer.

“If you prefer a male voice it can be arranged.” All Fabian wanted was that Bruno didn’t do an about-face and leave.

“Would you do that for me?” Bruno’s posture relaxed a bit.

“For you, anything.” Fabian spoke in clipped tones then, “Computer, voice range between E2 and E4.”

The computer voice became a sensual bass, “Your room temperature choice is seventy-two degrees Fahrenheit.”

“Thank you very much.” The exhalation was a delicious purr.

Fabian wanted to sit Bruno down and ask a thousand questions. Understand why the memories of his parents were so hard on him. But they would have time for that later; to learn everything about each other (after violent love-making) in long languid conversations, for many nights to come.

“Would you like a drink before we start?”

Bruno studied him for a moment, as if trying to decide on more than simply drinks. “No. I don’t want to ruin my palate for the food.”

“Let me get you some sparkling water then.” Fabian offered Bruno a seat on a brocade sofa, his only concession to Rococo amid his functional, square décor. An antique brought to a city with nothing truly old, and exactly where he planned to have some fun before they moved to the bedroom.

“Excellent.” Bruno sported a shy smile, almost a truce. “Where did you order from?”

“Fabian’s.”

“Never heard of it. Isn’t it a bit narcissistic to pick a restaurant with your own name?”

Was Fabian imagining it or did Bruno sound somewhat amused? The almost-smirk in his tone did wonderful things to that fabulous timbre.

“It’s Fabian’s as in *I* made it for you.” He gave Bruno a tall glass with bubbly water. “Well, technically, prepared. I want to finish cooking with you by my side so we can chat while I do it.”

“You’re either a show off or are trying to set me up.” Amusement still coated Bruno’s voice. “In any case, I thank you for the effort. Glad my taste buds won’t be compromised then.”

Truth be told, Fabian wasn’t sure why he’d done it. An insane need to be all domestic and cozy with Bruno in the kitchen had led him to it, but now

with Bruno so close (close to his crotch, that was), his intentions had become more savage and more vulnerable at once.

Something about Bruno being upset about his parents had rocked Fabian between the need to comfort him (to ease his pain) and fucking him senseless (to make him forget it). A pretty disturbing dichotomy, since Fabian didn't know if he should be rough or gentle.

“I will take good care of your taste buds.”

And everything else.

“Well, it's my own version of Slutty Chicken.”

Bruno chuckled, “What the hell is a Slutty Chicken?”

They were in the kitchen. The bruschetta (Pizzaiola) and the chunks of chicken were in the oven, the water for the penne was ready to boil, and the aroma of sautéed onions and garlic permeated the air. Thin slices of prosciutto also found their way to the heat. All his senses were invaded as a post-contemporary string piece wafted sensually, enveloping them in its sublime atmosphere, the grave cellos so similar to Fabian's deep, melodic voice. His eyes were full of the trainer's presence. And his skin burned to be touched by him again.

Bruno was a mess.

“The broiled chicken goes with *Puttanesca* sauce. *Puttanesca* comes from the word *puttana* and it literally means ‘whore's sauce’. It's said that Neapolitan brothels used the aroma of this sauce to entice customers looking for food, drink, and entertainment.” Fabian winked.

“So this Italian feast is your way to sell your *assets*?”

“Didn't see it that way at the time.” Fabian smiled shyly. “I just wanted to give you something I'm good at.” Penne dived into the bubbling water. “You know they say the way to a man's heart is through his stomach.”

“Old wives tales. Why would you want my heart?”

“We met a little more than twenty-four hours ago, and you’re the only thing I can think of. Your voice. The way you looked at me while you were singing. Your weight on my lap. How good your skin felt under my hand. The way you tasted when we kissed.”

Hearing Fabian say those things was giving Bruno a damn-you erection. He had come with the very clear intention of wiping the smugness off the handsome face, snuffing that glint of mischievousness from those ever-changing hazel eyes. And he had been fine and ready to do so until the house computer greeted him and he heard his mother’s voice. What a punch to the guts.

The woman who gave birth to him had left him in the hands of strangers to pursue the applause she craved like a filthy drug. Never close, never motherly, only caring about showering him with money to forget she was always absent.

Be honest. He floored you when you found him in the lobby, waiting.

Well, that too. Bruno purposely arrived late; a petty way to assert that he wasn’t in a hurry to be around Fabian. Utter bullshit, because he had also been unable to think of anything else but the arrogant, hot-as-hell, wonderful-kissing buffoon. Absolutely trapped, he shouldn’t have come.

“Your eyes can’t lie. You liked my kiss.”

And your spanking. But Bruno would not admit that with words; he let his eyes do the talking since they were such babblers. He focused on the white-on-white embroidery of Fabian’s nice-fitting shirt. It had several buttons opened and a strap of black leather crossed over the gap. Was he wearing a bulldog harness under the fabric?

“Yeah, you did. Your silence speaks volumes.” Fabian smirked and stirred the pasta, then set aside the prosciutto.

Bruno wanted to ask about the leather. He didn’t want to sound eager, but he wondered if there were more surprises hidden. Perhaps a jock or a cod or even a cock ring. Too many images swirled in front of Bruno and he almost felt lightheaded. He needed to steer these thoughts in a different direction.

“I’m only human, Fabian; we all like kisses. Tell me about your job.”

The house computer's voice floated about them. "Bruschetta ready. Twenty minutes and thirty seconds for chicken's desired consistency."

With a wait-a-second motion, Fabian turned toward the oven, pulled the Bruschetta out, and put it to rest. He added wine, chili, and anchovies to the pan with the onions and started breaking the anchovies with a wooden spoon. The many bowls with chopped, minced, and sliced things attested to Fabian's effort to please Bruno. With every minute in this apartment, his defenses weakened.

I came to do something, and no matter what, I'm going to do it.

"Would you please drain that pasta?" Fabian nodded toward the boiling pot. "I'll tell you everything about my job while we eat." He brandished a sinful smile. "Don't wanna run out of things to say during dinner." And the bastard winked.

Years of ingrained manners and political intrigues helped Bruno refrain from rolling his eyes and curse Fabian for being so charming; after all, Bruno was being groomed to be the next mayor of Aurora. He did as requested, a damned automaton set to mute.

The midnight-blue dinnerware with stylish silver trim fitted perfectly on the ebony table for four. Fabian offered Bruno the seat at the head of the table and sat beside him instead of opposite. Everything in the apartment was linear, horizontal or vertical, black leather and dark woods. The white walls had a barely-there hint of blue, or perhaps it was green, Bruno couldn't be sure.

Even the art on the walls was black and white landscapes: deserts, canyons, oceans. The only concessions to color were the yellow and purple orchids (spread around the place) and that sensually curved and richly adorned sofa with its emerald brocade and tubular throw pillows.

"As you can see, I've tried my best to avoid touching you after we shook hands," Fabian commented casually, serving Bruno more Sangiovese. "This doesn't mean in any way, shape, or form that I'm not burning to taste you. I simply want you to enjoy what I made for you. After dessert, we will watch a movie, and, subsequently, with our stomachs sated and our minds relaxed, I'll have my way with you."

“So, no surprises. No sneaking an arm around my shoulders while I’m distracted by the monsters chasing the pretty girl in the movie?”

“No funny business. This is not a rigid course of action though, but I’d rather have you aware of my intentions.”

“And what exactly are your intentions, Mister Acre?”

“Fabian,” he murmured, drilling Bruno with those possessive eyes.

Bruno nodded, “Tell me, Fabian.”

“Learn your body ’til there’s nothing more to learn, and then invent new ways to rediscover it.”

Goose bumps exploded all over his body, and Bruno swallowed hard. He wasn’t a virgin or inexperienced. He’d had his fair share of lovers, but never had such intensity been directed at him. Such bluntness was incredibly arousing, especially coming from an environment where cloak and dagger was the norm.

“Am I supposed to be a passive member of this *expedition*?”

“Hell no, I’m absolutely ready to be plundered and ravished as well.” Fabian smirked. “I’m a firm believer of equal footing. *Nor Sub Nor Dom.*”

Bruno raised his flute, “I’ll drink to that.”

The clink of their glasses was like the boxing bell to start a new round.

Closing credits rolled away. Made in the early ’20s, *Mastering the Comet* was based on a trilogy of M/M romance books, all condensed into one movie. A polyamory story, it narrated the encounter of a prince with a thief, who would become the love of his life. And the way his bodyguard pushed him to love the thief and also accept that he loved his bodyguard too (who had been in love with the prince since childhood).

The movie had been a test. There were still things that were difficult to process for some individuals, especially in a world where people wanted selfishly and didn’t want to share, even in love.

“That was a really good movie,” Bruno commented with a sigh. “It’s a shame I never heard of it before.” He squeezed Fabian’s shoulder.

Fabian was splayed on the floor, his shoulder resting beside Bruno's knee, who sat on his Rococo sofa. "I'm glad you got to see it with me for the first time."

"Come over here."

Turning his head, Fabian saw Bruno crooking his index finger.

Enough of being a good boy. Time to taste those lips again. He crawled his way up and ended kneeling on the sofa with both hands cradling Bruno's face. "Finally."

Those eyes were a turbulent grey. They held Fabian's undivided attention. "If I ever come to your house again, don't shave." Bruno murmured before closing his eyes and devouring Fabian's mouth.

Well, that was a weird request. Then Fabian remembered how Bruno had brushed his fingers over his designer stubble the previous day. Oh.

What does he mean by 'if'?

But Bruno sucking on his tongue was too much of a distraction to focus on semantics. He tasted like Sangiovese and candy, and his hands roamed over Fabian's torso, mapping, discovering. Hardening, his cock strained in its leather encasement, and his bladder decided to knock on his lust's door. *Fuck.* Fabian broke their delicious link. "I'm sorry, handsome," he grimaced. "I need a bathroom break."

Bruno chuckled so close to his face, Fabian almost savored the mirth. "Sure. It's going to take a while with that cock so hard."

It was Fabian's turn to laugh, "You evil, evil man." He straightened up and adjusted his erection. "I'll be right back."

"I'm not going anywhere." Bruno spread his arms across the back of the sofa, and his thick legs too. And the smugness on his face didn't help either.

Damn him.

Payroll lists, requisitions, and all kinds of inane things rolled through Fabian's head, willing all the blood concentrated in his granite cock to ebb. After almost ten minutes of acrobatics, he was finally done. He stopped by his bedroom to retrieve a box and returned to the living room. He found Bruno surfing channels. A scene so domestic, his heart (and his cock) perked up at

once. Legs crossed, his left ankle over his right knee, Bruno looked at ease and handsome as hell.

“What’s in the box?”

“A surprise.”

“Not a big fan of those.”

“Oh, hush. If I’m reading you correctly, you’re gonna love this one.”

“That’s all fine and dandy but we haven’t finished yet.”

“We haven’t properly started actually.”

Bruno extended his hand, “So true.” The hunger in his eyes came out loud and clear. In his voice, in the way his head cocked to the side. “Take your shirt off.”

His green-self scrambled to comply, leaving the box on the floor and almost ripping off the buttons in his haste. Bruno made him forget he was a man usually in control. Not usually, always. Nevertheless, these sudden bouts of fresh-from-academy, inexperienced behavior, far from making him angry, made him hopeful. Perhaps he had found his match. A man he would not just lust after but who would put him in his place. If only that main dish came with a side of completeness.

Somewhat lightheaded, Fabian stood there, anticipation freezing him, engulfing him.

Bruno’s perusal was open and determined. With feline easiness, he slinked toward Fabian and took his chin. “Excellent dinner. Interesting movie.” Soft lips brushed Fabian’s. “It’s time for roughness.”

Before Fabian could react, Bruno had tackled him, bringing both of them down to the sofa, and he ended up across Bruno’s lap, with a throw pillow stuffed in his face and his legs flailing. “Now, now, calm down. You knew this was coming,” Bruno traced the lines of the eagle tattoo covering Fabian’s upper back, “Although, I’d like to see more skin.” Those square hands kneaded Fabian’s butt. “Unzip your pants and show me your ass.”

Not wanting to be told twice, Fabian quickly complied, using his knees to lift his body a little, unzipping his pants and lowering them with a squirm in a

flash. A long, languid caress (over his sensitive tush) fathered goose bumps and a raging erection. He swallowed hard. He wanted to say something clever, but his brain was in another city, trying to buy tickets to return to his body.

“Beautiful,” Bruno almost sighed, picking up one side band of the leather jock. He let it return to its original position with a muffled snap. “Do you know why I’m spanking you?”

It took Fabian a moment to understand the question, and the implications. “I think so... Sir?”

Bruno was acting like a true Dom, asking his sub if he understood the reason for punishment.

“No need to address me as Sir. I’m just Bruno. Tell me what do you think is the reason.”

“Because I made you come in front of a crowd?” Fabian trembled. “I’m sorry—that’s my answer, not a question.”

“That,” Bruno hummed, “And something else.”

Fabio thought hard for a second. “Also because the crowd cheered your climax more than they did after you sang?”

“Sounds like a question.”

“My answer.” Fabio didn’t know exactly why, but his cock was an even bigger marble block, and the spanking hadn’t even begun.

“You’re correct. You must take at least twenty as I did. If you take twenty-five your reward would be... delicious.”

“Oh, I’ll take twenty-five. Thank you, Bruno.”

“We’ll see.”

And so it began.

This was Fabian’s first full-blown spanking. A couple of spans while fucking didn’t count. Pain and Pleasure surged and whirled and loved each other with each descent of Bruno’s hand. By the tenth slap, Bruno commented how handsomely his cheeks pinked. Also commented about how his trousers

were already a mess thanks to Fabian's copious delivery of precum, after releasing it from its leather confinement.

Plaff.

“Seventeen.”

“What's in the box?” Bruno asked, as a drop of sweat landed on Fabian's coccyx.

Fabian shuddered. All his body was on fire, and he could visualize that tiny droplet evaporating on its way through his crack. He found his voice; it came out like a groan. “Toys.”

“Hmmm.”

Plaff.

“Eighteen.” Fabian felt the caress of Bruno's shirt over his back; the weight of the other man over him.

“You sure you can take twenty? Your breathing seems a little erratic.” Warm breath tickled his ear.

“I can do twenty-five, Bruno, please.” Fabian wondered why the house computer was so silent if his vitals were changing.

The pressure lifted.

A palm quickly brushed his burning left cheek. *Plaff. Plaff. Plaff*

“Nineteen. Twenty. Twenty-one.”

Nothing.

An entire minute trickled by. Fabian wasn't sure he should question Bruno's sudden halt.

“Can you reach the box?”

“Yes, Bruno.”

“Please do.” The command was delivered softly, with a pinch of strain peppered around it.

Stretching his body, Fabian picked the box up. He passed it over his head, and Bruno took it, resting it over his tender rump. As he moved back to his

original position, Fabian noticed the hardened length of Bruno's arousal. And his cock instinctively gravitated toward its counterpart.

The shift of the polished wood alerted him of the box's opening. "Such an impressive collection for such a little space."

Fabian curbed his chuckle, still, his shoulders shook. "That's only the traveling kit, Bruno."

"Is that so?" The three words floated in restrained amusement.

"Uh-huh." Fabian remembered he was on Bruno's lap, "Yes, Bruno." Just because he wasn't calling him "Master" or "Sir" didn't mean the protocol was broken. It circled them, tacit and clear.

Fingers found their way through Fabian's hair. His face rested sideways over his crossed forearms, the lush green brocade a promise of adventure and satisfaction. The contact lost, he felt a corner of the box close to his knee. Two fingers spread his ass, and cold, thick liquid landed on his unsuspecting hole. One digit from the other hand prepped him. Slow and deliberate motions made him want to undulate, to impale himself on that firm invader, seeking the elusive touch over his prostate that would drive him crazy.

"I know what you want, but we're not done yet."

Plaff.

Before Fabian could open his mouth to count, he realized Bruno had used the sting of the spank to thrust a butt plug inside him. "Twenty-two."

A swift tap on the base of the butt plug and then, *Plaff. Plaff. Plaff.*

"Twenty-three. Twenty-four. Twenty-five." All sensations heightened by the mass snugly lodged in his hole. Fabian was a little lightheaded, and the phrase "in heat" would be a stupid understatement.

Bruno coasted his shoulder blades with one hand while the other rested over warm, reddened hills. "Now, you can do whatever you want with me, as long as you keep that butt plug in."

Fabian turned half his body to study Bruno's face. "Whatever?"

“Anything and everything.” The serious face afforded no further questioning.

Slowly, Fabian left Bruno’s lap and got to his feet. His cock, a radioactive missile ready for launch, jutted out of the leather jock in the dark-haired countertenor’s direction. “Then we need those trousers off.”

“At once.” And quicker than you could say *Hunk alla Puttanesca*, those luscious legs were bare and the long, massive cock was proudly upright, commanding attention.

On his knees now, between impressive thighs, Fabian inspected his mark, happily inhaling the fragrance of aroused male, his mouth watering, all his senses on hyperdrive. As he laved plump testicles, the fact that a hairy masterpiece like Bruno shaved his balls became an even bigger turn-on. And Bruno’s approving groans were the perfect score for Fabian’s ministrations. His tongue followed the vein dividing the magnificent obelisk, and Bruno’s hands found his hair and tugged. “Fabian, you need to stop playing with your food.” Grey eyes flashed through narrowed lids.

Fabian chuckled, his mouth so close to the task at hand he could feel the tickle of the heat radiating from it. “It’s called *degusting*.”

“Do it faster then. If I don’t see those lips wrapped around my cock in the next two seconds...”

Bruno couldn’t finish his threat (or promise?) because Fabian circled the glans with his tongue.

“Oh, sweet Triad, do that again.”

That’s an interesting expression.

Not only swirling his tongue, but engulfing the succulent dick, Fabian hummed. Bruno’s legs closed around him and pulled him forward, the heels of his feet a hot pressure over Fabian’s tender ass. His head bobbed, controlled by Bruno’s hands, guiding him to take more, to go deeper.

And deeper Fabian went... for five minutes.

I need to eat that fucking hole.

Dislodging himself from the lengthy piece, Fabian kissed Bruno. “Lie on your side.” When Bruno tried to comply, facing him, Fabian pushed his shoulder. “With your ass to me.” And the wicked glint in Bruno’s eyes said he’d received the message loud and clear.

Tubular throw pillows flew in all directions, and Fabian took a moment to admire the expanse of Bruno’s body as the man settled himself. Wide shoulders covered in beautiful freckles. Thick, perfect arms that ended in masculine, square hands; one propped on his elbow, holding that head with its wonderful mass of dark curls, the other resting over his hip. The powerful, hairy legs, blessed to carry the weight of all this virile smorgasbord.

In the center of the vision, the magnificent rump decorated with a subtle fuzz of dark velvet, concealing a mouthwatering treasure, amid rocky hills of pure delight. And that guiche piercing was not just unexpected but kinky as hell.

Fuck Michelangelo and his David. This is pure Ancient Roman granite.

Bruno from behind was a thing of beauty, and only one thing would make the sight even more perfect. Lifting one of Bruno’s legs, Fabian pulled the reddened dick back and placed it between formidable thighs. There. Rocky cheeks, beaded-ring, balls and cock made a supreme hunting trail, and Fabian was about to immerse himself in the exploration of a lifetime.

And he dived, tongue first.

His hole had been worshipped, the platinum ring in his taint pulled, his cheeks branded by sharp teeth, his cock devoured. His body was a writhing mass of need, and all Bruno wanted was Fabian’s sweet shaft ensconced deep within him. But Fabian had delayed the final completion, keeping him on the edge for at least two hours.

He mapped every inch of Bruno’s frame with lips, teeth, fingers, and every other body part he deemed necessary to enhance the maddening experience and sweetly torture Bruno until he was ready to erupt and succumb.

“Please, Fabian. I can’t take this anymore.” Bruno groaned, his voice a breath away from being raw desperation, his upside down position making the blood rushing to his head a sinful tonic.

Once again Fabian munched on Bruno’s hole as if it were covered in pure ambrosia. He lifted his face from his feast, an arched eyebrow and a wicked grin greeted Bruno. “No.”

It was hard to assert yourself when you were a ball over a Rococo sofa and your knees were so close to your face you could almost kiss them. Still, there was such a thing as too much of a good thing. And this good thing needed the damned cherry on top really soon. “You know I have a bodyguard outside your door.”

The glistening-lipped smile was utter debauchery. “I really don’t think you’d like him to see you in this compromising position. And I’m not talking about your toes behind your ears but about my face between your yummy cheeks.”

“You evil, evil man.” But the heat in his words came from unchained desire and not from aggravation. Well, there was a certain component of irritation, because he needed to be fucked (aggressively) now. “If you don’t fuck me in the next two seconds...” And two fingers stuffed into his hole closed Bruno’s mouth and scattered even more of his already scrambled brain. “Fuck yesss.”

Fabian stood from his kneeling position over the seat of the sofa, taking away the burning stick of his flaming cock from Bruno’s skin. He rearranged Bruno so his back rested on the back of the sofa and Fabian had his legs encasing Bruno’s folded limbs. There was something insanely depraved and totally in tune with his inner hedonist about being *piledriven* on an antique piece of furniture, that he was completely at ease with Fabian’s machinations.

Even more exhilarating was the fact that the butt plug screwed into Fabian’s hole must be driving him to Bedlam Lane too. And now the carvings around the sofa were totally leaving low reliefs on that muscular rump.

His burning hole accepted the slow invasion. Inch by precious inch, Fabian lowered himself, conquering Bruno, expanding him, dominating him. Sheathed to the hilt, Fabian allowed Bruno to take a deep breath and then

became a monumental piston. The pumping was not only upward and downward; a certain circular hip motion was also thrown in the mix. It was absolute bliss every time the vertical abrasion touched Bruno's prostate.

Bruno groaned and moaned and grunted, completely oblivious to how close his neck was to snapping. All he could think was how good this felt and how stupid he would be not to concede defeat and let Fabian enter.

In his life that was, since the man was already happily (and aggressively) inside him.

Fabian fucked Bruno looking into his eyes, pouring out something Bruno hadn't encountered before, something akin to acceptance, understanding, camaraderie. Those weren't the eyes of a man just wanting to get off; Bruno knew those very well, had lived with them not once but twice. And both had denied him what could have made his heart complete.

Nevertheless, this wasn't the moment to think of such things. His body was sending signals and pulling every single cell together to welcome an explosive orgasm.

A climax he'd been building long before he entered the lobby of this damned skyscraper on Russia Avenue and settled eyes on the gorgeous man ravishing him.

And the explosion rocked him, dismembered him, dispelled him. Ropes and ropes of creamy seed landed on his cheeks, his mouth, and hair. Fabian's roar was like a thousand waves crashing into a moonlit cliff.

They ended up in a satisfied heap of smiles and limbs.

As his consciousness slowly floated back toward Earth, Bruno worried about mundane things, like the mess they had just made on the unique piece of furniture. Uncannily sensing Bruno's thoughts, Fabian commented, "It's treated, handsome. All the mess will come off with a swift wiping."

Fabian cleaned the mess *on* Bruno, chuckling and lapping (equal to an eager puppy) and then thoroughly kissing him, giving Bruno a taste of his own semen, blended with Fabian's inimitable flavor.

When his neck stopped killing him and he calculated he could stand up without crumbling like a newborn giraffe, he declared a truce. "I need to

arrange with Smith outside for his replacement.” The tacit acceptance in his tone made Fabian smile. “It would be nice to give him a doggie bag. After all, he put up with all the noise we were making.”

“I’m pretty sure we gave him plenty of fuel for his own masturbatory release later.” Fabian shrugged. “A doggie bag is okay, since I don’t eat the same food twice.” Noticing Bruno’s shocked expression Fabian added, “I’m talking about regular mortal’s food. You, my feast for the gods, I could eat forever.”

Bruno grimaced and shelved those words away for further examination. He pushed Fabian, stood up, and grabbed his pants. He’d decided to come commando to torture Fabian, and it had been his own undoing. “I’m going to gather things and give instructions then.” Fabian remained on the sofa, a solid block of hotness, his head propped on an elbow, his long legs flexed, showcasing the goods.

Doggie bag ready, Bruno fixed half the buttons of his shirt and padded toward the door barefooted. Smith (his back to the wall facing Fabian’s door) greeted him with a curt nod and then catalogued the state of Bruno’s clothing with an arched eyebrow.

“I’m going to stay ’til morning. Call for your relief and schedule the car at zero seven hundred hours sharp. The chauffer needs to bring me a complete change of clothes since I will go straight to the office.” Not that he did things like this every other week. Actually, this was the first time in more than two years. But his people were trained to act without questioning or running their mouths afterward.

Another dry nod after accepting the food, and Smith started to feed instructions through his communicator. The door hissed, closing.

Fabian lay in the exact same position only with a slight difference. All right, a big difference because his cock was hard and ready to go again. Then he surprised Bruno with a smirk and the following words, “My turn to ride a fucking dick.” The butt plug leaving Fabian’s body parodied the opening of a bottle of champagne. “And this hole is beyond ready.”

“Let’s do this.”

He had escaped, like the sad coward he was (a truly scaredy chickenshit), sneaking away from Fabian's apartment long before zero six thirty, thanks to his inner clock and the silent complicity of the house computer. True to form, his people were at the ready and before he could put a foot into the lobby, the car was waiting for him outside. Now, before the first rays of the new day touched the waters of the San Joaquin River, he crossed Bridge Four toward the west side of town.

Bruno shook off all the illusions and wishes engulfing him like a wet dog drying himself. They flew out the window, surely to drown in the dark waters below him.

No ideas formulated while a man is sitting on your face (and his cock is sliding between your pecs) have a place in bright daylight.

But it wasn't just the way Fabian's body had rocked his world. Nor the way those lips and hands had caressed every single inch of his skin. Nor the sweet words Fabian had whispered in his ear, full of promise and future. It was Fabian's eyes, portals that could not lie. So devoid of deception, it was humbling to have such crystalline beacons aimed at him.

"He's trying too hard," whispered his coward self. *"No one can be that devoted so fast."*

True. This wasn't a love story where soul mates meet and everything is beautiful and easy at once. Bruno was too scared, too fragile, too scarred, to let anyone enter his life just to fuck him all over again and leave him devastated. No. He would write this encounter down as an awesome one-night stand and nothing else, just the fun memory of a good roll. Besides, Fabian never ate the same thing twice. Although they devoured each other no less than seven times.

His wrist vibrated. The digits flashing on his communicator were Fabian's. Bruno groaned but answered nonetheless, "Ouatu."

That glorious face greeted him with a disarming smile. "Good morning, handsome." Such mirth was bad for the gloom Bruno wanted to remain around him. "I was expecting, at least, a good-bye kiss." And yet, his voice implied he'd hoped for a Have-a-Nice-Day Blow Job.

“I can’t do this.”

“I know. You’d rather we were face-to-face. That can be arranged.” Fabian winked.

“No. I would rather not hear from you anymore.”

Fabian chuckled. “Not the kind of joke I appreciate after a night of lovemaking.”

If he had said “a night of fucking”, the episode would be a lot easier, “The thing is... I’m not kidding. Let’s leave it as a nice memory and don’t bitter it with unnecessary emotions.”

“I don’t believe you.” The scowl was hurtful.

“That’s your problem.” And Bruno hung up. Just listening to Fabian’s voice was wrecking his determination to put a stop to the situation, never mind those disbelieving eyes.

He shouldn’t have gone to Fabian’s apartment to begin with. All his alarms had gone off after the kiss they shared at Folsom Fair. He knew it was a trap the moment his hands touched Fabian’s skin. His finger pads still tingled with the ghost sensation of all that body hair. His lips were sore after all the smashing and crashing. Every fucking cell still hummed with joy.

No. Bruno would not let this happen.

He couldn’t be destroyed again.

“Sir? The same Mister Acre who has come for the past week is here again. Should I call security?”

Bruno studied the nervous gaze of his secretary as her holographic face floated over his desk. He calculated it had been enough time for him to be able to face Fabian without crumbling and concede. “Make him wait ten minutes and then guide him in.”

He had to accept the S.E.C. Chief Trainer was persistent.

“Yes, sir.”

Ten minutes later, Fabian stormed into his office. Before Bruno could say a word, he stopped him by raising a hand. His voice came out thundering, akin to an avenging angel. “You captivated me since the first time I saw you, and not just because of your talent. Now, I’ve tasted your body and I’m insanely hooked. To ease my addiction, the only thing that can save me is to know the secrets of your soul, and those cannot be discovered with telescopes or computers or probes. They are discovered by lips brushing lips, by looking into your eyes.”

“I…”

“I’m not finished. You’re destroying this bridge because you insist on thinking that there’s no one on the other side waiting for you, and that’s your way to fend off your loneliness. And I tell you, you’re wrong. I’m there and I’m gonna fight your stubbornness and all the mines and shields and missiles you send my way. I’m not gonna let you do this. Whatever happened to you in the past is gone now. Don’t dwell on it and miss this chance. Don’t fuck *my* chance up.”

Bruno slammed his hands on his desk. “How dare you? What makes you think you know or understand my reasons? I foolishly thought we could be friends, but you are an egocentric asshole. Get out of my fucking office this instant.”

Fabian stomped forward until he banged his hands on the desk (his fingers grazing Bruno’s) and growled, “No.”

Those ever-changing eyes roiled, and the faint contact sent lightning bolts throughout Bruno’s body. He thought he was ready, but he was beyond mistaken. Almost nose to nose, if Fabian kissed him right now, Bruno would be nothing but a drowning sub begging for his Dom, even when he had never been fully inclined to submission. “Get out.” The two words were hissed with as much contempt as he could muster.

“Make me.” A hand found Bruno’s nape and a clash of lips, teeth, and stubble followed.

Rationality stopped functioning, and Bruno became all instinct, all animal. Tongues fought, lapels were pulled, and everything on the frigging desk flew

left, right, and center, crashing and disturbing the sacred peace of a Commissioner's Office.

The voice of his secretary came muffled from some random corner. "Sir, are you all right? Do you want me to call security?"

They stopped the destruction of their clothes and stared at each other. Bruno—confused—Sanity trying to elbow its way back into his brain, and Fabian—defiant—daring him to stop what they both knew they needed like nothing else in the world. "No, I'm fine," he growled as Fabian squeezed his cock. "You can leave for the day, Averin."

"I'm not comfortable leaving you in there alone with that man, sir." Obviously, the desk (or something else) was blocking her vision because otherwise she would know he *was* comfortable with *that* man and *needed* to be alone.

"It was an order, not a request," Bruno managed to say, before his breath was caught thanks to Fabian sucking on his neck and probably giving him the hickey to end all hickeys.

Reluctance was clear in Averin's voice. "Of course, sir. I will see you tomorrow."

Fabian's mouth found his, and the battle started again. It had never truly ended since Folsom Fair. How was Bruno to curb all the things (good things) swimming in his blood, reverberating in his every fiber?

Just let go and feel. Trust.

He wanted to taste Fabian, all of him. To be sure that his memory wasn't an exalted myth, a mirage enhanced by this unquenchable craving. And his tongue met stubble, and the stubble was good. And his tongue outlined the square jaw, and the steel underneath it was perfection. Fabian groaned as Bruno lapped that Adam's apple, hard and fragile, consistent and mobile.

The desk, their little wrestling mat, became immense as their bodies entwined, so desperate to be part of the other. Bruno trailed Fabian's abs, using tongue and lips, relishing the brush of soft hair, while big hands played with his hair, rough and demanding. His first taste of the leaking beast put not only his taste buds but every molecule of his body into hyperdrive. Nerve

endings ablaze, he closed his eyes and hummed, savoring the broadness, the length, as he closed his throat about the incandescent cock head.

“Turn around. I need you in my mouth too.” The request (lodged between a grunt and a moan) came out vivid and pleading.

Bruno crawled until they were mouth to mouth again, missing the thickness that had forced his lips but knowing it would be back to conquer him soon. He bit Fabian’s bottom lip. “I hate you.”

“Hate me all you want as long as it’s with your cock pumping into these lips.”

His knees settled on either side of Fabian’s head, Bruno was surprised when Fabian caressed his sock garters with both hands and murmured, “So fucking sexy.” And Bruno didn’t know if he said anything else because the second his dick was engulfed by the wet heat of Fabian’s mouth, deaf and blind was all Bruno was.

They sixty-nined until Bruno couldn’t take anymore. With a last hard suck, he jumped from the desk and grabbed Fabian’s hair, slamming him against a wall. The shock in the handsome face was short-lived, turning into a sultry grin with lightning speed. Fabian licked his lips and narrowed his eyes, “You gonna hate my ass now?”

Hiking one of Fabian’s legs to his waist, Bruno spat on his hand and coated his cock. “Hate cannot even begin to describe what I’m going to give to your hole.”

“Bring it.”

Fabian’s big toe was the only thing touching the floor every time Bruno drove forward. He had never been fucked against a wall like this. His legs reminded him of a compass, a device kids from the previous century had used to draw circles. The commissioner’s right forearm held Fabian’s lower back (to keep Fabian firmly in place) and his left hand pressed over Fabian’s chest for counter balance, as the man grunted and thrust and drilled Fabian with his huge cock and stormy grey eyes.

His ankle was on the back of Bruno's neck, and amid all the pleasure and roughness, Fabian seriously considered asking Bruno to let him wrap his legs around that narrow waist. He was sure Bruno could handle his weight.

The present position was only to splay him and hammer who was in control, and Fabian loved it.

Bent as he was, Fabian's only option of movement was to rub his marble length against Bruno's happy trail, which in his case was more like a happy forest. Oh, the caress of thousands of silky hairs over his cock head was maddening. He leaked profusely, content with the assault, bewildered by the vertical split, and so close to coming he didn't know how his clenching muscles hadn't already made Bruno's piston shatter.

Never breaking eye contact (or the rhythm of the pounding), Bruno started to stroke Fabian's cock. His hand pulled in a corkscrewing motion, the battering continued relentlessly; both things a sensual cadence designed to destroy Fabian's senses, annihilate his reason and make him nothing but happy goo.

Bruno climaxed, and his shudder and erratic movements triggered Fabian's own explosion. Jets and jets of zealously guarded semen landed over Bruno's hairy chest, over his thick neck, over his square chin, as they both panted.

Not even his hand had given Fabian pleasure since the last time he saw Bruno, and now the proof of his self-imposed faithfulness was displayed on the commissioner. For the amount of liquid running down his leg, a similar situation must have happened at the other end of this tug-o-war.

With a deep sigh, Bruno let go of Fabian's other leg, allowing him to stand up, even if a little wobbly, on his own. Bruno's forehead rested on Fabian's shoulder. The wet, plastered hair covering it tickled his still hyper-sensitive skin. Fabian didn't care that the hunky, hairy chest was covered in spunk, he crushed the man against him and murmured in his ear, "That was..." But he couldn't find a word to encompass the whole experience.

"That was something all right..." Their eyes met and Bruno shook his head. "I shouldn't have done it." He started to push Fabian to get away.

“What, are you nuts?” Fabian circled Bruno with an iron grip. Their spent cocks brushed and both let out an involuntary moan. “You see? What’s so wrong about this, that even after we’ve just fucked, we cannot get enough of it?”

“I never said I wasn’t attracted to you.”

“It’s more than that, and you know it. Stop being a wuss and let me in.”

“I can’t, Fabian. I’m afraid to trust.” Bruno scowled at Fabian. “There, I said it.”

“The best way to find out if you can trust somebody is to trust them.” Fabian gave him a soft smile.

Bruno arched an eyebrow. “Who said that?”

“Daddy Hemmingway.”

Bruno’s dark head shook again, this time for a different reason. This time the sigh was to disguise a snicker. “Why would you call Hemmingway Daddy?”

“That old man was hot.” Fabian chuckled and caressed Bruno’s cheek. “Being afraid is good. It makes us alert. What it’s not supposed to do is freeze us.” He removed the still wet locks from the ample forehead and kissed it. “You’re a brave man; you saved so many people when you were a firefighter. Don’t let something an asshole or assholes did cripple your capacity for love.”

Hope timidly peeked from those grey windows. “Is that what you’re offering me; Love?”

“I want to give you my life, Bruno. But that is something to be given day by day, sharing moments. Not just moments of pleasure, but also the silly ones, the scary ones, the sad ones. I want to do this journey with you. You just have to take the first step.”

“NO.” Fabian had loosened his grip a bit, and Bruno used it to break free. “Get your clothes and leave.”

“You have got to be shitting me.” Fabian growled, intent on restraining Bruno again until the stubborn man got it into his head that he was gonna fight for him, no matter what.

Bruno took a stun gun from a drawer and aimed it at Fabian with a steady hand. “Get the fuck out.”

Looking for time, Fabian chuckled. “You’re not gonna let me dress?”

The stun gun waved toward the door. “We have similar training, Fabian. Out.”

Fabian gathered his things. For some reason he didn’t want to analyze in this precise moment, the cum still trickling from his hole did not feel like an insult. No, he didn’t feel used; that cum was a promise. A promise he would force Bruno to make good on.

He didn’t try to put his underwear on. Before the door opened, he turned to look at Bruno. “We are not done.”

“Oh, we are.”

“So he fucked you and then threw you to the curb.”

“When you say it like that...”

“There’s no other way to say it.” Lucian took a deep breath. “Okay, I know it’s my fault I took you to the damned fair, but I refuse to let you drown in your own shit.”

Balder came to sit beside Lucian, and they both occupied almost the entire screen. “What’s so special about the commissioner, Fabian?”

“I don’t have a logical explanation for what I feel.”

“There never is.” Balder caressed Lucian’s chin. “We want you to be happy.”

“Nobody said happiness was easy. I’m positive I must fight for him if I want us to be together.”

“What if he isn’t worthy?”

“Then I’ll be okay with it, knowing that I did what I had to do. The worst thing is to live with a ‘what if’.”

Balder and Lucian looked at each other. He knew their story better than anyone, and they understood how devastating a “what if” could be, since they had tried to deny their attraction and suffered for years.

“All I know is, he’s under my skin as I sure am under his,” Fabian added.

“Then let’s do this.” Lucian’s face illuminated the way it only did when he had a brilliant idea, or he thought whatever it was, was a brilliant idea. “Stop presenting yourself wherever he is. Just completely disappear. You haven’t given him time to miss you, to accept his need for you. As long as you are around, he knows he can change his mind.” He gave Fabian a wicked grin. “Right now, you’re nothing but a creepy stalker.”

Balder elbowed his husband. “He can’t be creepy, he’s too hot for that.” He wanted to sound stern, but the way those eyes scanned his cousin was like Lucian could do no wrong.

“Stop encouraging him.” Lucian elbowed back. “That’s why he thinks his presence alone can weaken the commissioner’s defenses. You two are a pair of brutes. What is needed here is subtlety and artifice, not a show of force.”

“You want me to pull a disappearing act on him?”

“Uh-huh.” Lucian nodded. “When was the last time you saw him?”

“Last night at the Mayor’s Thanksgiving Ball.”

“Did you behave?” Balder spoke this time, apparently already in with his husband’s train of thought.

Fabian snorted. “Of course I behaved. We didn’t even exchange words. I was just there, always in his line of sight.”

“Did he dance?”

“I guess so…” And Fabian had wanted to kill each individual, but he didn’t express those murderous feelings in front of his friends.

“Did you?” Lucian’s arched eyebrow was a bad omen.

“You know I can be really scary if I want to, so nobody bothered me.”

“Yeah, you’re scary all right, prowling among people like a frigging apparition.”

“Sweetie, get to the point, please,” Balder implored his husband.

“Dads, is that God-daddy?” Emmanuel’s voice floated from the background, as if he had just poked his head into the room.

Fabian hadn't heard the door hissing, he couldn't believe they were having this conversation with the doors open.

"Yes, son."

"Can I say hi?"

Such a well-behaved kid. When other teenagers were wreaking havoc about the surface of Earth, Moon and Mars, Emmanuel still asked for permission to do things. Fabian didn't know whether the boy was innately good or all the discipline Balder could wield kept him in check.

"Just for a minute. We're discussing a very private matter here."

"How you doing, God-daddy?" Emmanuel's radiant smile occupied most of the screen as if he were holding the monitor with both hands. "How's Aurora? Are the new recruits any good?"

Someday Emmanuel would make a fine scientist like his parents, but for now, he was obsessed with military stuff. Fabian smiled when Balder pulled his son back onto his lap, and he noticed the boy had chopped his hair like he was about to enter a military school. There was that spark of rebellion. He was pretty sure the Luxes weren't happy about that. Both sported long golden tresses.

"I'm doing fine. Aurora is great as always, and the new batch is from Fort Bamboo."

Emmanuel did everything but bounce on his father's lap, a restless puppy would have been more quiet. "That is so galactic!" Then he stopped, hunching his body. "I miss you, God-daddy."

Fabian sighed, "I miss you too, Em. Now, let me finish my conversation with your dads."

Balder released him, and Emmanuel was about to stand up with the saddest face Fabian had ever seen, when Lucian stopped him, holding his forearm. "Say, Emmanuel, what if we invite your godfather to spend the holiday *month* with us?"

The sad countenance did an about-face, morphing into all teeth and bright eyes, and all that cuteness was aimed at Fabian, "Please?"

Cunning Lucian.

“Sure, baby boy. I’ll go.”

Now Fabian had to find three Christmas presents earlier than he thought. And there was a fourth. He would buy it anyway, hoping for the best.

“I saw the recording.”

“What are you talking about?”

“That day when Chief Trainer Acre came to see you and you finally received him. He’s right; you need to stop denying yourself the opportunity to be happy.”

That had happened so many moons ago; Bruno wasn’t sure why Callum was bringing it up now. Probably Callum had learned about him inquiring over Fabian’s sudden disappearance.

“You watched the whole thing?”

“Don’t worry, I stopped the minute you two started ripping your clothes apart.”

Damn him to Pluto and back.

Callum was his best friend, but Bruno also knew he was a little perv.

“Hey, you’re like my mother; I’d never watch you having sex. Mr. Acre on the other hand...”

The surge of jealousy was overwhelming, “Seriously?”

“You’re the one who doesn’t want him. It’s not my fault the multi-partnered marriage law is so explicit in its damned narrowness that all parties had to be married at the same time. If I didn’t have my ball and chain already, I’d totally find a hunk like that to share with Camilla and live happily ever after.” Callum chuckled, but there was something in his gaze that not even the screen could distort.

“Have you really considered it?”

“Yeah. You know Camilla, she wouldn’t fuck another girl, but she’d love to see a guy having his way with me.”

“How French, you two.”

“Why so repressed, sweet cheeks? It’s not like we’re in 2020. We already have more than fifty years of marriage liberation in this great nation of ours.”

“It’s not that. In all the years we have known each other, you never struck me as the multi-partnered kind, that’s all. Throwing an orgy now and then, yes, but you committed to more than one person? Nope.”

“Then you weren’t paying attention to the signals.” Callum put his hand up. “I see what you’re doing, and you’re not going to distract me. Stop being a chickenshit and do something. Fine men like Acre don’t grow on trees.” Callum made a face, “And cloning doesn’t count.”

“I don’t know how to locate him. He simply vanished.”

“So what’s exactly the point of your best friend being the mayor, if you don’t call him when you need him?”

“I was sabotaging myself?” The same question he had been asking himself for almost a month, and it was driving him crazy.

“Damn right you were. Or did you think he was going to lurk around forever?”

“I don’t know what I thought. But with his absence I realized that I need to leave behind my cowardice.”

“Well, I hope your New Year resolutions included pulling up your big-boy jockstrap and getting your man.”

“Not in so many words.”

“I’m going to give you a tip. He’s back from Mars, and if you don’t want me to stuff a rocket up your tight ass and put it in a trajectory to Space Expansion Commission, you’d better find your way there and grovel like there is no tomorrow, begging his forgiveness.”

“Beg forgiveness. Why would I do that?”

“Shhh.” Callum counted with his fingers. “S.E.C. Rocket. Ass. Go.” His freckled face became a dot on the screen as he hung up.

His big-boy jockstrap...

It was time to face his fears and come clean. If Fabian Acre wasn't able to understand or accept all the things Bruno's heart needed, this was the moment to find out and be done with it. Come what may, it wasn't wise to live with a stinky "what if" following him everywhere for the rest of his days.

"Averin, get me the car, please. I'm going to S.E.C."

Five minutes later, Bruno was on his way to the outskirts of Aurora, where the Space Expansion Commission compound emerged like a technological nightmare on Caswell Grounds.

Smith, his primary bodyguard, sat beside him. "Acre?"

Bruno grimaced. "Yes."

"It is about time, sir."

His shock was a lot bigger than his embarrassment. He didn't say anything, just kept staring at Smith, who shrugged, unapologetic. They spent the rest of the journey in silence.

Since all security agencies did joint exercises, Bruno had a high clearance and was soon observing Fabian from the safe distance of a mezzanine as he drilled thirty officers, his voice crisp and clear.

"There's a misconception about trainers. People think we only teach. Everything you learn from me, I can do ten times better than you'll ever do it." Bruno browsed the men's faces. "This doesn't mean in any way, shape, or form that I'm not expecting the best from each of you. You're here because you demonstrated your capabilities, and when I'm done with you, you'll be excellent."

They all shouted as one, "Yes, sir."

Fabian barked, "Now get out of my face and report to Strategy Decoding."

After another *yes, sir*, the officers exited in a single file, and Fabian caught sight of Bruno resting his hands on the railing above him. The short-lived grin turned into a glare; Fabian about-faced and walked away.

Apparently, Callum was right. There would be groveling and begging involved.

“Sir, you can’t go in there without an appointment.” The tall, well-built man got to his feet and started to round the desk outside Fabian’s office. Then recognition struck him. “Commissioner Ouatu.”

Bruno gave the man a hard nod.

Still the man put himself between Bruno and the door. “I’m sorry, sir. At least let me inform Chief Trainer Acre of your presence.” Smith grabbed him by the lapels of his uniform, ready to fling him out of the way.

“Let the officer make the call, Smith.”

Mentally preparing himself for a long wait, Bruno was surprised when he was allowed in immediately. He practically had to growl the order for Smith to wait outside.

Fabian sat on a large chair, swiveling, digits intertwined and his forefingers in a clapping steeple. “Well, well. What can I do for you, Commissioner?” His whole frame looked bigger than Bruno remembered in the stretched black T-shirt. The stiff bill of the flat-top cap darkened his eyes.

“I needed to see you.” Bruno didn’t know where that came from, it wasn’t what he had rehearsed a thousand times on his way there.

Slowly, Fabian stood up and flatted his hands on the enormous metal desk, his gaze noncommittal, practically bored. “Okay, you saw me, you can go now.” A crooked smirk flourished on his handsome face. “Don’t let the door hit your ass on the way out.”

“No.”

“Is this the part where I fuck you silly in my office and then you run like a wuss?”

“I’m not running.”

“But I still get to fuck you.”

“Yes.”

“So, this is just sex?”

“No. I finally realized only the brave find what they seek. So, I’m going to be brave and accept what you have to offer.”

Fabian arched an eyebrow, looking unconvinced.

Bruno swallowed hard. “The difference between wanting something and getting something is that wanting can be passive, getting never is.”

“Good. Take your clothes off.”

Instead of working in haste, Bruno took his time, folding each garment as he removed it. He did this without looking at Fabian, but he could feel the weight of all the attention poured onto him like a dark storm cloud ready to unleash a million volts of lightning.

“You can get rid of the shoes but leave the sock garters on.” The voice came out rasped, as if Fabian’s throat was suddenly dry and raw.

At last, Bruno turned around to face Fabian. His erection jutted, long and proud. A single bead of clear liquid peeked from the slit, dew on a purple petal.

“Stand easy.” Fabian inspected him for a moment without moving a muscle, just roaming his eyes over Bruno’s naked frame. The caress of those hazel eyes was almost physical and goose bumps sprouted all over as if a cold breeze had just swirled around him. But it was exactly the opposite, because Fabian’s stare was a tongue of pure fire licking him from top to bottom.

With firm steps, Fabian approached him. Circling and nodding, Fabian appraised him. After the second circle, he commented, probably more to himself than to Bruno, “Magnificent.”

Bruno flexed his fists, opening and closing them. Unnerved, he wanted Fabian to touch him. “Oh for fuck’s sake, take me already.”

Fabian chuckled and there was something sinister in that sound. “Mere five minutes and you are snapping?” He *tsked*. “Not fair. How many months did I wait?”

He didn’t have an answer for that because it was true. He had to take it however Fabian chose to mete out his pleasure. “I’m sorry, Fabian. I deserve whatever punishment you see fit. I brought this on myself.”

“That you did, but I’m not your master as you are not mine. I said it before, *Nor Sub Nor Dom*. We’re equals.” A finger traced a horizontal line from shoulder to shoulder, all nerve endings ablaze. “Nevertheless, you earned a reprimand for being so stubborn.”

A kiss landed on the side of his neck, while hands coasted down his flanks until they rested on Bruno's hips. Hot breath tickled his ear. "I missed you."

Bruno moaned, "I'm an idiot."

"Not anymore."

Those big hands cupped his ass, spreading and kneading. Bruno pushed back seeking contact with the muscle wall behind him. The cotton shield was a nightmare; he wanted skin-to-skin. He wanted to be on his knees, imploring forgiveness with his lips and tongue and throat.

His body trembled as a stubbly chin descended, scraping in vertical bliss the outline of his spine. The same scrape circled his ass cheeks and then Fabian's face burrowed between them and pulled his guiche piercing with desperate teeth. And Bruno bent, one hand grabbing the back of Fabian's head to push him deeper, the other stroking his cock, erratic and needy.

Fabian motorboated him, and Bruno couldn't do anything but laugh when the *BRRRRR* became louder.

Plaff.

The spank startled him, and Fabian ordered, "Back on the floor now."

The second his shoulders touched the wooden boards, Fabian had him by the ankles with both hands. "Who the hell still wears sock garters? That is so fucking sexy." He stroked the socks as if memorizing the texture. He bit one calf and put two fingers in Bruno's mouth. "Wet these."

His tongue swirled about the digits, anticipation making the act raunchier than it was meant to be. The possessiveness pouring from Fabian's eyes was an aphrodisiac, a primal call. Those gems never lost focus as the fingers found their way into Bruno's hole, their gazes colliding in tune with the furious thrusting.

Never breaking eye contact, Fabian settled legs over his shoulders, lowered his body and took Bruno's dick in hand, the rhythm of his digital battering steady and continuous. Before engulfing the burning pole, with a wicked grin and a wink Fabian commanded, "Don't hold back, babe, gimme everything you got."

And he got it all.

Incessantly.

For the next thirty-seven days.

Until...

“*Uff*, that was...” Bruno felt the flood of Fabian’s completion slowly ease out of him.

“Best Valentine post-dinner fuck ever?” Fabian panted and plopped beside Bruno. He whooped, his breathing ragged. “Baby, I don’t know how you do it. Fuck me and then let me fuck you like that, it’s just...”

“Have you ever been in a threesome?”

“Yes. You?”

“No.” He lied. He couldn’t come out with the truth just yet. “But it’s something that always intrigued me.”

“You know I love you, right?” Fabian’s eyes were big and clear.

“Yes, I do.”

“I always thought I would end up in a three-way relationship. Always felt my heart was too big for just one man.” Fabian peered at Bruno expectantly.

Bruno averted his eyes for a moment. When he returned his gaze, everything in Fabian’s countenance spoke of a confession turned into a costly mistake. Fabian added, “I’ve never contemplated cheating on you. If you hadn’t brought this up, I would have eventually, because it is something deep within me.”

Eyes watering, Bruno didn’t have words.

“Did I offend you with this declaration?”

“I’ve got to be absolutely honest with you.” Bruno took a deep breath, and Fabian’s expression was the equivalent of *Oh mercy, here it comes...* “I always felt the same way. I’m still a big chickenshit-slash-wuss. I should have said something earlier, but every time I spoke about it before...”

All his concerns disappeared with Fabian’s next words, merriment permeating them, “The heart wants what the heart wants, and that’s exactly a nice spit roast.”

Carried by the mirth emanating from Fabian, Bruno commented casually, “Well, that explains why ninety percent of the time the one doing the topping ends with a dildo or something else up his ass.” Bruno grinned and Fabian laughed hard, jumping from the bed and running to the bathroom because, apparently, he’d peed himself a little.

Following the chief trainer, Bruno hugged him from behind, “Oh babe, this will only make us stronger.”

Recuperated, Fabian turned and returned the embrace, “Yes, Bruno. From now on we will always speak what’s in our hearts.”

“If it comes, it comes.”

“Of course, love. When the time is right, we’ll find him.”

“I say we call an escort to start practicing.”

“My naughty Bruno, you’re amazing.”

“And you’re a dream come true.”

PART TWO

Aurora City – Novel California – Year 2088

Folsom Fair – 104th Anniversary

“Hi God-daddy. Hi, Uncle Bruno.”

“Hey kiddo, what are you doing here?” The white leather pants and white harness framed Emmanuel’s swimmer’s build perfectly. Fabian’s paternal instincts rose abruptly. At nineteen, Emmanuel was barely old enough to be at the fair. “Just because you live on campus and not under my roof anymore doesn’t mean you can parade around like this.” He didn’t like the long hair covering Emmanuel’s left eye either, still, he had to admit those purple highlights looked nice like that.

Emmanuel looked them both up and down, making a deliberate stop at their heads since they had cut their hair really short after he moved away. “God-daddy. I might be adopted, but the kinky gene comes from two flanks, my dads’ and yours, so deal with it.” He ended with an arched eyebrow and a twisted mouth.

“Don’t get all uppity with me, or I’ll call that burly man over there to give you a well-deserved paddling.” Fabian gave a murderous glance to Bruno, who was about to snicker.

After a second of studying the man, Emmanuel shuddered. “No, thank you. There are enough cheeks on display here to be silly and put mine in jeopardy.”

Why did the kid have to be so cheeky?

“Well, this is no place to be by yourself anyway,” Bruno interjected, putting a hand on Emmanuel’s upper arm. “Stay with us.”

“Actually, I’m supposed to meet my friend Topher. He’s been in the scene for a while, so he knows the ropes.” Emmanuel smiled and winked.

Suppressing a groan, Fabian grated out, “How old is this Topher? How did you meet him? Is he your lover?”

“Sweet ashes of Madonna, hold your rockets, God-daddy. Twenty-five. Philosophy class. And no. We’re just good friends—he’s not even my type.”

But Emmanuel did that semi eye-roll that was his tell when he was uttering a half truth.

“And what is your type, doll?” Bruno asked, failing miserably to stifle his chuckle.

“A man without tattoos.” He eyed Fabian. “No offense, God-daddy. Topher has this huge tattoo with skulls over his chest. He looks like a frigging holographic billboard.”

Fabian wasn't completely convinced. Emmanuel was hiding something, and how had he seen the damned tattoo? Fabian would wait until the so-called friend appeared and then hammer him with questions.

“Anyways, he's gonna call me when he gets here. I came early because I was too excited.”

“That I see. C'mon, let's walk around. Your uncle's performance is in two hours.” Fabian would play nice god-daddy until that sneaky *friend* appeared.

“Plenty of time to be naughty.” Emmanuel rubbed his hands, ready for mischief.

The kid was adorable but had too much energy, more than a normal nineteen-year-old ought to have. Well, Fabian shouldn't grumble about it; it took them almost two years to bring his godson out of his shell after the debacle with the two Mr. Luxes. Because of that, they allowed Emmanuel certain liberties but this...

They wandered around for a while, enjoying the constant hum of paddling and whipping in open booths, the thumping loud music, the laughter intertwined with moans and groans. Two overly-tattooed and extremely pierced men with platinum Mohawks and leather kilts caressed Emmanuel's shoulders as he walked between them. The boy didn't recoil, but Fabian noticed his discomfort, and he was about to say something when Bruno stopped him, “Hey, Mama Bear, he put himself here and wants to be all adult and proud, let him deal with it.”

“But—he...” Fabian sputtered.

“You're not going to be around him always.” Bruno grabbed Fabian's chin and turned it toward Emmanuel, a couple of paces ahead of them. “You see?”

He already raised one kilt and spanked the insolent.”

Effectively, the other one was already bending and arching his ass to receive Emmanuel’s hand too. A couple of people stopped to record them. Fabian didn’t know whether to be proud or grab his godson by the ear and leave the frigging fair. He couldn’t believe his sweet boy was spanking two guys simultaneously in the middle of a crowded street.

Emmanuel was gathering an audience.

Bruno closed Fabian’s mouth with a push of fingers and blurted as if reading his thoughts, “Seriously? Where do you think you are, the Easter-Vernal Parade? I don’t see any furry bunnies or floats with fairies and pixies. Get a grip and let the boy be.”

Fabian was a fan of a good spanking as much as the next person in the fair. But there was something truly wrong about seeing those guys pushing their asses out, their backs perfectly concave and their kilts hanging limply from their hips. And Emmanuel, who looked like a fallen angel (all in white), reddening those skinny cheeks.

A final *plaff* triggered a round of applause from those assembled, and Emmanuel took a bow and sent his spankees on their way, after French-kissing the heck out of both while stroking their cocks. Fabian was speechless—*appalled* couldn’t begin to describe the turmoil inside him.

“Do you think he hacked the house computer and watched us have sex? There is something very familiar in his stroking technique,” Bruno murmured in Fabian’s ear, squeezing his leather-clad ass.

“You’re an evil, evil uncle,” Fabian growled and moved to kiss Bruno, not quite a peck, neither a full saliva-exchange moment.

“And you are a silly, silly godfather,” Bruno pronounced when they separated.

Emmanuel came to them with an accusatory look on his face, as if it was their fault he had an impromptu spanking session in public.

“Excellent show, baby boy.” Bruno hugged Emmanuel. “I thought you didn’t like tattoos.”

Fucking Bruno, always encouraging the imp.

“I don’t.”

“Then what was that?” Fabian ran a hand over his face. Emmanuel would be the end of him.

“Fun, God-daddy. Just fun.”

This year, the Opera Leather Pack was doing an adaptation of *The Phantom of the Opera*, using Ken Hill’s original version, including the modern score by Ian Armit—not the overused Andrew Lloyd Webber version. Entitled HIDDEN, the costumes were on the futuristic side, with chromed leather and lots of copper chains and boots. They started with “Welcome Sir, I’m So Delighted”, verbatim title of the original song, continued with “No He Did Not”, a new incarnation of “How Dare She”. Then it was time for Bruno to enter in the middle of “Pain Dooms Me”, using only three words of the original title “To Pain My Heart Selfishly Dooms Me”. The crowd went wild as Bruno hit the highest notes at the end of the song.

“He’s so good, God-daddy. I would give anything to have talent like that.”

“Your talent is your brain, Em. I’ve seen what you write, and you’re amazing.” Fabian threw his arm around his godson’s shoulder and hugged him close. “One day you’ll be famous.”

“Like my dads?”

Fabian barely heard Emmanuel’s words, muffled by the cheering around them since Bruno was in the middle of the OLP’s version of “Ah, Do I Hear My Lover’s Voice?”, called “When He Speaks”. Still, he grasped the pain in those grey eyes. “You’ll always be their son, but you have your own merits. It was a hard decision, but you followed your heart and that’s what matters. As stubborn as they are, they love you, and this situation will come to an end. I promise you.”

He might not agree with Emmanuel’s current attitude, but he was still proud of him for being true to himself. He hadn’t wanted to be a scientist or have anything to do with space exploration, and, thus he stood his ground. Lamentably, he was forced to flee to Earth to save his hide, but better being miserable in just one aspect of your life (not having your parents’ support anymore), than living a lie (being something you were not meant to be).

Emmanuel nodded and gave him a tentative smile.

“Aha! There you are.” A young-looking man, with glossy black hair and a bandana covered in silver coins wrapped around his neck, grabbed Emmanuel by the waist, pulling him away from Fabian’s embrace. The intruder chortled and gave Emmanuel a resounding peck on the lips. “I’ve been looking for you all over!”

Fabian clenched and unclenched his fists. He noticed some designs and color peeking from under the scarf over nice defined pectorals. Tanned, but in a manner that suggested that it was more from heritage than sun exposure, the caramel complexion was alluring. A little shorter than Emmanuel, the man would probably reach just above Fabian’s shoulder.

Then Fabian realized this was probably Emmanuel’s instigator-slash-lover-slash-friend. He cleared his throat. Yanked from their little world, both youngsters looked at him. A sheepish grimace surged from Emmanuel. “Hey God-daddy, this is my friend Christopher Hunter.”

With his most feral countenance, Fabian directed all his attention to the newcomer but didn’t extend his hand.

Unfazed, Christopher offered his gloved hand. “My, my. You call me Topher, and I’ll call you Daddy.” He winked; a rakish smirk decorated his handsome face.

It’d have been rude not to shake the young hand, so he grabbed (ready to break) it and understood what fathers through centuries had suffered when meeting the men fucking their daughters, or in this case, son. “Fabian Acre. Security Chief of S.E.C.”

Bruno hit an insanely high note, closing “A Sharp Whipping”, a piece that in the original opera didn’t have lyrics, but that they had expanded and developed for the closing moment. The spectators cheered and applauded, a deafening roar. Fabian and Christopher stood there, their hands still linked and with a weird current moving between them. Fabian held what he was sure looked like murder in his eyes, Christopher sporting an “I dare you to act on those instincts” smug grin.

Fabian felt a well-known caress over his body and turned to look at Bruno on the stage.

And what he saw on Bruno's face was scary and exhilarating at once.

Pulling Christopher toward him, Fabian banded his arms over the boy's taut muscular body, and kissed him violently. His harsh action was rewarded with the equal fervor of an expert tongue.

It was Emmanuel's turn to clear his throat. "Ahem. Good thing Topher and I are not lovers."

Bright eyes, deep like dark chocolate and surrounded by thick lashes stared at Fabian. And Christopher's thoroughly-kissed full lips uttered two simple words. "Fuck yeah."

BANG.

Bruno had been struck by something he couldn't quite define. The young man shaking Fabian's hand left him speechless. He was pretty in a way that was masculine and innocent and teasing, all wrapped in a tight body (at least the upper part). Shirtless and with somewhat baggy jeans, the youngster defied the tacit dress code of the fair. Suspenders hung from his waist around him instead of chains. He wore fingerless dark gloves, and combat boots were his only concession to the leather scene.

The glint in Fabian's eyes told Bruno many things in a flash, and when Fabian pressed the boy's body against his and ravaged his mouth, Bruno's dick saluted firmly without delay.

A little lightheaded, Bruno moved backstage and sat, fighting the tightness in his chest.

"Are you all right? You're a bit pale." Hans rested a hand on Bruno's shoulder. "Want a bottle of water?"

Love had changed *Bitching, Drama Queen Hans* into *Concerned, Polite Hans*, and Bruno was still a tiny bit disoriented around this new version of his usual on-stage lover. "I'm fine, Hans. Just need a moment to assimilate something."

"What, Fabian kissing that kid?"

"You saw it?"

“I’m surprised it wasn’t broadcasted on every holographic billboard around the fair.”

“It’s not what you think.”

“Your lover shouldn’t be kissing other men. Not in private and surely not in public.”

That sounded more like the old Hans. Bruno didn’t have time to give him explanations. He needed to get out of his costume and find out who that man was. He saw Emmanuel hovering around them; perhaps it was the friend he had been waiting for. And wouldn’t that be just... complicated.

“I’m going to change, Hans.” Bruno stood up. “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome. If you need anything, you know where to find me.” Hans gave him a reassuring smile.

Yeah, that was weirder than Fabian kissing another man in public. What Hans didn’t know was that this wasn’t a rare occurrence. In all their years together, he and Fabian had kissed and fucked many men together. Still, none had wrung such a forceful reaction.

With a nod, Bruno smiled and walked away. Strolling around the fair in tight chrome shorts and copper mesh tank was out of the question, but briefly he considered just going like that and changing later on. He didn’t know where he would be later on so it was better to be prepared.

He donned his leather pants, his erection unhelpful. His nipples were hard, and the ghost weight of the ring on his right one was a delicious reminder of how much Fabian loved that little metal circle.

Focus, Bruno, focus. You can’t walk around sporting wood. It’s not 2014, but in a year you’ll start campaigning to be mayor of Aurora. A bit of decorum goes a long way.

The white belt, a gift from Emmanuel for Father’s Day, was a nice contrast to his black pants and boots. Bruno considered wearing his T-shirt for a while, but his harness looked too damned good to have it hidden; he adjusted one of its buckles, clasped on wristbands, and stuffed the T-shirt in his back pocket. A quick look in the mirror—his sideburns transitioned to his designer stubble perfectly, so he was ready (not the exact word but it sufficed) to face the

young man making his stomach flutter like only one other man had, four years ago.

“Where is he?” Bruno found Fabian loitering close to a group of port-potties. “Did he leave the fair already?”

Fabian produced a deliberately sensual smile. “He’ll be back.”

“What’s his name?” Bruno exhaled a breath he didn’t know he was holding.

Like something delicious, Fabian murmured, “Christopher.”

Bruno remembered Emmanuel had mentioned a Topher. “Emmanuel’s friend?”

“Yeah. He told me to call him Topher, so he can call me Daddy.”

“That was straightforward.” And dread surged inside Bruno. What if the boy only wanted a roll in the metaphorical hay?

One of the loos became available. The aviators found their way to the top of the Security Chief’s head. “I’ll be right back.”

Fabian left him standing there and thinking a thousand stupid things. Foremost, why couldn’t this be just another swift encounter and move on? The answer came like a resounding slap. He was tired. Tired of thinking that one-night stands could turn into something deeper, when, each time, the third man simply vanished after satisfying his itch.

There was a light in Topher calling him. The same way Fabian’s confidence had pulled him like a black hole. And once again, he was scared, stupidly and annoyingly afraid of putting his heart in the wrong hands. They both knew they had each other; nevertheless, they also needed that third person to make them complete.

After wiping his hands with a wet tissue, Fabian did a three-pointer in a nearby trashcan. “What’s wrong, babe?” He put his hands on Bruno’s flanks, thumbs stroking him softly.

His forehead touched Fabian’s. “Who is this man? I feel exactly the same way I felt the first time I saw you. And just like that time, I’m anxious and confused.”

“Hey,” Fabian grabbed his chin and forced Bruno to look him in the eye. “Do you know how many people can say they had a ‘love at first sight’ experience twice?” His voice was grave, but a pinch of mirth lingered there too.

“You evil, evil man.” Bruno narrowed his eyes. “You too?”

A moving billboard, Fabian’s archenemy, hovered dangerously in their direction. *KATE’s Cuisine: Spicy. Kinky. What else do you need?* Fabian poked the thing to send it away, but as if Fabian’s blood were gravity and the billboards meteors in a collision course, two more were close behind.

Silvertongue Lia B. Dominating words since 2011

Viv Saints Inc. Catering for the not so Saintly

“You’ve got to tell Callum to ban this pest from the fair.” Fabian’s whole body exuded his “ready to kick shit” mode.

Maybe they had installed some danger sensors in the pesky devices because it scurried away before Fabian could destroy it. “I never heard anyone else complaining about them.” Bruno chuckled, forgetting for a moment his predicament. “You, evil mister, were saying it was love at first sight for you too.”

Fabian growled, narrowed eyes following his departed nemesis. “Nah. The first time I lay eyes on him, all I wanted to do was punch him.”

Bruno studied Fabian’s face, trying to decipher if he was joking. He wasn’t. “Are you serious?”

“Uh-huh, he snatched Emmanuel from my arms when I was consoling him and kissed him on the mouth. Not like I kissed him, it was a quick peck but I didn’t like it anyway.”

A groan escaped Bruno, “Are they lovers?”

Yes, the guy is trouble.

“According to Em no, and Topher was too enthusiastic about meeting you to seem otherwise. He was praising your voice and your looks and how hot it’d be to have his tongue down your throat.”

A politician never blushed, but Bruno felt fire on his cheek. “His exact words?”

“He was a teensy bit more graphic.”

“Sweet Triad!”

“If we are lucky, yes.”

After a brief meeting, Topher scurried away with Emmanuel to an underground party on the other side of the river, close to Circular Park Three. Of course, the little rascal didn't go without first kissing the living daylights out of Bruno while squeezing Fabian's cock and balls and leaving both men like horny teenagers without privacy to rein in their hormones.

Their lovemaking that night was ferocious, each trying to multiply the other so they could fill the hopeful space the troublemaker had left within them.

Fabian's following day had been a disaster. A group of Moon miners had decided that the S.E.C. shouldn't oversee them anymore and caused a riot and the destruction of an insane amount of government property and two of his guards were injured. Five high-level meetings later, he arrived at their Russia Avenue apartment to find Bruno in a state of depression more appropriate to a national catastrophe than to a dinner with a cute guy.

“What's going on?”

“His blood pressure has been a rollercoaster since he arrived,” the house computer informed him with a nip of sarcasm that wasn't supposed to be there.

Their walk-in closet was a wreck, as if the garments had been fighting among themselves. “Bruno, answer me? I'm pretty sure you weren't like this the first time you came here for dinner.”

Funny how they had never talked about the moments prior to their first real encounter, the one that ended with great sex and an idiotic escape by Bruno the next morning.

Bruno turned to look at him, throwing another shirt on the floor. “What if he thinks we're old men?”

“That’s your concern, making the wrong age-appropriate fashion statement?”

“No,” Bruno shrugged. “I don’t know, maybe…”

“We both were shirtless yesterday. And his erection was indeed happy to see us.”

“But you know how kids are.”

“First of all, there’s no kid in this equation. He’s a grown-ass man. You’re not even old enough to be his father, unless you’ve begotten a child when you were twelve.”

“I’m a fucking mess.”

“Yep.” Fabian went to the floor where Bruno lay after slowly sliding with a deep sigh. “But you’re my mess, and I love you.” He pulled them both up from the floor. “C’mon, we have a hottie to conquer.”

They arrived at Tamarin, a Eurasian restaurant between two high-end boutiques on 25 North and Nippon East. Topher had made the reservations and was handling all the details, to compensate for his hasty departure from the fair. They found him at the bar, sipping something purple and bubbly. His smile, when he saw them, could have outshone the moon with its intensity.

Topher set the tall glass on the bar and stood to greet them. “Hello, you two!” He kissed both of them on both cheeks. “No PDAs tonight. Later perhaps,” he chortled with a flirty wink. He gave a signal to a hostess, and she came to guide them to their table.

“That was quick,” Bruno commented as they sat.

“The table was waiting for your arrival. My father used to say that you have to have at least one restaurant where you’re known before you reach thirty.”

“Wise man your father. Mine is Peccado on Quattro West,” Fabian offered.

“You said ‘used’. Is your father gone?” Bruno’s concern was obvious, and Fabian forced himself to remain impassive, because he knew where his countertenor’s mind was heading: the boy is looking to replace his father.

“Oh, yes. Both my parents are gone. They died two years ago, that’s why I started college so late. I had to take care of them for many years.”

There was nothing bitter or sad about the way Topher gave the information. It was a simple detailing of facts. That could be a good thing or a bad thing, Fabian wasn't sure which yet.

“Very sorry for your loss,” Bruno patted Topher's hand across the table.

With a nod, Topher smiled at both. “They were sick for a long time, so I prepared myself for the inevitable. It wasn't a surprise.” Fabian noticed how Topher squeezed Bruno's hand in return and added cheerily. “What I want to know is, what's your deal?”

“There's no deal as it is. We want to know you and see what happens.” Fabian cocked his head.

Topher cocked his head in the opposite direction and smirked. “Intimately?”

“If possible. The attraction is obvious, so there's no need for games.” Fabian was proud of Bruno for sounding so sure when he knew his lover was a heap of nerves.

“No psychological games.” Topher held his hand up as if voicing an oath. “Nonetheless, I hope we can have some multi-limbs games, you know... to discover and learn.”

If he had been drinking something, Fabian would have sputtered it, because Topher sounded just like him. He stole a glance at Bruno, who apparently was arriving to the same conclusion.

This's gonna be fun.

They entered Topher's apartment in a rabid mass of limbs, teeth, and mouths.

“Welcome Christopher... and guests?” The house computer had the whimsical voice of a woman used to telling bedtime stories. Obviously, since they were intertwined like a mythological punishment, the computer took a second to identify separate individuals.

Any other time, Bruno would have been intrigued by the evocative tone. However, as busy as his tongue was parrying with Fabian's and Topher's to let his mind process such details, it didn't escape him.

Topher came up for air. "What happened with taking it slow?"

"No one said such a thing." Fabian squeezed both their asses, if the little yelp wrung from Topher was any indication of what he was doing with his other hand.

Extricating himself, Topher sobered up. "Computer, lower the temperature four degrees. This is going to get awfully hot in here."

"At once," the computer chimed.

He walked toward the center of the living space, sure they would follow. He turned around and faced them, addressing them with a firm voice, even after three bottles of Veuve Clicquot. "Bruno, Fabian, I never bring men home. You two are outstanding citizens of Aurora, and as such, I expect you to behave accordingly."

"Yes, sir," Fabian offered him a mocking salute. "Who's going to his knees first?"

That was a good question if there was any.

"Since I'm your host, that will be my pleasure." Topher did a "come on" motion with both hands. As they reached him, he grabbed both by the back of their necks, hard. "Just one thing. We met at Folsom Fair, but you're not my masters, and I'm considering *not* being yours. Are we clear?"

Bruno nipped that plump lower lip, "*Nor Sub Nor Dom.*"

"Perfect."

Their three-way kiss was fierce, and (after a glorious eternity) Bruno found his fingers brushing Fabian's while they explored everything they could touch on Topher as he descended, opening their flies. Two weapons sprang out, vying for those full lips' attention.

Topher gave an open-mouthed peck to the underside of one, then the other, and Bruno and Fabian groaned. The liquid emanating from both slits was used to rub the heads against one another until the friction was unbearable. And

then, when Bruno's vision was almost blurred; Topher started to alternate the sucking of their shafts, his expert hands easily accompanying his mouth: stroking, pulling, twisting.

"Isn't he beautiful?" Fabian asked breathlessly, giving Bruno's cheek a soft caress.

It was hard to tear his eyes away from that mischievous face below. "Yes."

Bruno was close to his release, and Fabian had all the same symptoms. He was dying to find out how his come would look all over Topher's face. But that wasn't to happen.

"Your turn, Daddies." Topher gave some smooches to their balls before standing up and getting rid of his long-sleeved, muscle-hugging shirt in one swift motion. "This bad boy needs some attention." Bruno and Fabian hurried to their knees, and he whipped out his large and heavy dick, tapping their mouths with it, as if it were a scepter or a wicked pacifier.

The sparkle in Fabian's ever-changing eyes was mesmerizing as their mouths wet the length of Topher's shaft in perfect synchronicity until lips touched, and their tongues explored the abundant foreskin.

This wasn't the first man they had shared, but there was something different about the situation. Perhaps, it was the possessive way Topher stroked their close-shaved heads. Perhaps, it was his encouraging murmurs in the manner you pet precious hounds that pleased you greatly. Something in his demeanor was absolutely in tune with them beyond the mere physical.

Fabian took Topher's cock in hand, peeling the foreskin back and offering the silky member, so Bruno could take a deep plunge. The texture and the width assaulted Bruno, and he felt the urgent need to have Fabian behind him, pounding away.

His lover was there with Bruno. "Soon, babe, soon."

"C'mon, Daddy. I need your throat around my cock." Topher guided Bruno to take more, to go deeper, and Fabian helped, tweaking his nipples, kneading his chest.

Bruno wanted to close his eyes and abandon himself to all the sensations battering him, the fragrance of Topher's copious bush, his sure grasp behind

Bruno's head, Fabian's wandering hands, caressing his balls, teasing his hole. Yet, Bruno was enthralled, enslaved to the attention pouring from those dark eyes, looming over him, taking possession of both.

“Neither of you is coming until I say so.” Topher released his hold on Bruno and aimed his glistening cock at Fabian. “Your turn, Daddy. Suck me good. I want to see my semen covering you both, taste it from your lips and share it with you.”

The growl escaping from Fabian was primal and feral. A sound Bruno knew well, signaling Fabian's eagerness to devour, to conquer. And he saw how the chunky pole disappeared into that luscious mouth; how those lips wrapped around the caramel skin until they grazed ebony curls.

“Untie my boots.” Topher commanded, his tone not completely dominant but extremely controlled.

Stealing licks and tiny sucks, Bruno nurtured Fabian's throbbing and leaking dick while he unlaced Topher's combat boots. His position, with his pants around his thighs, his ass in the air and exposed, didn't go unnoticed. He heard an appreciative *mmm* followed by a wet finger circling and stroking his hole. He arched his back to allow better access, to indicate his approval; sure it was Topher's digit since Fabian's hands were busy over their new lover, cupping balls, outlining muscles, mapping that undiscovered geography.

However, his entrance was never breached because he was suddenly yanked upward and found his face mashed against Fabian's, and Topher howled, his body shaking. Jet after jet of creamy seed landed on their chins, lips and cheeks, its consistency glorious and welcome.

Even in the throes of ecstasy, when most people looked wounded and lost, Topher still retained a measured dignity; a savage beauty enhanced by his scrunched nose, clenched eyelids and rounded lips. Opening his eyes, he fell to his knees and lapped at their faces, gathering his essence until nothing was left.

Topher made them taste him once again; this time, from his own lips as they shared kisses that were wicked and sublime at the same time.

When their mouths were swollen and tender, Topher pulled himself just distant enough to encompass both in his roguish gaze and smirked, “Now,

Daddies. I'm going to fuck you 'til your orgasms make you forget your names but not mine."

And he did.

Several times.

At midnight, Fabian and Bruno were back in their limo, their identities lost forever.

"This is serious."

"Now you understand why I was so conflicted."

"Conflict can't begin to describe this mess."

"What are we going to do?"

"We're gonna take the bull by the horns and have our way with him."

Bruno chuckled, "I thought he was a different kind of animal."

"Yeah, that little bunny rabbit turned out to be a mongoose." Fabian shook his head. It had been four days and his hole couldn't stop twitching every time Topher was mentioned.

"Besides, don't you think it's weird he uses his mother's voice for the house computer?"

"Weird would be Fran Drescher or Pee-Wee Herman. His mother had a very soothing voice. I understand why he does it. We have bigger complications than his taste in voices."

"He's not even on Earth to help us figure out this mess."

Fabian wasn't happy with Topher as part of a mission near the border of the Moon's dark side thanks to his internship with one of the biggest lunar developers. Just their luck to meet a future geologist on his way off-planet, and he had to land precisely not that many clicks away from the miners' unrest. "I should have stopped them. I'm positive Sunny and her Board of Directors would have listened if I told them to abort the expedition."

"You cannot use your connections to stop every private lunar mission."

"Not *every*, just this one. We haven't had the chance to discover him." Fabian sighed.

“He sure mapped us right.”

The kid had fucked them like only they could fuck each other. As if he knew their surfaces by heart, every nook, every crevice, each nerve ending. Yes, Topher lived at Tarot Towers, the epicenter of all magical workers in Aurora (card readers, mediums, animists), but that didn't mean the boy had some supernatural power. He was just a natural-born sex god.

“That he did, and I can't wait to have my go at charting his body.”

They had been so overwhelmed by the expert maneuvers that they didn't have the chance to return the favor. If blindfolded, Fabian could have sworn there was a fourth man in the room with them. Topher was dominant in such a subtle way that they only realized his cock had been the only one inside them all along when they were finally sitting in the limo, staring at each other, sated and perplexed.

“I know this is what we have been searching for, but...” Bruno hesitated, crossing his arms over his chest. A pose so uncommon, Fabian arched an eyebrow.

“You don't wanna see him again?”

“In all honesty, I'd rather not. Once was enough for feeling this out of sorts. No need for another Fabian Fright.”

Fabian grabbed Bruno's forearms and uncrossed them. He pulled his man against his chest, murmuring in his ear, “We can call it the Mongoose Enigma.”

“Sounds like something Emmanuel would write.”

This time they laughed aloud and kissed vehemently afterward.

“Why not accept what Fate is offering?” Fabian traced Bruno's lower lip with his thumb.

“Are you going to give me another speech like the one when you stormed into my office?”

“Nah. You took too long to react to that one. I'm just gonna fuck you senseless until you see the wisdom of letting Topher enter our lives.”

Bruno shuddered in Fabian's arms. “Not fair. You know all my weak spots.”

“As you do mine. OUCH.” Fabian jumped in response to Bruno’s ass-pinching.

“Fabian, Bruno, you have a video call from Christopher Hunter,” The house computer announced. “And the young man looks distressed.”

After glancing at each other, they ran into the studio. An odd grimace decorated Topher’s features, but it changed as soon as he saw them. He smiled, and Fabian felt Bruno’s blunt nails digging into his hand.

“Hey, Daddies!” Topher wore a yellow overall, Sunny’s trademark, and it made his face glow beautifully. “This trip has been a ginormous pile of shit. My only consolation is looking forward to seeing you again.” He turned into a puppy asking for a treat. “Because I’m gonna see you again, right?”

“Sure,” Bruno said, and Fabian knew he would end with crescent marks on the back of his left hand.

“What has been so crappy, boy?” Fabian kept a pleasant face to soothe Topher.

Topher’s eyebrow hiked up, in an arch, and Fabian understood. He didn’t like being called “boy”.

“C’mon, Topher.”

“For starters, the eleven hours on the shuttle were utter crap because I was strapped next to the chattiest person on three planets. After that, we’ve been cooped up in the compound thanks to the frigging miners deciding to pursue some kind of independence at the wrong moment.”

“There must be something you can do not to go crazy.”

“Well, a week ago, I’d have fucked every willing being, but now... my body is besieged by the memories of your skin under my touch, the way you tasted, the sounds you made while I was inside you.”

Sweet Mother of Mercy, the boy was giving Fabian a rotund hard-on. The lump in his throat made an audible sound as he swallowed it. “You want me to send for you?”

“Fabian,” Bruno warned.

“What, love? Topher is bored and the situation over there is dangerous. We don’t want anything happening to him.”

“Of course not, but it’s his job.”

“He’s an intern, not an indentured slave.”

“Bruno, Fabian.” Topher’s voice was firm, and they both turned to him. “You don’t need to argue. I can ask to be sent home. There’s a clause where, if I feel threatened in any way, they’ll return me to Earth immediately.”

“You do that and come straight to us.” Fabian winked. His hard-on—and his hole—approved the suggestion.

But Topher’s gaze landed on Bruno. “Are you okay with this? You seem reticent, and I don’t want to impose my presence on you.”

“Are you playing us?”

The young countenance became granite. “We agreed on no head games. You can’t trust someone unless you try first. This is both ways. How do I know I’m not putting myself in a vulnerable position for nothing?”

“There has never been anything vulnerable about you,” Bruno growled.

“Are we talking about sex? Because if that’s your problem, you can fuck me six ways to Sunday next time we see each other.” However that invitation was not delivered with a saucy smirk or an enticing smile; it was professed like a threatening dare.

“What we want is more than just your body.”

“Hey I’m fine with his body.” Fabian held his hands up in surrender. “I’m not in a rush to pick his brain. I know he’s smart, though—geology is not an easy thing.”

“Bruno, I opened myself to you at Tamarin. This is not a movie where you can infer character in a couple of hours. We need to do that day by day, intimately and otherwise.”

That was a wisdom slap if Fabian knew any. “Love, we all deserve the opportunity. Nothing is set in stone. If it doesn’t work, it doesn’t, but a ‘what if’ is a heavy burden.”

Bruno nodded solemnly. “Come to us, Topher.”

Almost a month of limited heavy petting had left Bruno wanting to smash his head against the walls, because after all, it had been his idea. Luckily for him, Halloween (Topher's favorite holiday) was tonight on a Sunday, so Bruno had sent his boys away while he prepared dinner. He hoped all his preparations led to dicks destroying holes. It was really annoying to see little phallic birds flying and spewing around him twenty-four-seven due to his rampant horniness.

On the other hand, it had been good to erode his barriers. Barriers he had thought forgotten once Fabian entered his life. A little part of that scaredy chickenshit had remained, and it was time to let it go completely. And to celebrate that joyful moment, carnal gratification was the order of the day.

Everything on the menu indicated his purpose, from the pork loins to the Persian hot rice to the bacon-chocolate soufflé. If they didn't get the hint, Bruno would simply grab his dick and shove it in someone's mouth without requesting permission or feeling remorse afterward.

"Honey, we're home." Fabian's voice wafted from the entrance.

"Welcome Fabian and Christopher. Topher your vitals are a little high. Would you like some valerian tablets?"

To celebrate the Halloween weekend, the house computer's voice was downright macabre. Bruno could easily visualize the stiff butler (who invariably committed the crime) still haunting the manor in penance. It was hilarious, but he had a vitals alert in front of him. "What's going on?"

"Oh, not much." Fabian did a dismissive gesture as they walked in. "We were with Emmanuel and the Novel California Tribune offered him a permanent position."

"Yeah, he thought he'd only intern there." Topher was as excited as if he were the one getting the job. "And now he's ecstatic thinking of all the opportunities this will bring."

"That's awesome," Bruno hugged a still thrumming Topher. "Go freshen up, because dinner will be ready in thirty minutes." He slapped the tight rump to send him on his way, something that didn't help with his current state of

need. “Computer, Christopher will be fine as soon as he eats something. Just let us know if his vitals continue with anomalies after that.”

“As you wish, Bruno.” The voice was only missing the “mwahaha” at the end.

“So what, were you chopping up a virgin for our Halloween feast?”

“I got a lot of wood that needs chopping.”

“You were the one who put us in quarantine.” Fabian pinched his nipple pulling just enough to make Bruno moan.

“Hey, I hear moaning. Don’t start anything without me!” Topher yelled from the bedroom.

“I swear that kid has bionic hearing.”

“No he doesn’t. You’re simply too loud.”

Bruno swallowed hard. “Well, I expect a lot of moaning and groaning and grunting and swearing later on.”

“You’re lifting the ban on penetration?” Fabian smirk was so hot, Bruno’s dick responded instantly.

“Indeed.”

“Hmm, it is about time. Need you so much. I can’t wait to see your cock deep inside Topher, and his lips wrapped around mine as he sways between us.”

An image like that would make any sane human being forget about dinner and pull his lover to the bedroom at once. However, Bruno still had a few hours of control left in him. He sighed and pointed behind him with his thumb. “Give that monolith a cold shower. First food... then dicks, balls, and holes.”

“You’re an evil, evil man,” Fabian grunted as he left.

“I learned from the best.”

“I heard that.”

Forty-five minutes later, they’d degusted what Bruno had prepared with the greatest care, hoping for a fleshy reward.

Topher popped a dissolving slice of apricot from the pork loins into his mouth. “Bruno, this is excellent. You’ve outdone yourself.” Of late, Topher

only called Bruno “Daddy” when they were making out (or grabbing body parts).

He would surely give Topher a reason to call him Daddy later.

It had been sheer torture resisting the pull of that enticing skin, sporting a natural smoothness and absence of hair that most people achieved through money and painful procedures. Bruno enjoyed the texture of Topher’s soft pubic curls. But he was ready to give a thoroughly close inspection to the dark tuft of hair peeking from between his taut muscular cheeks; a furry little thing waiting to be trapped and consumed and still proclaiming the tight treasure in its midst.

And if those flowery skulls on Topher’s chest weren’t permanent, they would have disappeared weeks ago with all the licking happening to them. Bruno needed more than skulls and nipples and ears and lips.

“Thank you. I thought pork loins would give you an indication of how piggish we all should be later.”

“I heard so.” Topher made clear he was adjusting his erection. Topher wore a half-buttoned, sleeveless white shirt, a leather harness peeking petulantly from the pristine fabric. Synthetic denim cut-offs and his combat boots completed his outfit.

Bruno felt like a moron because he was dressed for a formal dinner. He was sure the other two had done it on purpose, because Fabian had donned a cheerful, muscle-adoring orange T-shirt with minimal black dots (visible only at close inspection), leather short-shorts, and knee-high boots. If they thought he would not finish his dinner, the surprise was on them, since he didn’t slave in the kitchen for hours to be sidetracked by hot bodies. He would sample (more like devour) his lovers on his own terms now that he had arrived in Acceptanceville.

“However, we are not rushing. We still have dessert and a movie.”

Fabian and Topher groaned, “Are you serious?”

“Absolutely, I don’t want anyone sick when we start the acrobatics.”

“You sure he’s not into torturing?” Topher addressed Fabian, pointing at Bruno with his thumb. “I don’t mind a whip, but this is plain evil.”

“I get what you’re saying. He says ‘no’ and then paints a kinky picture in your brain. Yeah, evil.” Fabian waved his fork at Bruno. “Love, I thought the only thing you waited an hour after eating for was swimming.”

“As if we’re not going to use every limb and other body parts for what’s coming.” Bruno shrugged noncommittally. “I think it’s obviously more risky than a mere swim.”

“He did it again!” Topher had his eyes like enormous plates. “How have you survived four years of such darkness?”

“Well, you remember how his body undulates when you’re inside him. Wait ’til his tongue can truly explore you, or his hips roll while he fucks you. Then you’ll understand why his evilness is worthy.”

This was the first time Bruno noticed Topher changing colors. And the house computer confirmed his suspicions. “Christopher, your blood pressure is increasing again.”

Bruno stood up. “Let’s have dessert. Some chocolate will make it all better.”

“Oh, damn. Or should I say oink?” Topher licked the back of the spoon. His satisfied hum went straight to all the hardening places in Fabian’s body.

Goose bumps emerged when Bruno’s mouth covered Topher’s. He pulled the boy’s lower lip with his teeth as he ended the kiss. “The dark chocolate was inspired by the color of your eyes, and the bacon... well, you’re our little piglet, right?”

Topher smiled and pulled Fabian toward them, “A pig, a dog, an ostrich. Whatever you want me to be.” His strong hands roamed two backs while three tongues danced.

Bruno surfaced for air. “I take it we’re going to skip the movie.”

“Nope.” Topher extricated himself from their arms. “You said we had to wait, and we’ll do so.” He picked up the visual wall control, chose a three-hour movie and sat back between them on Rocco (he’d baptized the Rococo sofa with the name), patting their thighs. “Now, be good daddies and no touching or kneading or wet-willies. You know how much damage we can do to each other in an hour, let alone three?”

“He’s been around you for too long,” Bruno tossed casually with a huff not looking at Fabian.

“Shh, you don’t wanna be one of those people who talks during the movies,” Fabian sent back, chuckling. Topher had used a quote from a very old movie and added his own twist. Revenge was a dish best served after dessert, apparently.

“Ahem. I haven’t seen this one,” Topher silenced them.

Halfway through the movie, Bruno started to take his clothes off. Afterward, he tried to unbutton Topher’s shirt furtively several times (thinking the boy distracted by the movie), just to end up swatted away like an obnoxious fly.

Further along, Fabian went to get a drink, just to find Bruno’s legs across the young lap, using one of Rocco’s tubular throw pillows to rest his neck and with Topher’s hands caressing his hairy thighs. The scene was so domestic, it made Fabian’s heart ache. He scooted over to Topher’s side, ruffling his hair and arranging Bruno’s calves over his own lap.

By the time the credits rolled, throw pillows were scattered over the immediate floor, and Topher was spread-eagle, Bruno sucking his cock to the root and Fabian eating away that furry little hole. Three hours was too long for all the testosterone floating in the air, fueled by bacon, chocolate and imported spirits.

Topher writhed and groaned, using his hands to push their heads to assault his body, deeper and harder, chanting in a monotone, “oh fuck oh yes oh fuck oh yes”.

Bruno and Fabian’s lips met around the marble cock, and they grinned, tasting the proof of Topher’s enthusiasm. They stroked and teased the sweet ring of muscle, slicked by Fabian’s thorough ministrations.

“I need a cock. I need a cock in my mouth now.” It didn’t sound like a plea but like a definitive command.

Bruno nodded to him, and Fabian obliged, pulling Topher with him to the floor for a long-overdue sixty-nine. He put Topher on top, so as the dark head bobbed over his cock and the thick shaft pumped into his mouth he could spread the smooth cheeks to give Bruno better access to their prize.

The commissioner nuzzled the tight sac over Fabian's face, and a moan (muffled by his cock) reverberated through him, the vibrations of the Bell of Passion's clamor. A hairless ball disappeared into Bruno's mouth and Topher lost the rhythm of his piston. From this angle, Fabian couldn't be sure, but he calculated that the attack was double, and Bruno had a finger (or two) in a quest to put Topher's prostate on fire.

And the thrumming around Fabian's cock announced Bruno was greatly succeeding.

Needing a better view, Fabian released the cock making his pie-hole tender and distributed wet kisses over Topher's abs, licked the skulls decorating his chest, nipped at the brown medallions of his nipples, and ended with a peck over plump lips. Topher growled, reclaiming his prey without words, and Fabian murmured grabbing his chin, "I'm not leaving; just changing position." Once on his knees, Fabian shoved his angry cock back into Topher's desperate mouth.

As Fabian leaned over the triangular back, he discovered Bruno prepping for his mission with abundant lubricant. Fabian helped, holding rocky buns apart, and Bruno inched his way inward. The scrape of teeth over his cock made Fabian shudder, the beauty of the penetration enhanced by the sting surrounding his shaft.

The emotions fleeting over Bruno's face were too innumerable to recount, his grey eyes glassy, lost in the magnificent sight. Fabian knew that there was nothing more erotic than watching how your cock possessed your lover, but in this case, it was a different kind of culmination. It was a redemption of sorts, because when their gazes met and their mouths found their way to each other they understood Topher was it, what they had needed from the beginning to make them complete.

And their lover swayed between them, grunting and roaring and demanding more.

No satellite dish on Earth, the Moon, or Mars was more concave than Topher's spine, arched in blissful pleasure. And Fabian heard words from Balder Lux, spoken when they were young to make Lucian laugh. "The mark of a true bottom is the depth of his back's curve as he gets fucked."

It was an odd moment to remember the blond cousins, but the memory came pure and crystalline, devoid of need and enveloped in gratitude because he'd found his two partners.

Fabian sensed his orgasm near, all his cells ready to ignite when Topher let go of his cock and upended himself, grabbing Fabian by the neck and commanding, "Daddy, fuck Bruno. I want to feel your cock in me through him."

That was an order Fabian couldn't refuse.

He stroked Topher's blushed face, and the dark brown eyes told him a thousand stories. The revelations of the man waiting for them to accept him as part of their life, unaware they had already sealed that pact. "Of course, babe."

Behind Bruno, Fabian bit and licked the myriad freckles adorning the broad shoulders, while the countertenor steered the future geologist, using the leather harness he'd intentionally recommended to taunt Bruno.

Topher and Bruno moaned as Fabian breached the commissioner, making them lose their rhythm and forcing them to accept his control over the six-limbed beast they had become.

"This is how it feels to be three." Fabian murmured into Bruno's ear.

"Sweet fucking Triad, yes." Bruno groaned with a powerful grip on Fabian cock.

Later on, the midnight hour smiled upon them, covered in sweat and semen, and with Topher and Bruno deeply entrenched in Fabian's satisfied hole.

"And that's my cue to leave." Emmanuel did a cheerful "bye-bye" motion with his fingers.

"Why? No. If you don't want to talk to them, wait in another room." Topher grabbed Emmanuel's upper arm.

The house computer had just announced they had a video call from Mars. Emmanuel obviously knew it was his parents.

"Kiddo, you stay put and behave." Fabian used his most stern paternal tone.

Emmanuel huffed and threw himself on Rocco. After a year of Topher officially living with them, if the poor Rococo sofa could speak, it would certainly be screaming, thanks to all the things that happened almost daily on it. It was a little embarrassing to have Emmanuel sitting there with that pouty mouth and sending daggers their way. The memory of Fabian riding Topher while Bruno made use of their younger lover's hole, brought fire to Bruno's face.

"Uncle, they're waiting for you," Emmanuel ground out, taking Bruno out of his hard-on worthy reverie.

"Sure, sure, nephew." Bruno left Emmanuel still scowling and with his arms crossed over his chest, more in a protective than actually angry fashion.

The triad entered the studio together. Lucian Lux greeted Fabian first. "Fabulous Fabian, love suits you well." He turned to face Topher and Bruno. "And you two look like you're radioactive, with all that glowing about yourself, naughty little pigs."

Someone cleared his throat behind Lucian, "Sweetheart, this is a business call." Balder took a seat next to his husband. "Good evening, gentlemen. Hope you are all in good health." His smile was particularly bright when he spoke next. "Christopher, I heard you graduated with honors, congratulations."

The Luxes were truly fond of Topher, which in turn made Emmanuel even more furious with his parents. It was a pity, because in every other aspect of his life the boy was levelheaded (more than many adults Bruno knew), but his dads were his Achilles' heel.

Topher beamed at the blond cousins. "Thank you. Sunny Development offered me a contract and I'm considering it. It's a great opportunity; the only downside is the excessive amount of time off-planet."

"Well, maybe we have something to help you with that." Lucian rubbed his hands together, the image of a man ready to eat a more than delicious fare. His silver eyes landed on Bruno. "You're planning on running for mayor next year."

"It's not official yet, but that's the idea."

“The people of Thouria have decided they want a more... civil government. They want a mayor like any normal city.” There was a pinch of hidden pride in Lucian’s words, as if the idea had been his and not the people’s.

“Okay,” He made a “go on” motion. This seemed good for him, but what about Topher and Fabian? “Sounds interesting,” he offered vaguely. He didn’t want to be rude, but he knew the other two would not let him take care of them economically.

Apparently reading Bruno’s apprehension, Balder spoke to Fabian. “Admiral Beck is ready for retirement. If you want the position, the job is yours.”

“What?” Fabian fidgeted. “You think S.E.C. would send me there?”

“It’s already been discussed. As I said, if you want it, you got it.”

“What the fuck, Balder?”

“That is what you do with those two.” Balder waved his forefinger between Topher and Bruno, who sat on either side of Fabian. “No one is forcing you to do anything, if you’re against it.”

“By the way,” Lucian tried to look sheepish but he might have had more success trying to be Korean, “Bruno, technically, you’ve been elected in absentia and only need to accept the office.”

“What is wrong with you Luxes? That was a really shitty move!” Bruno yelled, standing up and flailing his arms.

Fabian had his mouth ajar, as if he had been tasered the fuck out. Topher was bent, cackling like a bedlam inmate. Emmanuel entered the studio, disheveled (with a face that could only indicate that a meteor was about to destroy Earth), and blurted, “Disavowing me wasn’t enough. Now you feel the sick need to take away the only family I have left.”

Lucian looked like a spaceship had just run into him. Balder wore a stoic mask. “The world doesn’t revolve around you. As usual you’re being selfish in your conclusions. This is not about you in any way, shape, or form. I would appreciate if you left the study. Your face disgusts me.”

“Hold your rockets, Lux.” Fabian snapped out of his frozen state. “This is my fucking house, and that is my fucking godson you’re talking to.”

Topher got to his feet and circled Emmanuel with his arms. “You got issues, Balder. Your attitude toward your son saddens me.”

With the same serpentine voice Bruno had come to associate with Balder trying to impose his way, the blond man uttered. “Stay out of this, Christopher. You fulfilled your parents’ wishes. That one did not.”

Bruno had had enough, “All out.” He pushed the trio out of the study amid their protests.

Once alone, he sat and asked, “What’s your plan for Topher on Mars?”

Balder showed a fleeting moment of shock. Surely, he was expecting a lecture about Emmanuel. “We have a position for him with the expansion of the Mars colonies.”

Lucian looked really upset, “Bruno, we...”

“I don’t want to hear it. Two great men in different stages of my life told me, ‘you can’t trust unless you try first’. So I’m going to trust you and hope that you didn’t come up with this scheme to do exactly what Emmanuel thinks. If I learn now or in the future that he was right, you will gain a formidable enemy.” Bruno narrowed his eyes. “This is your chance to come clean.”

“I swear on the love I have for this man,” Balder put his right hand on the top of Lucian’s head, “I would never do anything on purpose to hurt Emmanuel.”

Lucian used the same action and similar words and added, “He disappointed us, but we do love him.”

“I believe you.”

All pieces fell in to place as the triad prepared to put roots down on Mars. The decision had been easy. As long as they were together, they could settle anywhere; it didn’t matter if it was off-planet or Timbuktu.

The Leather Opera Pack had been in an uproar because their only countertenor was leaving, and they had adopted Topher as some sort of lucky

charm (which had Fabian laughing his ass off from day one, to Topher's glaring disapproval), thus losing both assets in one shot.

Only one thing dampened their festive mood, and it was Emmanuel's vanishing. Fabian hoped with all his heart his godson would move on and wouldn't hold a grudge against him forever.

"What's wrong, handsome?" Topher kissed Fabian's cheek as he scooted under the covers and rested his head on Fabian's shoulder.

With a chuckle, Fabian patted Topher's thigh. The boy had adopted mannerisms from both Bruno and Fabian, and they had a lot of him too. "Old man's thoughts."

"Hey, I'm older than you and don't say things like that." Bruno occupied Fabian's other flank.

Fabian turned to each lover in turn and both looked like they were doing something really naughty before coming to bed. "Wow, you two are like rabbits."

"Poor Rocco doesn't stand a chance," Topher commented with a mischievous glint in those dark beautiful eyes.

"Whoever did that treatment to the fabric is a genius." Bruno licked Fabian stubbly chin.

Topher groaned as Fabian grabbed his engorging erection. He jumped from the bed as if spooked. "I need to do this before I get trapped between you two again." He left the bedroom giggling.

"What's he up to?"

Bruno shrugged, equally puzzled. "I have no clue."

Topher returned, his cock at full mast, bobbing happily as he almost skipped toward them. "It is time for me to make honest men out of you." He pounced onto the bed, landed between their legs on his knees and opened the little box he had concealed until the last second. "Bruno Ouatu and Fabian Acre, would you two make me the happiest man on two planets and one moon?" He smiled at their petrified faces. "Would you marry me?"

"Oh fuck."

“No, shit.”

“What, you don’t want a traditional marriage?” Topher arched an eyebrow and his expression mutated from sweet boy to feral master. “Do I need to collar the fuck out of you two?”

“*Nor Sub Nor Dom* is the motto in this relationship.” Fabian held up his hand. “You just caught us by surprise.”

Bruno left the bed and came back with his own velvet box. “We got you rings too.”

While Topher’s set of rings was platinum, Bruno and Fabian’s were gold. Fabian groaned, “What’re we gonna do with twelve rings?”

The young face stated clearly that he was not going to return his set. Then Topher snapped his fingers. “I know! Let’s make an alloy. It’ll be an even bigger symbol of our union.” He smirked, fully back to his naughty self. “We’ll have to stay clear of nitric acid though.”

“As if any of us is going to put his hand in spaceship fuel.” Bruno rolled his eyes.

“It’s settled then.” Fabian clapped. “We melt the rings.” He grabbed both heads and guided them toward his rapidly hardening piece. “Now take care of Daddy’s cock.”

The cover removed, Topher took Fabian in hand and offered the first taste to Bruno. They shared a smile and started to work in perfect sync. Their mouths sliding up and down Fabian’s cock, and the way they kept their gazes locked was a thing of beauty. Fabian was soon leaking equally to a broken faucet.

After they kissed over Fabian’s obelisk, Topher commented, a healthy dose of mirth permeating his sweet baritone, “I can’t wait to turn off the gravity on the ship and fuck while floating.”

“That will be something.” Bruno winked and both giggled, taking at least twenty years off their respective ages.

Fabian smacked two round asses. “And I have a paddling ready for you both, if you don’t concentrate on the task at hand.”

Their wicked intentions were clearly written over those heavenly features as they exclaimed together, “Yes, sir.”

No man was happier than Fabian Acre.

THE END

About the Rings

In a Triad the set of rings is six rings, each member gives two rings (one to each of the other guys) and receives two rings (one from each guy), so at the end each man has two rings on his ring finger making it a total of six and not nine. You don't put a ring on your own hand.

Author Bio

Born a Sagittarius in the fabulous year of the Rooster of '69, at the hour when his cat was about to become a complete dragon, Gabbo de la Parra landed on the Caribbean Coast of the outlandish Republic of Panama to start the adventure of Life.

Love and the Internet brought him to Middle Tennessee to embrace the American Dream and his husbandly romance. Writing has been an important part of his life since a very early age, and it's a pleasure to share his stories with others thanks to the wonderful opportunities this land provides. He is the author of the Spaniards series, Prince of Atlantis and other titles available through Amazon, Barnes & Noble and Smashwords.

Gabbo cherishes Life with a southern gentleman in a townhouse close to a lake, crowded with the spirits of his characters and their pets: black esoteric kitty, Luna; white emo-twink Maltese, Chance; and street smart Russian Blue, Bella.

His novels Septima Luna and Another Dawn on Planet X (the child of his two stories for LiAW) will come to your e-reading devices in Fall 2013 and The Pompeian Horse in Spring 2014.

Contact & Media Info

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THE ROAD FROM MARYVILLE

By Gabbo de la Parra

Photo Description

A bare-chested, handsome man, with big arms and a perky nose, reads a book (yes, a book—not an e-reader) on his stomach over a light-colored carpet. The nice thing is, he has his round tanned butt exposed because his cargo shorts are way below the curve (almost reaching his thighs) leaving all that delicious flesh visible for us to enjoy. Did I mention he has the cutest dimples flanking his coccyx?

Story Letter

Dear Author,

Their Mom guilt-tripped him and his brother into coming home for at least a week for Easter. So this Detective took off two weeks from work, his brother was supposed to come to him from college so they could both drive there together (their mother lives in another country/state). Oh, and their mother was looking forward to meeting their partners, too, which wouldn't be that bad, had his not dumped him a month ago. Nope, he still hasn't told his mother, since she would just arrange for sons and daughters of her neighbors to visit them when he came home.

Of course, his last day at work isn't going well. Some ass hit his car, so he actually had to use public transportation. He had to fight off the advances of a drunk on the Tube and got beer spilled all over his favorite T-Shirt. Then his female neighbor tried to seduce him, again, when he arrived at his flat.

The day couldn't get worse; at least he thought so before finding his brother having sex with a blond twink on his couch, who is apparently his squeeze of the week. The guy is a history major who is apparently looking forward to visiting the sights in their hometown, and who hated him on sight. After going out to a party and leaving his sick boyfriend behind, his brother finds someone new and actually dumps the twink on him while driving to the beach with his new partner.

Do you know what their mother suggested after he told her the story? To take the twink home with him!!! (“You can’t leave the poor boy alone in such a state.”)

Please let them have an interesting trip and find to each other on this holiday!

I’d love HEA and enemies to lovers, but I’ll take being prejudiced or reserved.

Please, no BDSM, ménage, incest, open relationships or instant love.

Sincerely,

Fehu

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: enemies to lovers, flavored implements, shooting enthusiast, road trip, NYPD

Word Count: 12,054

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THE ROAD FROM MARYVILLE

By Gabbo de la Parra

1. Bazookas & Douches

“What the...?”

“Shorrie, kwutie, butch I’f veen trai-ing to catshf your eyef for a hwile an’ yoarh hiknoring meh,” the man slurred, attempting to *clean* Trenton’s crotch by spilling more beer onto it.

This hadn’t been a good week. He was riding the frigging subway because some moron had decided to rear-end him two days ago, and the damned insurance company refused to give him another car. What was the point of being one of New York’s Finest if it didn’t give you any leverage with a company that had a chicken for mascot?

His whole hand ended up on Drunken Dude’s face to prevent the man from stealing a kiss. Trenton seriously considered arresting the idiot, but just the thought of all the paperwork, plus another unnecessary trip on the subway, was all it took for him to push the guy aside and let him rest sprawled on the floor. He stood up, adjusted his coat, and moved to another car, even though he knew it was illegal.

Part of him wanted to smack the offender, and another (a bigger one) to make sure nobody would rob the guy, but the guy had put himself there—let him deal with the consequences.

Ten minutes later, he forgot all about the drunk as he reached his stop, and he waded through thoughts of his messy week on the short walk home.

Mrs. Perkins was lurking close to the mailboxes in the lobby of his building. Trenton tried to give her a polite nod without stopping to retrieve his mail, since it could wait until she wasn’t around. He wasn’t in the mood to be groped.

“Why so serious?”

Goddamned Southern Gentlemanliness.

Trenton turned around and forced a smile. He couldn't help but look at her strategically spilling bazookas. Not that the transparent robe was covering anything else anyway. "A bad day, that's all."

"I have a remedy for that, big boy." She shimmied a little, showing her perkiness as her bosom drew dangerously close to Trenton's face, which was a feat on its own because he was at least eight inches taller than her.

This same woman had caught him and that cheating, lying bastard Jeremy several times on the stairs. What made her think that because the son of a bitch had gotten out of his life, she had a chance?

Hello, wrong equipment?

This BS needed a final stop. "I think you are aware that I'm gay. *Right?*"

"Pfft." She did a dismissive gesture with her hand, sporting long, red-painted claws. "You are so big and a cop. I'm pretty sure you were just experimenting."

His momma had taught him to be a gentleman no matter the circumstances, but he had lived in New York long enough for some cynicism to have rubbed off on him. "Ma'am, the fact that I'm six foot two and a cop doesn't make me love cock less. Have a good day."

Before he could turn around, she gasped with feigned shock, putting her talons over her abundant chest, *clutching the pearls* as the pageant queens would say. The place where this cougar was hoping for him to leave a pearl necklace, that was.

He had said "fuck" and all its derivatives enough times in the past week that if he was putting money in a swear jar, he would be able to buy a yacht tomorrow. He was not going to let this cartoony Jezebel make him curse again.

Trenton did an about-face and left her standing there, spilling and being shocked all she wanted.

She called behind him, "Wait, I read about this thing, pegging?"

Oh hell, no. He was not gonna let that woman ram him with a strap-on. He didn't even look at her as he put his hand up and flipped her off, escaping as fast as he could.

The elevator did a particularly weird noise when he exited it. Like a suppressed chuckle. Well, things could not go further downhill if he was imagining a frigging metal box laughing at him. Good thing he was taking these few days off. Some of his momma's ribs would make it all better.

The apartment door was unlocked.

Odd.

“Oh fuck yeeeesssss.”

Too late to close his eyes or remove the porn flick developing on his couch from his retinas and therefore from his brain. “Holy fucking shit!” Trenton blurted, unable to control his surprise.

The lanky, strawberry-blond twink fucking his brother froze in mid penetration and stared at him with eyes so big he could have passed for an owl.

“Oh, hey, big bro. What's up?” His jackass of a brother smiled as he swept his cum from Trenton's couch with a finger and licked it, as if finding themselves in this awkward situation were an everyday occurrence.

“There is a reason why you have your own bedroom, Cutler. What is *wrong* with you?”

Lanky didn't know whether to pull out or keep going or what. Trenton was doing his best to keep his focus on the guy's face, but after more than a month without sex it was getting harder by the second.

“Ah, we just got caught up. You know how it is.” Cutler resolved Lanky's conundrum by disengaging the impaling cock with a muffled *pop* and getting to his feet.

“Oh, gross. I don't need to see y'all's dangling bits.” Trenton put the back of his hand over his eyes and walked away. “You *are* paying for the cleaners. I will never be able to sit on that couch again without feeling all nasty.”

“Seriously, you're a cop. Sure as hell you have seen worse things—disembowelments and decapitations included.”

“That's my job, you *shithead*. This is just unfortunate and completely preventable.”

“Uh-huh. Come on, Hugh, let's shower and call for pizza.”

Trenton shifted to face them, then remembered they were naked and talked sideways. “You need to send him home or to whatever hole he crawled from.”

“Don’t be such an ass, big bro. Hugh is coming with us to visit Momma. He’s paying for my ticket and wants to do some sightseeing since he’s a history major. And you know how much history East Tennessee conceals.”

“You have got to be shitting me.” Trenton shook his head. “Fine, just keep to yourselves and out of my way.”

“Sorry to meet you like this, mate.”

Of course he had to be Australian, just another foreigner screwing the Land of the Free. California wasn’t big enough for them, now they were invading New York, too. Trenton felt the body heat as Lanky approached him, all dangling, not-so-tiny bits, his hand extended. “Keep your skanky ass away from me or I’m going to shoot you.”

He saw Cutler pulling the offender to the side. “Dude, he’d totally shoot you, back off.”

“Sweet Fehu,” Trenton heard as he slammed his door shut.

What the hell is a Fehu?

A soft knock interrupted Trenton’s ruminations. “It’s open.”

Whatshisface poked his head into the room. “I brought you some slices of pizza. Truce?”

“Shouldn’t you be jumping my brother’s bones or something?”

“Maybe later.” The man smiled, entering the room. “We started with the wrong foot. My name is Hugh Knobel.” For the second time that night, a hand was extended toward Trenton.

“Trenton Waddell. Detective. Twelfth Precinct. Homicide Squad.” He aimed to destroy the guy’s hand as he shook it, but Hugh had some grip of his own. Actually, he didn’t seem that fragile once he was dressed. He had pretty eyes, too, really blue, like oceans.

Wow, he really needed to get laid. He was lusting after his brother’s Squeeze of the Week.

Hugh chuckled. “You always introduce yourself that way? Seems a little far-fetched, mate.”

“Stop *mating* me. I’m just letting you know I’m a cop, and I can make things happen. Good *and* bad things.”

“Sounds like a lot of dingo snarling.” Hugh put more pressure into their joined hands.

This impressed Trenton. Just a little, but he had to respect the fact that the twink didn’t shy from him. And that voice—it was not just the accent but the depth. It was like a goddamned caress.

Yeah, he definitively needed to screw someone pronto. Preferably, not the long-legged man in front of him. He had a healthy color that wasn’t exactly a tan but he was anything but pale.

And you need to stop appreciating those little details, horn dog.

Luckily, his iPhone trilled. He was supposed to be on vacation—why were they calling? “Waddell.”

“Hello, Mister Waddell, my name is Stacey, and I’m calling to inform you that your ticket has been cancelled because your name appears on the No Fly List as of two hours ago.”

“What? There must be a mistake. Did you double-check that? I work for the Police Department,” he practically growled.

“I do apologize, sir, but if your name has a red flag we have to cancel your ticket. Now, about the cancellation fee. We cannot refund your ticket completely—”

“What? What cancellation fee? I ain’t cancelling anything!”

“Well, since we are obliged to cancel the ticket, we must apply the cancellation fee.”

“You’ve got to be kidding. Y’ALL are the ones cancelling it, why do I have to pay a goddamned fee?”

“It is the policy of the airline...”

Trenton hung up. He wasn’t in the mood to deal with the airline’s shenanigans. He needed to find out why his name was on the No Fly List. He was a frigging cop, for Pete’s sake.

“Is something wrong?” Hugh stood there with a genuinely concerned face and a plate full of pizza slices.

“I can’t fly tomorrow. Some dipshit decided to put a red flag on my name, and that was the airline calling to tell me I’m fucked.”

Hugh put the pizza plate down on the night stand and dug his phone from his second-skin jeans. With deft fingers, he did some search or whatever. “We can drive. It’s only thirteen hours.”

“We? There ain’t no *we*. Y’all take your fancy flight and leave me the hell alone.”

“Now, now, mate. There’s no reason to have your jockstrap in a bunch here. It’s a family trip, we’re together in this.”

Trenton got to his feet, rage making his entire body throb. He poked Hugh with his index finger square on the chest. “Just because you’re sucking my brother’s dick doesn’t make us milk brothers. You’re simply a random dude who happened to be around when his asshole itched.” Before Trenton realized it, they were nose-to-nose. “Get the fuck out of my room this instant before I forget that you have constitutional rights. Wait a second—you don’t have any ’cause you’re not American. I can shoot your ass without any remorse.”

The pretty twink took a step back and arched an eyebrow. His voice came out in a deep growl, perfectly matching Trenton’s. “I never understood why people called cops *pigs* in this country. Now, I totally get it.” He did an about-face and slammed the door on his way out.

“Well, I’ll be damned.”

Trenton was talking to himself as much as to the huge erection vying for his attention below his waist.

“I can’t take care of you right now, Boy. But as soon as I’m done with the phone, I’m all yours.”

Adjusting the boy in question, Trenton sat back on the bed, picked up the iPhone, and dialed his contact in Homeland Security.

“Thank you, Malloy.”

“You’re welcome, Waddell. I’m really sorry I can’t do anything until our tech people come back on Monday.”

“Yeah, Shit Hurling Fridays. I know.”

Malloy chuckled and said, “Good-bye.”

This damned hacking business smelled a lot like his brother’s doing, but without proof there was no point of making an ass of himself with baseless accusations. Geez, they weren’t even going on the same frigging flight.

Trenton stepped out of his room. He needed a cold one (or three) and some leftover pizza, if those two jackanapes hadn’t eaten the whole thing.

They were sitting on the offended couch, watching some black-and-white film with subtitles. Hugh was the first to notice him. “We’re renting a car and driving to Maryville. You’re welcome to join us.”

Cutler looked like someone not only peed on his Cheerios but finished them with a steaming number two. “For the record. Not my idea.” He crossed his arms over his chest.

When did his baby brother get so big?

Narrowing his eyes, Trenton studied both men. It was true that his relationship with his brother had been somewhat tense since Cutler came to NYU, but the closer they got to going back home for a visit, the snappier the kid became. He decided to be the bigger man and share the trip with them; perhaps that would help them reconnect. He would just have to grin and bear the intruding Aussie. “Thank you. At least let me pay for gas.”

“Excellent.” Hugh’s lack of emotion was undoubtedly fake. “The agency will bring the car by tomorrow at six.” He stood up and patted Cutler’s cheek. “Let’s get our bags ready, mate.” Looking at Trenton, he uttered a low growl. “Good night, Detective.”

And Boy perked at the deep tone.

Trenton decided in that instant that he didn’t like Hugh Knobel one bit.

2. Baudelaire & Hungry Dingoes

The green sign proclaimed 81 South Harrisburg. According to Google, they were still a hundred miles away from the Maryland border, and three hours later than the assumed schedule, thanks to several road repairs.

Who does road works on a bloody Saturday?

Cutler dozed with his head on Hugh's shoulder, while his fuckwit of a brother drove with a scowl comfortably lodged on his face. Hugh had encountered very few people so predisposed to hate him in his life. Yet, he still tried to do the right thing and forced Cutler to accept his decision to drive instead of fly. Besides, he wanted both brothers to find each other again after the things Cutler had said when they were not burying the bishop. Being an only child had always been a sad theme for Hugh, so he couldn't understand why two people lucky enough to have each other would let it go to hell due to their stubbornness.

Hugh caught Trenton studying him through the mirror. "What's that writing on your back?"

"Excuse me?"

"Tattooed on your back. Looks like the words of a song or a poem. It's not English and not Spanish."

"It's the last strophe of a Baudelaire poem in French."

"Which one?"

"*L'Albatros*." Hugh concluded Trenton was just asking for the sake of looking for something to be an asshole about. Trenton would surely call him a snob for having not just a poem but one written in French on his back. Mentally, he recited the words:

Le Poète est semblable au prince des nuées

Qui hante la tempête et se rit de l'archer;

Exilé sur le sol au milieu des huées,

Ses ailes de géant l'empêchent de marcher.

Even though he didn't speak French, Hugh felt it was a disservice to the great poet to have his poem in a language other than the one in which it was originally conceived.

Then, the strangest thing happened.

“The Poet is like this monarch of the clouds, riding the storm above the marksman's range; exiled on the ground, hooted and jeered, he cannot walk because of his great wings.” Trenton spoke with a soft, grave tone that fathered gooseflesh on Hugh's arms. It wasn't the exact translation Hugh knew, but it was a very lyric one. He was astonished.

“Well, bugger me. You were the last person I expected to be able to recite Baudelaire.”

“My brother is the one in charge of your bugging.” Trenton chuckled to lighten the retort. “It's a funny story how I learned about Charles Baudelaire. My Advanced Spanish teacher was a French lady who had learned the language in Spain, so she had this accent with a ton of Zs in it, and we were learning it European style, translating English translations of French poets into Spanish.”

“Crikey. That must have been quite the experience.”

“Mm-hmm. I learned Spanish in that peculiar way before I entered the Knoxville Police Academy, and it has helped me a lot in New York.”

“You gonna braid each other's hair later?” Cutler snorted, coming out of his slumber. “Are you planning on stopping soon, 'cause I'm starving.” He stretched, shifted to put both of his legs on Hugh's lap, and winked as he rested his back on the car's door. “I bet you're hungry, babe.”

Cutler's tone indicated anything but food, and Hugh suddenly felt self-conscious when he spied Trenton's green, green eyes on him. “Sure, I can eat.”

“Alrighty then, we stop for food and, after that, someone else takes the wheel.” Trenton's cheeriness was downright staged. Hugh didn't blame him; Cutler's funky attitude was excessive.

Hugh drove and Cutler played with the radio, changing stations and trying to find decent music in the middle of nowhere. The incessant rain following them for the last hour had become stronger and the visibility was vanishing. Trenton stared ahead impassively, perhaps hoping to make the rain stop by the sheer force of his intention.

“Hugh, the next exit has a motel, take it and let’s stop for the night. There’s no point in trying to arrive today anyway.” Trenton’s words came out dry, like they were before discovering they had Baudelaire in common.

“Sure.”

Thirty minutes later, the brothers sat on opposite sides of the queen bed, their MacBooks on their laps, both men typing away. Hugh was almost sure Cutler was furiously blogging about the sucky trip, but couldn’t fathom what a cop could be doing on his laptop. It didn’t seem like he was paying bills.

Seeing Trenton gave Hugh a hint at what Cutler might look in—what was their age difference?—maybe six years. Trenton was a rougher, buffer version of Cutler, the main difference being Cutler’s gray eyes to Trenton’s green, and the facial hair the older brother sported. The Van Dyke made his plump lips appear caged creatures in desperate need of release. Also Cutler had longer, Eighties-ish-revival hair while Trenton’s was short and a little spiked on top.

Cutler made an unnecessarily loud tap to something on the notebook’s keyboard, and set it aside with a flourish. His smile landed on Hugh. “Come on, babe, give me some sugar.”

“I don’t think we should do that with your brother so close.” Hugh peered at Trenton, whose arched eyebrow and twisted mouth snarled silently *I’m in the room, you know*.

“Pshaw, I think BBD here can handle people making out or having sex near him without being invited to participate.”

This time the snarl was audible. “Kid, you have issues. What did you do with my sweet little brother?”

“That kid died when you moved to New York.”

The storm was in full force outside, and there was no other place to hide than the bathroom. It was not far, ten steps perhaps, but the tension that had bloomed inside the room had him paralyzed. Apparently, Cutler had a lot to vent about, and Hugh didn't want to hear it, but he was glued to the chair. He tried to decipher the intricate floral pattern on the ugly curtains—nevertheless, the sparks flying between the two brothers were worse than a car accident, it was like watching Rome burn.

Still, Trenton surprised him for the second time that day. Instead of barking, he almost choked. “I just... I'm...”

“Save it. There's no way to turn back time.” Cutler jumped from the bed like it had scorpions on it and stomped to the bathroom. “I'm taking a shower; you coming?” His scrunched face wasn't cute like when he was in the throes of ecstasy, it was downright scary.

Hugh shook his head; his vocal cords didn't want to help. With a “Fine” and a *boom*, the bathroom door closed behind Cutler. Hugh felt a mixture of embarrassment, concern, and despair, staring at Trenton's pained features. He seemed lost. Someone hadn't just kicked his puppy—they had run it over, back and forth, back and forth.

The only half-intelligent thing that came to Hugh's mind as his temperamental vocal cords remembered their purpose was, “What's BBD?”

Trenton's shy, crooked smirk lit his face. “Big Bad Detective.”

Hugh dreamed of dingoes fighting over a dead something. He never had the chance to learn what the thing in pieces was. A second morning wrapped in Cutler's arms seemed the perfect way to enter the day. Then he recalled they were not alone, on that bed in a random motel room. He froze for a second, but Cutler was so relaxed around him—well, his morning wood was a boulder against Hugh's ass, but apart from that, everything else exuded peace. Giving in, Hugh burrowed back into the delicious warmth around him. The strong arms squeezed him, and Cutler nuzzled his neck.

Yeah, maybe today would be a better day between the brothers. He didn't have the chance to have a real conversation with Cutler last night, but his body language spoke of openness. Hugh would do his best to help them get through whatever the years of separation had done to them. His mistake (choosing the longer route) would prove valuable now. More time on the road meant more time for the brothers to come to terms with their convoluted relationship. He opened his eyes, ready to turn around and give Cutler a "good morning" kiss when thundering gray eyes met his.

Fuck me dead.

If gray eyes were in front of him, then who was behind him? Only one answer to *that* silly question. Hugh grimaced at Cutler and tried to dislodge himself from Trenton's grasp. As he struggled, Trenton put a leg over his hip and pulled back, his calf going between Hugh's legs to cover him more, and tightening his grip. This was beyond awkward, and, in the way Trenton's body was wrapped around him, Hugh couldn't even elbow the man.

"Trenton wake the fuck up." Hugh squirmed and pushed to no avail. Moving a mountain would have been easier.

"You son of a bitch."

Hugh felt the muscles around him tense and recoil.

"Do I have to remind you that bitch is your mother, too?"

Ready to be pushed away like a rotten carcass, astonishment settled upon Hugh as Trenton untangled them carefully and gave him a soft pat on the shoulder as he removed himself from the bed. Again, Hugh was in the middle of the snapping contest, and this time he was in the direct line of fire, sprawled on the bed.

"I'm sorry, Cutler. Hugh shouldn't have been sleeping between us. Force of habit—I would have done the same thing if it were you in his place."

Cutler seemed to consider this for a moment, his brow furrowed. He hissed, "Gross."

“I know, right? You’re not a baby anymore for me to cuddle you.”

“You’re an ass. Between brothers, cuddling shouldn’t be an invitation to impalement.” He gave a suspicious glance at Trenton’s crotch, his face a disgusted mask of contempt.

Those tented flannels had nothing brotherly about them.

Hugh swallowed the gulp in his throat, hard.

3. Hot Pink Cockatoos & The Runs

It had been nice to awaken with a warm body in his arms. *Shit.* He shouldn't be thinking such things. One: he didn't like twinks. Two: it was his brother's twink. Three: he had decided at the beginning of this godforsaken trip that he didn't like frigging Hugh Knobel.

If God was merciful (and he had been raised to believe that), at least one of his fuck buddies in Maryville would be available to help him release this pent-up lust. As a cop in New York, he needed to be careful with the kind of actions he engaged in, but here, back home, with a friend from the past, it was a different story.

Why had that lanky frame felt so right in his arms?

Goddamn it.

Trenton liked his men with meat, not to the bodybuilding extreme, but with some hot, round muscles to squeeze while pounding or being pounded. And yet, that poem tattooed between the not-so-wide shoulders, the even narrower hips, and those glutes that could totally fit in his hands, would not stop whirling in his mind. This was one of those moments when he hated his photographic memory. Awesome asset at work, a monumental pain in the ass in situations like the one in which he was currently immersed.

They left West Virginia during the early morning, did Kentucky in record time, and were entering Tennessee via Knoxville. At this rate they would arrive at Maryville before noon, and their parents were waiting with the Easter Fest ready to burst. It was an event in the neighborhood, so everybody was anxiously expecting them, and their mother kept calling Cutler's phone since they told her Trenton was driving.

A plausible explanation as to why the two-timing SOB Jeremy wasn't coming hadn't yet occurred to Trenton. Good thing she would be distracted for a while by Hugh's charming dimples and sexy blue eyes. *What?*

He stole a glance in the mirror and said blue gems were fixed on him. A scowl was his only defense after being caught, and Hugh scowled back. Excellent, Trenton didn't want the twink thinking he was attracted to him and his Aussie ways.

Beside Hugh, Cutler opened his mouth to say something, and Trenton cut him off. “We’re not stopping for food. You have to wait until we get home. I know you can eat an elephant and still be hungry, but not today, kiddo.”

“A piss break is what I need, moron. Or would you rather have me pee in a bottle?”

The fragile cessation of hostilities after breakfast was wearing thin. Mostly because Cutler had a major in Pain in the Ass and a minor in What the Fuck? That didn’t diminish Trenton’s love for his brother though, and after last night’s revelation, he understood that part of this banana cluster was his fault.

Maybe a lot more than just a third.

“If it were my car, I’d told you to fuck off, but since Hugh is the one paying the rental bill, I’ll let him decide.”

Cutler used what he thought was his sexiest voice, his lips almost brushing Hugh’s cheek. “We can go together to the restroom and make up for this morning’s blooper.”

Trenton saw Cutler wink at a big-eyed, rapidly blushing Hugh as they separated. Okay, he knew they were fucking, but why Cutler felt the need to flaunt their intimacy like that was beyond him. Something in Hugh’s reaction made him interfere. “I ain’t giving you enough time for that.”

“What’s another hour?”

Even though Trenton couldn’t see below their faces, he knew Cutler had done something with a lower body part, judging by Hugh’s jerk.

“Cutler, when we stop, you’re going by yourself. That’s not up for discussion, unless Hugh needs to go, too.”

“Nope, I’m fine.”

“What is it to you if I want to blow off some steam with him?”

“You’re just being thick for the sake of being thick. I’m the one who has to call Momma and tell her that you’re not coming to the Easter Fest because you were arrested for indecency. Hugh can get deported for shit like that. Don’t you care about him at least a little?”

“Geez, what crawled up your ass? I thought it was Florida that had the alligators in the sewer system.”

“You obnoxious brat.”

“Gentlemen,” Hugh interjected. “This thing, between you two, stopped being cute like ten hours ago, and it’s giving me the shits. Therefore, I’d highly appreciate it if you’d keep it to yourselves until I am not close enough to hear it, if you need to keep it going.”

“Are you siding with him?” Cutler’s accusation sounded like a five-year-old’s.

“I’m not taking sides. I just want you both to shut the fuck up if you cannot have a normal, amicable conversation. This back and forth is as useful as an asshole on your elbow. So, quit it now.”

Hugh delivered his little speech with the same determination Trenton had seen in people ready to shoot others. He decided he might like the strawberry-blond twink a little bit.

On Court Street, they passed by the baseball field where he’d practiced while he was growing up. Turning right on Waller, they entered his childhood street. Trees and bushes were still mostly bare, but he remembered the bright leaves and colorful flowers. Trenton’s heart swelled a little when he saw his Momma’s cockatoo-shaped mailbox, more hot pink than the actual subtle pink of the real bird. The big picnic tables from the Tenebrae Methodist Ladies Association had been brought to the backyard, and the laughter of men, women, and children mingled with the bark of dogs as they chased each other around.

The homey aroma of barbecue assaulted them as soon as they alighted. Tara Waddell was waiting for them on the porch with her arms extended and a watery smile. Trenton hadn’t seen his mother in five years, and as her matronly body and arms embraced them, he vowed never to be away for so long.

“Oh, my boys. Y’all look so handsome.” She covered their faces with kisses, still strangling them.

With both their arms around their mother's ample waist, Trenton felt for a moment that nothing had changed between Cutler and him. Cutler even grasped his forearm, encircling their mother in a double bear hug. He hoped they'd be fine after this visit, and the Aussie was out of the way. Just the two of them against the world.

Tara sniffled and dabbed her eyes with a handkerchief she had magically made appear. "And who's this gallant young man?" Their mother eyed Hugh like he was three piece and more than one biscuit.

"Hello ma'am. My name is Hugh Knobel. I'm very pleased to meet you." He shook her hand vigorously.

Pulling him into a smothering hug and shaking him like a giant rag doll (Trenton could almost see Hugh's feet swaying from side to side), Tara then studied him at arms' length. "So cute." She let go of him and snapped her fingers. "I know that drawl, hold on, don't tell me. It's like that crocodile man!"

Trenton chuckled, seeing the slight red creeping onto Hugh's high cheeks.

"Momma, my friend is from..." Cutler tried, but Tara cut him off.

"Cutler Anthony Waddell, how many times I told you to call things by their real name. You can say he is your boyfriend, we don't judge in this house." Her penciled eyebrow hiked up, then returned to a normal position, remembering the task at hand. "No. Don't say it—I'll get it on my own. Hold on." She did a tiny jump, triumphant. "*Awstraliah*, that's where you're from!"

"Yes, ma'am," Hugh sputtered as she grabbed his hand and pulled him into the house.

"George, George." She called after their father, "Cutler brought one of them *Awstraliahns*!" She looked back at Trenton. "Where's Jeremy?"

"He had to work."

"Poor thing. George, GEORGE."

“No. He didn’t.”

“*Yuh*. But I ain’t carin’ he’s twenty-two, I’m goin’ to spank him so hard, he’ll never ever think of embarrassing the name Waddell again.”

“Where’s Hugh?”

“In the guest room, havin’ the backdoor trots like a broken pipe.”

“I’ll be right back.”

Trenton jumped the stairs two at a time. Once in the guest room, he knocked at the bathroom door. “Pepto not working?”

“Go away.”

“Hugh, can you take Imodium?”

“Yes, I guess. This is so bloody humiliating.”

More watery noises. Yeah, the situation was embarrassing, but what his brother did was worse. Running away to Myrtle Beach with that skank Pam Olenick, and leaving Hugh discarded and sick. They were supposed to stay a couple of days after Easter, but what was the point now, since Cutler had escaped to South Carolina—which in no book figured as a Spring Break destination.

“I’m going to Cottoned-Eye’s Drugstore to get you something, and I’ll come back in a jiffy. Keep flushing and don’t let the fumes kill you.”

“Bloody funny, BBD,” came the muffled response through the door.

Thirty minutes later, Hugh was miserably negotiating with a spoon to bring a very light soup to his lips. Imodium had worked almost instantly and now he needed something warm in his stomach to make him feel better.

Trenton’s mother patted Hugh’s head. “Poor darlin’, at least you ain’t due for the marble orchard anymore.”

With an eye-roll, Trenton bit his tongue. Not like Hugh was truly dying.

“I’m sorry the barbecue made you ill.”

“Not at all, Tara. It wasn’t your barbie, I’m sure of that. It must have been one of those gas station hot dogs.”

They had moved from Mrs. Waddell to Tara in less than two hours, and Trenton was somewhat baffled by that. She never let Jeremy call her anything but Mrs. Waddell, but maybe it was because she never saw him in person. Perhaps in her mind, video chat didn't count as a meeting, no matter the two years Jeremy and he had been together.

“You are just too kind. Now finish your soup, and I'm goin' to run you a nice bath.” She patted his head again and left the room.

George Waddell popped his head into the kitchen, “You boys doin' all right?”

Trenton said “Yes,” while Hugh swallowed some soup and nodded. His father made a clicking sound with his tongue and disappeared from view.

“You have nice parents.”

“It's a shame I can't say the same about my brother. What an asshole.”

“Well, we're not together like that, anyway.”

“What do you mean?”

“We're more like fuck buddies. Actually, more friends than fuck buddies.”

“How come I never heard of you before, then?”

“I have no answer for that. You'll have to ask your brother. You were somewhat right when you accused me of *just being there when his hole itched.*”

“That was severely uncalled for.”

“Ugh. Yeah, more or less.”

Trenton chuckled. “Well, I guess a nice dick can't compete with a great pair of boobs.”

“My dick is more than nice. I don't think it has anything to do with that. It's a crapshoot with bi's—it can be cock this week and cunt the next.”

“No. It's all about *douchebagness.*”

“I know.”

Hugh smiled and Trenton suddenly felt really uncomfortable sitting there.

“Hugh, sweetheart, your bath’s ready,” Tara singsonged from the stairs.

“Trenton Arthur Waddell, you drive back to New York with that boy and take care of him. Ya’ heard me?”

“He was supposed to enjoy the Appalachians for a couple of days.”

“Neither George nor I can’t take Hugh to the mountains, not even to Gatlinburg. Unless you wanna do that job, you take him back with you.”

“But keeping him with me in the apartment is too much, Momma.”

“That’s the gentleman’s way. You do as you’re told, and that’s the end of it. I’m still seethin’ about your brother—don’t make me resolve my aggravation with your behind.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Trenton kissed his mother’s cheek and walked out of the kitchen to talk to Hugh. He found him in bed, Tara Waddell’s favorite quilted blanket thrown over him.

Hugh opened his eyes, “Hey.”

“There ain’t nothing subtle about my momma. I guess you heard the whole thing.”

“Don’t worry about it, mate. We part ways as soon as we arrive in the Big Apple.”

“No, Hugh. If I promised her I’d take care of you for a couple of days, I will.”

“Seriously. You don’t have to.”

“You don’t want that little lady loose in New York looking to spank you because you didn’t do what she wanted, right?”

“Not in a million years.”

“Then it’s settled. We depart with the sun.”

4. Silence & Stephanie

Tara patted their bums good-bye as the roosters crowed, after she loaded the rented SUV with all kinds of foods and sweets in coolers and handmade blankets. She gave Hugh a pillow so he could rest in the back seat, but risking incurring her wrath, he sat shotgun.

“You’re not my chauffer, mate,” he told Trenton as he climbed into the vehicle.

They filled up the car and drove in comfortable silence until Hugh saw a sign with the caption: Welcome to Kentucky, Unbridled Spirit.

“Why does your name—Trenton—sound familiar?”

“The porn star, Trenton Ducati?”

“Nah. he’s hot, but it’s something else.”

“It’s a city name in five states.”

“That’s it. Trenton, New Jersey. That’s Stephanie Plum’s city, right?”

Trenton’s laughter was a rich thing, and the happy wrinkles around his eyes made Hugh feel weird. “Are you serious? That’s how you know about Trenton, New Jersey?”

“You know about those books?”

“Yeah, I’ve read them all.”

Another thing they had in common. “Which one is your favorite?”

“Hmmm,” Trenton seemed to consider it for a moment. “I’m not a fan like that, but I think it would be the one with a hives curse.”

“Yeah, that’s a good one. What about the movie?”

“Bad casting choices. Loni Love should have played Lula.”

“I guess if Morelli were a Southerner he’d look like you.”

“Now, you’re just being plain silly. Where’d that come from?”

“Well, mate, you’re hot, a cop, and have a grumpy attitude.” Hugh snapped his mouth shut. He shouldn’t have told Trenton he was hot. He knew his face had *OOPS* written all over it.

“You forget the part where he was an inveterate womanizer before he fell for the bounty hunter.” Trenton smirked and then put his attention back on the road.

Hugh swallowed hard and kept his mouth shut through several states.

They crossed the George Washington Bridge at around two in the morning. Too tired to unload the goodies, they just dragged themselves up to the apartment.

“You can sleep in Cutler’s room.”

“I’d rather take the couch.” Hugh crumpled onto the aforementioned piece of furniture. “Just in case he returns. I don’t want him trying to make amends.”

“I guess you *amended* enough on it the other night.” Trenton shook his head. “You wanna bunk with me?”

An unexpected shiver ran through Hugh’s body. Would he wake up in Trenton’s arms again? Only one way to find out, “Sure. Why not?”

“Okay, since your clothes are still in the car, let me get you a pair of flannels and a tee.”

Hugh felt like protesting the unnecessary amount of layers, but he thought better about it. He didn’t want to appear too eager in case it was just a polite offering. That didn’t mean he would not enjoy if *habit* took its course and Trenton wrapped himself about him. He followed Trenton into the bedroom.

The well-organized and squeaky-clean room had a different connotation now. It wasn’t the lair of the green-eyed monster anymore but a sweet temptation. He was a firm believer that everything happened for a reason; he always ended up in the right place at the right time for him to learn, accomplish, or finish something. Which one it was now, he had yet to discover, but dawn would bring an answer.

Trenton’s invitation to share the bed produced an unprecedented lurch in his belly that Hugh didn’t know how to interpret. Whether it was pure lust or something else altogether, the New York police detective’s presence

was affecting Hugh in a different way since he heard him recite the Baudelaire strophe. It seemed so incongruent with his total-wanker, macho-cop persona that it made Hugh think of hard candy with a gooey core. The fact that Trenton knew a poem by heart to remember the last verse specifically, spoke of a hidden sensibility that Hugh felt the urgent need to explore. And the hard candy exterior wasn't anything to be complaining about either, anyway.

The flannels were two sizes too big for him, but a string helped with that. Nevertheless, the bloody shirt was as useless as tits on a bull. Hugh wasn't exactly drowning in it, but it wasn't advertising his assets at all. Well, fuck it, he was beyond buggered, and it wasn't like Trenton hadn't seen him naked already.

Trenton was dressed in the same fashion. The main difference being he gracefully filled everything and his arms looked powerful in the sleeveless garment. Trenton smiled shyly as Hugh dove under the covers. "Ready?"

Hugh nodded (vocal cords away as usual when needed most), the image of bulging biceps doing all sort of naughty things to his brain. He accommodated himself on the bed, willing his now more-than-alert body to relax and not dwell too much on that husky voice of Trenton's as he murmured, "Good night, Hugh."

That score used in Disney movies when dawn is giving its first rays to the forest and the little creatures are stirring and stretching before they start moving toward the watering hole (full of flutes and harps) played in Hugh's ears. It was lovely to have such delightful warmth wrapped around him; Trenton's arms were the perfect place to wake up. And the solid column of appreciation flush to his arse cheeks was absolutely welcome.

A kiss landed on the back of his neck, and the bulging muscles holding him stiffened. "I'm sorry."

"Why? I'm not complaining."

"We wasted like ten hours on the road from Maryville in a silence we could have used to learn everything about each other."

“Sometimes silence is good. And you don’t always need your ears to learn.” He brushed Trenton’s cock with a soft undulation of his hips.

“Is that so?” came out a little strangled, and iron bands pulled him onto the mighty shaft.

Reluctantly, Hugh turned about and gave Trenton a quick kiss on the lips. “Yeah, sometimes your hands and mouth are better instruments for knowledge.”

“Don’t forget lower parts,” Trenton exhaled in a husky murmur as he ground their hard-ons together.

Hugh groaned, “That’s a more intimate study.”

“It certainly is.”

Trenton traced Hugh’s lips with his own, a light caress that did a thousand more things than a rough meeting would have. Their kiss had that simple easiness of familiarity, as if they’d done it a million times, like old lovers. Even their morning breath was timid amid the languid movements of their tongues, limbs and torsos.

With a quick roll, Trenton changed their sideways face-to-face position to one where Hugh was on top, still facing Trenton but with two deft hands exploring the contours of his bum. “You have such a cute little butt. That was the first thing I noticed about you.”

A giggle escaped Hugh as he drowned in green, green lakes. “I thought it was the writing on my back.”

“That I *saw*. How your ass could easily fit in my hands I *noticed*. It aggravated the fuck out of me, though.”

“It doesn’t take a genius to guess why.” Hugh kissed Trenton again. The hands kneading his arse were driving him crazy with need, but he wanted Trenton to have his fill.

“By mere principle I shouldn’t be doing this with you, but I can’t help myself. Tell me to stop.”

Hugh growled, “That’s your wanker-self coming alive. You just want to blame me later for leaving you with blue balls, don’t you?”

Exploring hands left his arse and roamed past his hips and waist to travel north until they rested on his shoulders. “There’s something about you that is an offense and a provocation at the same time. I don’t know whether I want to shoot you for being with my brother first or smother you with kisses to erase the evidence of his existence from your body.”

“Trust me, I’m having the same existential debate here.” Huge poked at his temple with his forefinger. “Minus the shooting part, of course.” Then he gestured at the rest of his body with his entire hand, in an up and down fashion. “But this wants to try every particle of you.”

“You know what?” Trenton smiled and sighed. “Let’s shower up *separately*, and then figure this out over breakfast. We should allow our heads to weigh the situation before our bodies take control and do something we might regret later.”

Straightening himself up, Hugh ended straddling Trenton’s hips, his arse strategically positioned over the massive cock, engorged and ready to be called to duty. “Brilliant idea.” He rocked minutely, gauging Trenton’s reaction, and those green eyes narrowed. “I could eat a whale.” However with the pressure and rolling of his clothed arse cheeks over the rigid pole, he made certain Trenton understood that not just his mouth needed something in it.

Trenton lifted him bodily, separating their bodies and setting him aside on the bed as if he were a annoying pet not supposed to be on top of his master. “I’ll go first, and you get your things out of the car so you can have your own clothes to wear.” He practically ran into the bathroom, closing the door and locking it with a resounding click akin to a man chased by a horde of demons.

Resigned, Hugh huffed, jumped from the bed and went out to grab their luggage from the rented car. “Yeah, everything happens for a reason. It’s just not happening.”

Hugh came out freshly showered, wearing a fashionable white singlet with red trim. He’d never be able to get used to the name “wifebeater” for

this garment, it seemed so bogan it didn't make any sense. His jeans had enough spandex in them that he could easily do a split without tearing them apart. And he was prepared to be in all sort of odd positions to drive Trenton crazy.

The detective in question presented him with creamy scrambled eggs, thin slices of Black Forest ham and also unbuttered toast. Trenton had bacon on his plate and explained that it would be too greasy for Hugh's stomach after Niagara had run through him the day before. Trenton also gave him milk instead of coffee.

Wrong on so many levels.

"You know adults don't need to drink milk, right?" And *especially* if they had diarrhea the previous day.

"So what about those campaigns with people with white mustaches?"

"It's a multi-billion-dollar industry. They're going to use all the tricks up their sleeves to shove milk down your throat."

Trenton gave a start and then chuckled. "Well, that's a very strong position. Especially if you don't like things forced into your throat."

Realizing the double entendre he never intended, Hugh arched an eyebrow and uttered in a husky voice, "Four-legged-animal products are my concern, now if it comes from a two-legged beast..." He let his eyes roam over Trenton's features and bare chest. "I wouldn't mind so much."

Something that was the love child of a growl and a sigh *and* a moan escaped Trenton. He warned, "Hugh."

"What?" He used the face he had perfected over the years to get away with his mischief.

"You gonna make this difficult?"

"Hard is one thing, difficult is another."

"You little shit." Trenton slammed his hand on the table. "I don't want us to do something we might feel guilty about later. I thought we've agreed on that."

“Speak for yourself, mate. I never venture into anything without thinking it through first. That’s why I don’t have remorse later.”

That handsome face was a big *REALLY?* in neon lights. Trenton got to his feet and walked the three or four paces between them in slow motion and grabbed Hugh’s face by the jaw with his big meaty hand, squeezing and forcing it up until they were almost nose-to-nose. “We’ll see about that.” The sparks in those green embers were hypnotizing.

Trenton straightened himself, changed jaw-grabbing for hand-grabbing, and towed Hugh into the living room—where he plunked onto the couch and in one swift motion had Hugh straddling him, their faces mere inches apart. Out of his mouth, two words floated between them, half bark, half hiss. “Show me.”

Lips clashed like swords on a battlefield.

(Oi, History major here! Thank you.)

5. SWAT Team & Banana Blink

Trenton must have lost his mind on the road from Maryville. Why did the narrow hips of his brother's Squeeze of the Week felt so right burning his hands? What about this skinny jackanapes was so compelling he couldn't stop himself?

That tongue commanding his tongue, those long fingers patrolling his body, the crotch grinding his—it all was pure torment. Sweet, demented, and shameless torment, and he was ready to succumb to the vagaries of lust. The only problem (and it was a tremendous problem) was that for some inexplicable reason, Trenton wanted more. Not just the lanky body and strawberry-blond locks, he wanted—above everything else—Hugh's goddamned brain that seemed so in tune with his.

It was not the few exchanges they'd had, but what those exchanges had been. And those eyes, stupidly blue, wonderful eyes that made him need to fly and create sonnets like a teenager in love.

Hugh broke their kiss and rubbed his cheek against the hair on Trenton's chin. "You have no idea how much I love this, mate."

"You need to stop *mating* me." Trenton let out a groan, triggered by Hugh grabbing his denim-clad crotch.

"I'm sure you'd not say the same later on." Hugh chuckled as Trenton's iPhone began to trill. "Oops."

Trenton shushed Hugh with his index finger over those thin, sexy lips. "Waddell."

"Hey, big bro, how ya doin'?" Cutler sounded awfully cheerful. He didn't sound shit-faced, though.

"I'm fine. Where are you?"

"Still in SC. Is Hugh with you?"

"Yeah. Momma dumped him on me. Thanks."

"Do I need to feel like shit about it?"

“Would you?”

“Nah, not really.”

“Then why bother to ask such a silly question?” Trenton sobered up; Cutler leaving Hugh was the best thing that could have happened to him. “I love you, little bro. I don’t say it enough.”

“Same here, Biggie.” Cutler’s tone was almost sentimental.

Trenton hissed when he felt Hugh’s mouth around Boy. He’d been so distracted by the conversation, he didn’t even notice Hugh pulling his zipper down, much less the release of his hard-on. His Adam’s apple bobbed as he swallowed and tried to regain some control of his voice. “W-When are you coming?”

“I have a class on Thursday I can’t avoid, so Wednesday night the latest.”

“*OHHH*. I have to go, work is on the other line. Be good, kiddo.”

“Are you all right?”

“Sure, I just hit my big toe with something.” Trenton looked down and saw Hugh (his lips stretched by Trenton’s shaft) arching an eyebrow in mock offense.

“Alrighty then, see you soon. Bye.” Cutler ended the call.

“That was a very dick move.” Trenton moaned as he threw the iPhone to the other end of the couch.

Hugh managed to smirk around his mouth full of Boy.

Grabbing his face, Trenton pulled him up. They faced each other. “What are you doing to me?”

“Polishing your shamrock, mate.”

Trenton rolled his eyes, “What? That doesn’t make any sense.”

With his own eye-roll, Hugh made a dismissive sound and commented, “Don’t pay attention to that. We Aussies tend to change words, but still—this is one lucky piece.” He pulled Trenton’s jeans down.

Before the information could reach his scrambled brain, Trenton was bare-assed on the couch and his legs were in the air, Hugh holding them up

by the back of his knees. His balls were nuzzled by an inquisitive nose, and all his body shuddered. “What the...”

Hugh lifted his head, a sultry grin decorating his honed features. “Another question? You really need to shut the hell up and enjoy the ride.”

Trenton knew he should protest but all his neurons short-circuited because instead of his sac, Hugh went straight for his hole. And that was his Achilles heel. He moaned and grunted and tossed his head, unable to articulate a single coherent word.

Lips, teeth and tongue ganged up on his pucker. Hugh’s delighted *mmmm*-ing was arousing and disconcerting. This wasn’t supposed to be happening. Then he remembered that just a few minutes before, while on the phone, he’d realized and somewhat accepted that Hugh Knobel was a good thing in his life. His little epiphany shattered like a smashed window when Hugh’s glans poked his swollen orifice.

That brought him to reality in a flash. One: Hugh wasn’t wearing a condom. Two: he wasn’t gonna have his first time with Hugh in the same position he’d found his brother with the Aussie.

Really? That’s your second reason?

“Oh, Sweet Fehu. I want inside you, Trenton.” Hugh’s huskily delivered words prevented Trenton from starting an argument with himself. Hugh’s hands held Trenton’s ankles and his long shaft slid up and down against that burning center, sending a trillion commands. *Open. Surrender. Accept.*

Tough as it was, Trenton still reined in all the currents threatening to engulf him and make him a squirming mass of readiness. “I-I can’t let you fuck me.”

“You don’t bottom?” Hugh seemed almost devastated.

“I do, but...” Trenton knew his reasoning was silly at best and ridiculous at worst. Nevertheless, he needed to retain at least some measure of control of the situation. He confessed, “I don’t want our first time to be like the image I have of you and my brother.”

“We will take turns afterward?” Hugh let go of Trenton’s ankles.

Nodding, Trenton wrapped his legs around Hugh's taut waist, grinding his hole against the engorged beast.

"You bloody tease." Hugh stood up and offered his hand. "If you don't have condoms in your room, I know where Cutler has them."

"I have my own supplies." Trenton let Hugh guide him to his own bedroom.

After retrieving the implements (flavored condoms and lube), Trenton had his back against the headboard. Hugh rolled a Tropical Temptation rubber onto Trenton until it reached the base of his cock, and kissed him on the lips with a softness belied by the growl that followed. "No more foreplay."

Moving from between Trenton's legs, Hugh turned around, applying copious amounts of Banana Blink flavored lube as he went, and ended squatting toward a slow and succulent impalement on an eager spear.

Trenton closed his eyes and basked in the sweet heat swallowing Boy.

Hugh cheered the end of his journey with a satisfied groan. He started a languid but steady piston-like movement, flexing his legs and resting his hands on Trenton thighs.

The sounds accompanying the sultry motions broke Trenton from the erotic stupor. He licked the letters of the Baudelaire poem and took charge, his hands clutching at the warm muscles of Hugh's waist. Controlling the progression, he made the supple body rotate as it lowered, adding another layer to the incredible sensations bringing both of them closer to a seismic climax.

"So big, Trenton. So bloody big."

"All yours, baby."

Somehow, Trenton knew those words hadn't come from his groin alone.

This wasn't the moment to dissect feelings. All his analytical skills were blurred and muddied by passion and need.

Their orgasms descended upon them, like a SWAT team barking, "GOTCHA MOTHERFUCKERS."

Hours later, when their bodies couldn't produce any more fluids to substantiate their ejaculations, Hugh rested with his head over Trenton's chest. Trenton played with a reddish golden lock, twining and untwining it around his ring finger, while Hugh caressed the low relief of his abs.

"Tell me about your name." Hugh broke their comfortable silence. He lifted his head to face Trenton with a bright smile.

"I don't understand."

"Cutler told me he was named after the place he was conceived in, Cutler Bay, Florida."

"Oh, yeah, that's one of my earliest childhood memories. I remember I was miserable because I missed my friend Jimmy's birthday thanks to that family vacation."

"Your family went on holidays every year?"

"Nah, not much. That's why I remember that one so well."

"So what's the story behind your name?"

"It all started with the construction of the Clinton Laboratories as part of the Manhattan Project."

Hugh had that surprised look that Trenton was starting to cherish in his photography memory as part of their first encounter. "You have got to be shitting me. That was in the Forties. You're not that old."

"Indeed. Grandpa Waddell moved from New Jersey to work for the laboratories, met a girl from East Tennessee and fell in love. Papa was their first born, and I was conceived while attending a cousin's wedding back in Jersey. *In Trenton, New Jersey.*"

"In Stephanie's town!"

"Exactly. I started reading the books because Momma told me about them, 'cause she keeps track of such things." Trenton chuckled, thinking that his mother would be called nowadays, *adorkable*.

"Crikey, I really like your mom."

"And apparently she loves you."

“Speaking of Tara. That pulled pork she sent would be perfect right this second since we skipped breakfast to dilly-dally in carnal procedures.”

“Yeah, there was a lot of indecision in all those acts.”

Hugh shook his head. “Shameful.” He yelped as Trenton grabbed him by the waist and rolled them, ending on top of Hugh, their lips grazing each other’s.

“I could stay like this forever,” Trenton sighed, drowning in those dark, blue oceans.

“Me too. But life would intrude soon enough, so let’s enjoy it while it lasts.”

“Wise words from a not-so-wise-looking man.”

“Oi!” Hugh punched Trenton in the shoulder. “Where did that come from?”

“From the same place that thinks that you are something special and wants to learn more about it but has reservations because you are, I mean, were, my brother’s lover.”

“It’s not like you *ganked* me from him. He left me alone and you took care of me, and this evolved from there.”

“Excuse me, I didn’t what?”

“Stole me. We weren’t together in that sense to begin with. I have a better opinion of Cutler than that. I’m sure he will understand. Just savor this time, okay? We will worry when the kangaroo yanks the bunny out of the hat.”

“This ain’t gonna be no bunny rabbit, but a rabid skunk.”

“We’ll see.” Hugh pushed his face up to steal a quick peck from Trenton’s lips.

Then Trenton remembered and pushed Hugh down with both hands on his shoulders. “What the hell is a Fehu?”

Hugh chuckled and winked. “I’ll explain when you’ve taken care of my stomach’s needs.”

6. Power Bottoms & Mind Losing

A year later...

“What’s with the sexy cheeks exposed, love?”

Trenton lay on his stomach on the latte-colored carpet, reading a book, the waist of his cargo shorts way below the middle of his rocky bum. The dimples flanking his coccyx competed for attention with the delicious curves on display, both assets screaming for Hugh’s wet kisses.

Green, green eyes moved from the pages toward Hugh, accompanied by a cheeky grin, “An invitation?”

“There’s nothing subtle about it.” Hugh chuckled.

“I am my mother’s son.”

“That you are.” Hugh knelt beside Trenton and slowly caressed from shoulder to arse, relishing the hard muscles and warm skin. He saw Trenton close his eyes and let his head go backward as if basking in the sun, every feature professing his urgent need to be dominated.

Who am I to argue with my man’s cravings?

Hugh kissed and licked the shoulder where his hand had started.

Trenton moaned, “Baby.”

Dotting smooches over Trenton’s back, Hugh found his way to a better position with strong thighs between his knees. He grabbed narrow hips and pulled Trenton’s arse up and hissed, “Keep your chest on the floor.”

A muffled groan was all the response he got. Trenton kept his chest grounded but used both hands to spread his cheeks, and his puckered door winked, a carnivorous flower enticing its prey.

“Bloody tease,” Hugh murmured as he complied and gave a quick lick to the quivering hole. The savage flower opened, asking for more, and Hugh languorously dragged his wet tongue from taint to angry entrance. Now the reactions were not only audible but visible as well. Goosebumps emerged, covering the muscled hills so close to his face.

As tempting as this particular end of Trenton's body was, Hugh wanted to see the pleasure enhancing his detective's chiseled features: eyes fiercely shut, mouth slightly opened in a silent prayer, cheek resting dreamily on the carpet. Trenton couldn't be more gloriously handsome even if he were consciously trying to.

"Why'd you stop?" those cherry lips asked.

"Going somewhere, love?"

Trenton huffed, then opened his eyes and focused on Hugh. "You know Cutler is coming with Preston in less than two hours to drive us to Maryville."

"So? That doesn't mean he cannot wait while we get ready after he arrives."

"You really have no respect for other people's time." There was no heat in those words, but Trenton looked extremely silly with his arse in the air, having this conversation, cheeks still spread by his own hands.

"I'll be quick then."

"Don't you dare give me a half-assed fucking."

Yup, they didn't need to be talking right this second. "Trenton?"

"What?"

"Shut up."

Hugh went back to the pouty orifice and with lips, teeth and tongue played that instrument until it was swollen and begging to be breached by a battering ram. (Remember? History major...)

"Please, baby, fuck me."

"We have no condoms and no lube." Body thrumming, Hugh wasn't sure he would be able to walk to the bedroom and back.

"They're under the motherfuckin' couch."

Sneaky fiend.

Two fingers kept rubbing the eager hole as Hugh retrieved the strategically placed implements. Kinky Kiwi read the condom packet.

Seriously? Since when were New Zealanders a flavor? All right, Hugh's prick was too hard to be thinking of anything else but plunging into Trenton's snug tunnel.

"Do I have to grab it myself?"

Hugh loved when Trenton was like this, all hungry and demanding. Although they were both fully versatile, Trenton's power bottom side was the ultimate turn-on. "Right there with you, love." He used the aromatic rubber to circle the burning back door for a bit after coating it with Maracuyá Mousse lube. However, he had to abandon his tantalizing maneuver because Trenton pushed backward, bent on impaling himself.

Trenton rocked, undulated and rolled (as soon as Hugh was in) like there was no tomorrow. Hugh happily clasped his hands behind his neck and let his man work his magic with his sweet bum in full rotor-motion.

"Your cock is so good, so good." Trenton panted, never missing a beat of his multi-directional motions.

After a year of being together, they'd learned a great deal about each other in many departments, and they were in that stage of a relationship where the ardor of many gay couples would have diminished, transformed into a more relaxed and somewhat friendly companionship. For them, it was like the Lust switch couldn't be turned off, which was great since they both had the stamina to keep the party going for a long time.

Nevertheless, this particular encounter would be short-lived if Hugh didn't take control of the situation and subdue Trenton's frantic ministrations. One hand grabbed a hip; the other gave a hard whack to a bouncing cheek. "Slow down, cowboy. I thought I was the one supposed to be doing the fucking." Now he had both hands on Trenton's hips.

"Then do... it. I'm so close... I'm seeing stars." Trenton stopped moving, his chest heaving akin to someone just finishing a marathon.

Pulling almost all the way out, letting Trenton's sphincter playfully squeeze his glans just for a heartbeat, Hugh thrust in sharply. "Like... this?" He grunted and slowly pulled back again, reentering with another hard blow, the speed of his piston-like motion increasing as the tempo became steadier and harsher.

Minutes passed...

“That’s the spot, yeah!”

“Getting there, love. You coming with me?” Hugh was ready to burst. He just needed to do it along with Trenton.

“Now, baby, fill me up. Argh, yeeessss.”

The potent grip on his prick was Hugh’s undoing. His entire body trembled, and rope after rope of jizz was expelled, leaving him shattered and exhausted, sprawled over Trenton’s still convulsing frame.

Hugh found his voice, after several minutes of his body and brain adjusting to a more serene state of being, and joked, “Crikey, you cannot say that I did *not* send you to your mother’s house well-fucked.”

Trenton sighed, somewhat dreamily. “Gosh. Wait until we get back to have more of this? It’s gonna be pure torture.” His iPhone trilled.

“And that’s our cue to start acting like not-so-horny people.”

“What are you, pair of loonies, beaming about?”

Preston chuckled and punched Cutler, who was driving, in the shoulder. His hazel eyes flashed in naughty amusement. Cutler looked at Trenton through the mirror. “Geez, can two guys not be just happy?”

“I’m a cop, little brother. I know how to read people.”

Hugh rubbed and tapped Trenton’s arm. They didn’t need words.

“Oh, BBD, we met the most wonderful girl.” Preston turned his body so he was looking at both Trenton and Hugh in the back seat, wearing a grin so big, it’d have been painful in a less pretty face.

And that ponytail helps a lot to equate Preston with any cover of a romance novel.

Cutler elbowed Preston. “Shhhh.”

“Whaaat? We’re all adults here.” Preston pointed with his thumb to the back seat as he sat up straight. “That’s a gay cop who fucks an Aussie back there, not some Southern Congressman.”

“And that Aussie is no preacher either,” Trenton added happily.

Hugh shifted and spoke in Trenton’s ear. “I’m gonna give you something to be on your knees later, love.” He noticed the tremor in the muscled frame, which in turn triggered his own hard response. “Or I can give Boy a place to confess.”

“Goddammit.”

“Hugh, what are you doing to my brother?”

“Oi, *your* brother is mine, so I can do with him whatever I want.” Hugh said it with a smile in his tone and a grin on his face since he had his eyes locked with Cutler in the mirror.

Cutler arched an eyebrow. “Whatever that *is*, not in my car. Okay?”

“You know that’s a diversion, right?” Trenton shook his head.

“Totally.” Hugh poked Preston. “Spill it. What’s the happiness about?”

Preston looked at Cutler with a well-practiced and fake attempt to seek permission to tell them whatever it was they were all giddy about. Cutler rolled his eyes and nodded.

“All right, we met the most amazing girl in the world, absolutely hot and definitively digging both of us.”

“And...?” Trenton had on his face the biggest question mark Hugh had ever seen, which was hilarious.

“For a cop you can be clueless sometimes, BBD.” Preston waved a hand between Cutler and him. “Bi’s here? She likes us and doesn’t mind having a guy on each end, and she also thinks two guys going at it is mega scorching!”

“Fuck me dead! You shaggers found the perfect bitch for your alpha bogan love affair,” Trenton burst with such perfect Australian diction, he might as well have been born beside a pack of dingoes.

“You wanker, that was my line.” Hugh pulled Trenton toward him for a deep kiss.

The woman singing on the radio, Cutler’s outburst defending their open-minded lady friend, Preston’s cackle, everything became muffled and

distant as Hugh's tongue explored Trenton's mouth, traveling, commanding, owning.

The world seemed to slow down and lose gravity. All was ethereal and bright. And the declaration came out, easy and perfect. "I love you."

Trenton growled and lifted Hugh bodily, settling him on his lap and becoming all paws and teeth. He stopped for a second before going back to give attention to Hugh's neck, "I love you, too."

Hugh giggled and murmured, "I never thought I'd find love on the road from Maryville."

THE END

Author Bio

Born a Sagittarius in the fabulous year of the Rooster of '69, at the hour when his cat was about to become a complete dragon, Gabbo de la Parra landed on the Caribbean Coast of the outlandish Republic of Panama to start the adventure of Life.

Love and the Internet brought him to Middle Tennessee to embrace the American Dream and his husbandly romance. Writing has been an important part of his life since a very early age, and it's a pleasure to share his stories with others thanks to the wonderful opportunities this land provides. He is the author of the Spaniards series, Prince of Atlantis and other titles available through Amazon, Barnes & Noble and Smashwords.

Gabbo cherishes Life with a southern gentleman in a townhouse close to a lake, crowded with the spirits of his characters and their pets: black esoteric kitty, Luna; white emo-twink Maltese, Chance; and street smart Russian Blue, Bella.

His novels Septima Luna and Another Dawn on Planet X (the child of his two stories for LiAW) will come to your e-reading devices in Fall 2013 and The Pompeian Horse in Spring 2014.

Contact & Media Info

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TARNISHED TOYS

By Gabbo de la Parra

Photo Description

Two men have scorching sex, doggy style. Latin Lover is on all fours, his mouth opened in a moan of absolute ecstasy while a fair-skinned hunk covered in ink (even his shaved head) pounds our caramel otter to the nth degree. Tattoo Man's big hands steer the willing bottom with a possessive grasp on his shoulders in a spiffing ride to Orgasmville.

Story Letter

This is what happened to me. I'm the poor fool on the bottom. Ok, I admit I used to be a shallow party animal who got off on proving that he was God's devilish gift to hot, impressionable young men, especially if they thought they were satisfied with being someone else's. So I'd plunder and pillage, fuck and run. Until I had the idiot idea of getting myself a tattoo to add even more to my (or so I'd always figured) irresistible hotness.

Couldn't know the weird, haunted-looking artist (no that's not him, I'm getting to that. He was scary too, the tattooist, but I'd been too greedy for that one particular design in his dog-eared portfolio to back out right there and then like I shoulda) had been the boyfriend of the pretty young thing whose... head I turned a few months ago, played around with for a few weeks and then dumped like all the others, and who was now vegetating on some suicide ward with the lights out and nobody home.

It was a good tattoo, too, I have to admit. This sexy ring of weird symbols right around my perfect 'ceps. Would have made me look totally droolworthy when I was shaking my ass, shirt off, at the club. Except I never got that far.

Hey, it was itchy, so I rubbed it. Next thing I knew, centuries of pleasure and pain were frying my brain while this man-thing, muscles rippling, blue fire in its eyes and its strange, swirling markings glowing with each pounding clap of sexual thunder... was having its vicious way with my aching carcass. Again and again. I swear its—his—tool poked right up through my black little heart and right into my soul. We travelled through space and time while pirates,

demons, dragons and spacemen and god knows what else had their way with me and taught me things about loving and suffering I couldn't have ever dreamed of. Somehow they all—even the weird, huge aliens and the fanged shifters—looked like guys I'd done, except bigger, stronger, hotter and more terrifying.

Every night he'd vanish and I'd sink exhausted—instead of heading for the usual party—into black dreamless sleep. Every morning I'd wake up real groggy and—fuck—idly rub at my arm before I could help it. And we'd be off to a new world, a new delirious torture. I can feel my treacherous hand twitching even now as I desperately try to write this.

Dear Author, what's been happening to me, and what for the love of mercy is gonna happen next? I'm a quivering, helpless piece of meat and I'm crying myself to sleep every night. There's nowhere to run and hide from him, I know he's waiting inside my skin, waiting... punishing... torturing... pleasuring... like a demon drug... horrible and irresistible... and I need... I need... more... if it kills me...

Release me Dear Author from this curse, I beg of you, howsoever you can or will! Bring me back to the living reality and I promise I will be someone new, someone better, for the rest of my life... or else make my atoms dissolve into the ether just so I am finally free again and at peace.

Dear Author—feel free to change my story to suit your reality as long as you follow the spirit of the idea!

Sincerely,

Goesta

Story Info

Genre: contemporary, paranormal.

Tags: angels/demons/gods, spacemen/aliens, shifters, pirates, enemies to lovers, revenge, redemption, gangbangs

Content warnings: dubious consent, apparent rape (you'll understand when you read it), one EOUS (Ego Of Unusual Size)

Word Count: 15,539

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TARNISHED TOYS

By Gabbo de la Parra

It is not violence that best overcomes hate—nor vengeance that most certainly heals injury.

Charlotte Bronte (1816-1855)

SOME APPETITE

Jairo Laguna danced. His hips gyrated and his unclaimed, luscious tush swung in time with strobe lights and blazing music. His hairy, muscular chest exuded those perfumed drops people were said to catch in little flasks, for good fortune, before those drops traveled from his furry abs into the forbidden zone inside his second-skin jeans.

His retinue swayed around him, making a human barrier as young worshipers vied for his attention between the writhing bodies protecting him. Until Jairo chose his prey for the night, these fishies would circle-swim, flashing their sparkly smiles and sweet contortions, hoping for the ride of a lifetime.

The slap came sudden and loud. “Bastard.”

A collective gasp surged, leaving everybody immobile on the dance floor.

“What’s your problem, bitch?” Jairo spat, caressing his stinging cheek. His eyes threw daggers at those supposed to hinder shit like this.

Held by his subjects, the woman’s wild countenance became more livid the more she thrashed. “It’s all your fault. He’s in a fucking coma because of you.”

“Get this woman out of my face.” He turned and gave the DJ a signal, making a circle with his forefinger in the air.

The woman kicked and snarled as two no-neck security men took her away. “You will pay, you will pay!”

The dancing tide swallowed her out of Jairo's vision, and he forgot about her in two minutes and thirty-three seconds.

Jairo found his victim of the night away from his coral reef, twirling over one giant speaker at his right. Taken from the pages of a fashion magazine, his target wore crazy-printed skinny trousers, an outlandish bow tie and that neo-50's hairstyle with the little twist along the top. Once those eyes had found Jairo's stare—framed by his thick, perfectly-trimmed eyebrows—the prey couldn't do anything but float directly to his demise, where he'd be chewed and his sorry bones thrown back to the world after a seismic experience.

Fifteen minutes and seventeen seconds later, Forgotten-Name Automaton squirmed as Jairo bit his lower lip and spread his lovely cheeks with three massive digits, finger-fucking him in the sweaty confines of the club's dark room. "Oh my God, you taste like honey and your hands... Please Jairo, I want your cock inside me."

"You need to stop talking." Jairo pushed the boy's head down until he was on his knees, level with the iron mastiff behind his zipper, which waited to be unleashed all over the pretty, pouty mouth. "Suck me off, and I'll fuck you in every corner of this frigging blackout."

In a nanosecond, the beast was being thoroughly attended.

"I feel like getting a tattoo tonight," Jairo announced.

Powder-blue haired Erica bounced like a schoolgirl with the right answer. "What about that twenty-four-hour place I got mine last month?"

Sometimes Jairo let his entourage make decisions; yet, at that particular tattoo parlor, the guy creped the fuck out of him. Not that he'd ever admit such a thing aloud.

Sinister or not, the haunted-looking son of a gun was a genius with the needles, and Jairo had a hard-on for one of the designs in his dog-eared drawing book. "Seems fit. Let's go."

They boarded two taxis, and Jairo couldn't wait to sport the hot badge that would enhance his extraordinary caramel complexion: Heaven's gift to gay men.

The trip took twenty-nine minutes and eight seconds. They disembarked on the sidewalk opposite to the shop. Tel Aviv, the name of the place, and its “Open” sign were exactly the same neon crap you would see in those motels where people got smothered, bled and hacked. The only consolation to the gloomy exterior, beyond the artist’s mastery, was the mezuzah at the doorpost. That was supposed to fend off bad juju. Right?

Creep Numero Uno was shirtless behind the counter, leafing through a magazine with a huge Dia de los Muertos mask on the cover. He arched a purple eyebrow. “How can I help you?”

Jairo’s troupe took possession of the empty place, and he gave Creepo a wink, sensing a fellow member of the rainbow team, something he didn’t notice last time because the trip hadn’t been about him. An oddly familiar face tattooed on the guy’s chest was a fierce indicator, too. “I want a band around my bicep.” And he flexed, the balls of his ’ceps identical to bowling ones.

Nothing wrong with showing off.

The arched eyebrow hiked up at least three more millimeters. “If you want color, it’d be a couple of hours.”

His best smile shone over the grey ghoul. “We’re not in a hurry.” Jairo turned his head a little, and his companions were devotedly negating with their heads. “I know exactly what I want. Where’s your book?”

“Here.” The attempt at cheerfulness was catastrophic to say the least, and the catatonic grin never reached Spooky’s eyes. He pulled the heavy book from under the counter and put it in front of Jairo with a muffled thud.

Magically, Jairo opened the book to the appropriate page and poked with his finger. “This one.”

“Cool. Fill out this form while I prepare my instruments.” Creepo handed Jairo a clipboard with photocopied releases and a pen.

The worst part was that Dude wasn’t even ugly, it was just the whole dark cloud raining and thundering over his head and the serpentine way he said everything that made one think of serrated knives.

After nine minutes and nine seconds of form-filling and indecipherable, loud music, Creep Numero Uno called Jairo to one of the work stations.

Definitely more people worked there during the day. In the spacious cubicle the music wasn't as intrusive, and the dividers were furnished with the kind of multicolored tiles you would find in a kitchen or a bathroom—along with fabulous art, ranging from the downright eerie to the impressively sublime.

Erica's tattoo was a masterpiece, but Jairo was sure his would be the motherfucking bomb.

Once Jairo got used to the buzzing of the machine and the pricking of the needle, he went into a state of semi-trance where the only reminder of reality was the strange song or prayer Dude kept mumbling from beginning to end. Of the long row of gibberish, the only word that somewhat resonated with Jairo was "golem".

He wasn't sure why, but it sounded familiar. There were enough Jewish scientists around him in the Bio Research Complex for him to know what a mezuzah was, and he heard them now and then saying things in some form of Hebrew. Jairo simply couldn't place that *golem* thing at the moment.

"You're not going to cover this?" The jeweled blues, greens and reds were astonishing.

"Nope. Better let it breathe."

"You covered the girl's outside last month."

"I don't know what you're talking about. I stand by my work." Narrowed eyes met his.

Maybe Creepo didn't cover it. Jairo wasn't really paying attention. He paid and, surrounded by his subjects, exited the locale.

They looked sad and lost as Jairo boarded his cab, giving them the promise of new adventures the following night.

It had been a delicious Friday night. The weekend was just starting.

SUMMONING

That murmur...

Someone is calling me, using my names.

The nebulous haze dissipated as Triple Z regained his consciousness. The mortal world was requesting his presence, his power to avenge.

Invisible to all eyes but those of the mortal who had summoned him, he walked around the men. One worked with a strange machine, using a steel alloy Triple Z could not readily recognize and creating patterns on another's beefy upper arm. The child of darkness, the artist, still chanted without realizing his call had been answered.

Triple Z stood facing him, letting the designs covering his ethereal skin glow.

Expecting the apparition, the man didn't flinch. He continued his work, simply changing his canticle from beckoning to plea. "Serve my revenge, All Powerful. Antoine Keller floats in the sleepless sleep of coma thanks to this bastard, son of scorpions, Jairo Laguna. He broke my love's heart and destroyed his mind. Teach Jairo Laguna a lesson, you inevitably handsome, you gloriously radiant, you summarily holy."

With a bow, Triple Z let his voice be heard by the wronged lover. "Your revenge shall be served." He positioned himself to the right of his quarry, since the artist worked at his left. "I shall stay by him until his heart shatters and his mind seeks oblivion."

"Thank you, All Powerful. The sacred ink is your portal to his body."

"So be it."

Made with the burnt feathers of white doves sacrificed at dawn, the ink mingled seamlessly with his prey's blood, and the aroma stirred Triple Z's loins. "You are mine, Jairo Laguna."

After a swift farewell to his comrades, Jairo enclosed himself in a horseless vehicle. The last time Triple Z had been in the mortal world, people still rode

horses and used them to pull their carriages. He studied the man beside him. The swarthy complexion and dark hair of the desert men, which Triple Z had loved so much while human, dominated the becoming specimen.

Triple Z admired the coffee-colored eyes and the smirking, full mouth. Those lips were beautiful and cruel at the same time, and he yearned to taste them, see them around his cock. Soon he would learn all of this man's secrets and use them against him.

The tall building where they alighted from the vehicle served as dwelling place for hundreds of mortals. Triple Z could feel their essences wandering about it, and he wondered how things had changed so radically to force people to live constricted on top of each other. The structure reminded him of an inflated obelisk.

Through glass doors, they entered a spacious room and then buried themselves in a moving box. Since Jairo did not show any signs of anxiety, this must be a normal thing to do instead of climbing a thousand stairs.

Surprised by Jairo's accommodations, Triple Z realized he had been mistaken. Just the entry room could house an entire family, and as they moved deeper into the place he understood that this seemed like luxurious living. Nevertheless, it must be a sad existence to live in such an abundant place by oneself.

Used to crowded spaces full of colorful ornaments and draperies, the efficient, pastel and almost devoid-of-emotion area left Triple Z more than intrigued, concerned. But there was nothing he could do to understand his quarry until he was able to access his mind and dominate his body.

What Triple Z assumed was a bedroom, thanks to the enormous cushioned square with pillows on it, was even more emotionless. A group of idols on a shelf was the only thing that seemed, if not loved, at least cherished. These were also the only things with several colors in the room.

While Jairo was taking a long healthy piss, Triple Z examined the six idols. They did not represent any deity he knew, and the material they were made of was unknown to him. The shelf did not appear a shrine either: no candles, no

incense, nothing hinting of ritual or worship. And yet, he could sense appreciation and longing poured into these enigmatic little statues.

Naked, Jairo stood in front of a big mirror inside the water closet. He looked at himself with narcissistic adoration and caressed his shoulders and pectorals, pleasure oozing from his every pore. The smell of sex wafted like the incense Triple Z couldn't sense within the house. Jairo had been with a man before he went to the artist, a male he felt nothing for, a mere toy.

Filthy user.

Tracing the low relief of his abdomen, Jairo played with his trimmed pubic hair, the soft continuation of all the silky curls covering that magnificent torso. The roundness of his hard buttocks was also deliciously furred. Triple Z foresaw his hands parting the exquisite flesh and sheathing himself, forcing the tight ring: a piston, a spear, a ramrod.

Hard and aching, Triple Z reveled in the fragrance of the sacred ink enhanced by Jairo's blood, and he wanted to bite, to possess, to torment. His mouth watered as Jairo walked to the bed pulling his long cock, honed muscles rippling and exuding desire, to lie on a place made for multiple partners, for magnificent orgies.

On his back, Jairo stroked. Deliberate slowness made every stroke languid and teasing. His firmly planted feet supported strong legs pumping an imaginary lover. After so many years of unconsciousness, a few instants should amount to nothing, but kneeling between Jairo's thighs while awaiting the signal was a sweltering torture for Triple Z. He would most definitely enjoy his duty as avenger of the artist, both for the cause and for his own delight.

Not a moment too soon, Jairo scratched the newly acquired tattoo on his arm, dragging Triple Z into his body, a genie swiftly returning to his lamp. And they became one as the veil was rent, and every dark nook was revealed, analyzed and assimilated.

Triple Z trembled with the raw need coursing through Jairo's body because it befitted him, born of the knowledge of eons of isolation, of constant solitude even amid a crowd. They were the same, and that shocked Triple Z to his core.

The meaning of the idols also rattled Triple Z as the knowledge surfaced.

Short, skinny, bottle-bottom-glasses wearer and foreign, Jairo became the target of bullies quicker than you could say “quarterback.” By the time he was sixteen, tired of being shoved into lockers, trash cans and every minuscule space available at school, he made a life-changing decision: his geekiness needed to remain balled inside his body, and that body must become a portent of muscle and desire. The Striking Six were his inspiration. Six champions from different realms and eras united, thanks to the power of Elmar, to thwart iniquity and elevate the just no matter in what universe the wrong happened.

Essentially children’s toys, Jairo had sought the collection as an adult with the devotion of a true believer. But contrary to what most collectors did, he opened the boxes and had them on display free of conventional restraints. He personally dusted and polished them once a week, every Sunday when he awoke from his nightly forays.

Triple Z forced Jairo to abandon his purpose and fall asleep.

This information changed nothing.

He had been summoned, and his duty was foremost.

LAUGHING DOLPHINS

Jairo had always wanted to go on a cruise, but lack of money and family obligations—and after he had money, his work—never allowed him the opportunity. Now he was finally admiring the ocean in all its majesty. The salty breeze caressed him while he rested his elbows on the railing. Although there was something weird about this railing. On what third-rate cruise line was he vacationing that it was wood and seemingly old, for that matter?

Twenty-nine seconds into his confusion by the railing, Jairo turned around and realized he must be on the set of some movie, since this looked like a galleon or something, but the water seemed so real.

Fucking special effects.

What the Hell was he wearing? He was definitively hallucinating. No way in Hell would he participate as an extra in a frigging pirate movie. The only thing he didn't have was the effing parrot on his shoulder. At least the clothes didn't stink the way he supposed bedraggled outfits ought to.

He wasn't going to panic. An explanation should be at hand as soon as he found somebody to ask. A group of men, in the same atrocious pirate regalia but with gay porn stars' good looks and even better bodies, appeared as if cued. "Hey guys, what's going on here? What movie is this?"

"What's a movie, matey?" The apparent leader of the five tall pirate-wannabes regarded him with an unclothing stare. The others spread and surrounded Jairo.

At five nine, Jairo wasn't exactly tall, but what he lacked in height he had in bulk, and he wasn't a stranger to getting his hide out of situations through effective brawling. He'd learned long ago not to fear numbers, but skill.

Beyond his aggressors, Jairo saw a man. A stupidly handsome naked man, with symbols tattooed all over from head to toe, focused on him with a concentration that was frankly unnerving. Resting his shoulder on one of the masts, powerful arms crossed over an impressive chest, the hypnotic gaze seemed to unravel every thread of Jairo's soul.

Coño.

Tattoo Hunk left his perch and moved toward them. Not a bottom, and not even a fan of sucking, Jairo did his best to ignore the monster dangling between thick thighs. The sleeping boa brought to memory a conversation he'd had with his sulking dyke of a sister.

“What’s the point of preferring men if you don’t like a cock up your ass?”

“Bottoming is submission, and nobody will ever dominate me again.”

He'd had enough jock morons shoving and pushing and hurting him in school. Now where were they? Balding, with their nine-to-five pedestrian jobs and nagging wives, while Jairo was fucking their younger versions to oblivion on a nightly basis, with money to throw by the bucket compared to their sorry existence.

The naked man smirked as if aware of Jairo's thoughts. He put his hand over one of the goon's shoulders, and they moved to let him pass. Living coals, his eyes disrobed Jairo slowly, savoring a long-awaited meal, enjoying the gusto of devouring something he hunted with his bare hands.

Jairo resisted the flames threatening to engulf him, glaring at the naked intruder, ready to fight with teeth and claws.

A single word, like thunder at midnight, shattered his armor. “Mine.” The man snapped his fingers, and Jairo was equally naked. Then the naked man wetted a finger, and the image of Jairo's cock owning that mouth made Jairo shiver. As if following a secret command, two goons grabbed him, turning his body so he faced the ocean, bent over the wooden rail.

Hands parted his cheeks. He thrashed. Iron bars held him in place. A wet touch seared his hole, just a whisper, a wink, but it ignited a chain reaction similar to lava consuming everything in its path. Jairo couldn't fight the blistering urgency to submit, to cave, to be ransacked.

The thundering voice caressed him, rain soothing his inflamed flesh. “I give you to them.”

“No, please, it's you I want, please take me,” Jairo begged, and he snuffed out that particle in the back of his mind screaming, “Do not submit, no.”

The man climbed the rail and walked in the air, owner of the ether, leaving Jairo behind to be feasted upon.

“Take me with you, I’ll be good, I promise.”

Tattoo Hunk stopped and cocked his head with a side glance. He turned completely and, still floating, assumed a lotus position, giving Jairo his complete attention. “Be good to them.”

Rough hands kneaded Jairo’s ass, teeth grazed his shoulders and back. The heat within him ratcheted to unbearable heights, and just the first nudge of one goon’s cock breaching his hole seemed able to placate the uncontrollable raging. Pushing out, as he had told innumerable tricks to do, he closed his eyes, succumbing to the urges clawing at him.

When he opened them again, the suspended naked man contemplated him, every line of his beautiful tattoos glowing with gold radiance, a solemn expression marring his otherworldly features.

Jairo immediately felt unworthy and lowered his eyes, ashamed. In an instant the world seemed so wrong that even the magical dolphins racing along the ship gave him the finger amid their sordid laughter.

And the men used him.

And the men gave him pleasure, with deft hands and encouraging words.

And the rebellious little voice was no match for the volcano swallowing him.

Jairo woke up with a start, pissed off like the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse.

What was wrong with him?

Never, not even in his weirdest dreams, had he wanted to be fucked so badly and, least of all, by a bunch of men. When did a gangbang sneak into his fantasies? Perhaps a reverse gangbang where he fucked six or seven guys, tight asses up in a hot row of willing holes—but being the object of such attentions, no fucking way.

A consummate egoist, he wouldn't enjoy a threesome, on the odd chance that one of the other partners might consider sharing the hole he was fucking with him. Nope, the most inveterate bottom could come up with some doltish idea in the middle of a romp and that would not make him happy, no matter how sweet the moronic ass.

Fiercely closed windows kept the sun at bay, but he needed to move and face the strange dream. As a scientist, he knew dreams were just the residual chatter of daily events, a simple brain-shedding of all the unused emotions and filtered thoughts. Someone must have talked about a gangbang at the club.

Were there any pirate movies in theaters right now?

And what was that, thinking about Veronica, his screaming, muff-loving, long gone and almost forgotten sister?

Wasn't it enough, this stupid itch in his unscathed hole, that he was unearthing buried people?

Double Coño.

He'd never been partial to tattooed men, either. But there was something about the naked muscular man with so many beautiful designs over his body that turned Jairo on like nothing before. Some were like wings of fabulous beasts, others like anchors, perfectly symmetrical and mirrored on both sides. Jairo hadn't seen any visible scribbling, just lines becoming wonderful forms.

His morning wood throbbed.

The damned thing felt like it'd been hard for hours. Talk about wet dreams, he was drenched in pre-cum and some of it was even caked on his abs.

Jairo needed a shower and an obscene amount of coffee.

After that, he'd make a phone call. There was always some willing little number to suck away all traces of this annoying bottoming eagerness from his system. Jairo was ready to fuck some trick until that hole cried *Uncle*.

The mirror welcomed him. He winked and scratched his healing tattoo.

If someone had punched him in the face, his lights wouldn't have been knocked out so fast.

SMOLDERING

Triple Z held Jairo's hand, guiding him through the rocky steps carved on the ground. "Where are you taking me?" his quarry asked, annoyance explicit in his tone.

"It is time for another lesson." Triple Z did not bother to start with Jairo dressed this time.

"I don't even know your name." Jairo pulled back, making him stop.

"Only the worthy learn my names." He saw Jairo roll his eyes.

"If you're going to be popping into my dreams like this, I've got to give you a name."

He turned completely and faced Jairo. "Triple Z. That is the way it might translate into your language."

"That's not a name. That's what they draw in comic strips when they want to represent people sleeping."

It was good that along with all the scientific knowledge Triple Z had acquired from Jairo's mind was the mundane nonsense, too. "So be it."

"I refuse to call you that."

"Suit yourself. You are the one who needs to call me something. It is irrelevant to me."

A low growl was the response. Narrowed eyes sheltered flames and daggers. The rictus of the cruel mouth was an invitation, and Triple Z took it. Jairo stiffened, not accustomed to someone else being the attacker.

Triple Z chuckled, his tongue prying open the resisting entrance, and he hissed, "Give." One hand on Jairo's throat, the other squeezed the fuzzy hardness of that rounded ass.

His eyes were mere slits, and Jairo opened and melted like falling snow as soon as their tongues met.

So hard and so pliant, Triple Z drowned in the urgent craving to lift and fuck Jairo against the nearest rock wall. But that body could not be his just yet.

He had been summoned; he had a goal to achieve. “Come, your teachers await.”

Lava moved slowly, glowing and menacing, consuming the little fragments falling from the cavern’s ceiling. Triple Z sensed the apprehension coming in thick waves from Jairo. So different from the first encounter, since this time he was aware of the inevitable outcome.

“How many?”

“Never more than you can handle.”

In truth, Triple Z would batter and destroy Jairo’s boundaries until there was nothing left to protect his mind once his body was broken.

“Why?”

“If you need to ask, you are in for a long, hard experience.”

“How can I know what I’m being punished for if you don’t tell me?”

“The fact that you recognize punishment speaks of guilt. Just dig deeper. It is all there.”

“No. I know it’s some kind of penance because a reward would not make me suffer.”

“Do not play the victim card. It is offensive coming from you.”

Jairo jerked his hand away. “Fuck you.” He almost tripped on the ledge. The sluggish-moving lava yawned, ready to receive him.

“Careful.” Grabbing him by the waist, Triple Z’s chest slid deliciously over Jairo’s broad back. A well-connected elbow rewarded him. “Ouch.”

“Your manhandling is unnecessary.”

“Be my guest.” Triple Z flung Jairo upward where he was caught by one of the dragon shifters. Between the dragons and the demons, they would take good care of Jairo. Triple Z sat in midair, crossing his legs, and could not understand why Jairo’s hatred, magnificently sculpted on his face, shocked him so much; it was something to be expected.

Jairo jerked, snarled, and kicked like a rabid, cornered dog. Frankly, the only thing missing was the foam spurting from his mouth.

“What am I thinking?” Triple Z became a bullet and flew straight to the fracas where three dragon shifters, partially morphed just to have their wings available, were having a hard time controlling an enraged Jairo. “Part his legs, part his legs!” he yelled, frantic.

“No, no, you fucker.” Jairo was suddenly quiet. “Are you going to...?”

Triple Z shook his head. He did not have words. He wetted his finger and swept it quickly over Jairo’s hole. “This will help.”

Those dark eyes glazed over. Jairo moaned, and his entire frame turned limp immediately.

The two dragons holding Jairo’s arms grunted, apparently not happy that he would not put up a fight anymore. The one spreading the powerful legs barked, “There’s no fun like this.”

“No reason to ruin him before the others have their chance.”

Triple Z could not understand why, but even to his ears the excuse had sounded beyond lame.

Four flame-covered demons ascended to join the dragon shifters. The cerulean tongues of fire twisted and turned as if trying to escape their owners, beautiful and dangerous at once. Triple Z saw Jairo sober up for a second at the first touch of one of the demons, then crumble into primal ecstasy when the flaming dick entered him.

Eight bodies began a macabre dance of writhing torsos and pounding hips, tearing claws and burning mouths; and in the center of it all, Jairo. His delicious skin like desert sand glistened, drenched in sweat, kneaded and molded by fiery hands. Veiny wings hid him from time to time, only to reappear with other lips covering his, other tongues tasting the sparkling hair covering his chest, his arms, his legs.

Other men spreading, claiming, owning, and that had Triple Z hard and leaking for all the wrong reasons. He was one with Jairo as his mission required, but he wanted to be the sole giver of pleasure, the only one capable of quenching the spiraling need, the tortured hours of solitude.

So similar and so contrary by the circumstances.

Triple Z felt a particularly bitter pang of jealousy when one of the dragon shifters took Jairo's cock in his mouth; he should be the one doing that.

Where did that come from?

He sighed. No point in tormenting himself with all the things that could not be.

One after the other, the dragon shifters and the demons came over Jairo's chest, face and hair, coating him with their lust, drowning him in ecstasy as he burst and screamed. His orgasm was so powerful it made Triple Z shudder.

No release for him; not until the quarry truly begged for it, not just with his mouth, but with his eyes, with his very soul. Only then could Triple Z get his pleasure, ensured the domination was complete and the lesson evident.

Simply put, the lava around him and the flames of the demons were mere sparks compared to the fire consuming him for Jairo. Never had a prey stirred such blind need beyond the objective, and this dangerous passion would lead him nowhere. Failure did not exist in his language. Neither did wanting, but how could he deny this wanton grip, eating at him, tearing at him?

A demon deposited Jairo in Triple Z's arms. "We saw understanding in his eyes."

"Thank you."

"You brought us here. We are yours to command."

Flames jumped and squirmed, and in his mind's eye Triple Z beheld the demon supine, compliant and inviting. The others came down and rested on one knee. Similar images assaulted him. Obedient and submissive, they offered themselves to him.

Not even a flicker of temptation caressed Triple Z. He could not muster a single tingling for their provocative forms and handsome features. Not for the power of their muscles, nor the grave tones of their otherworldly voices.

They were ashes of a snuffed conflagration.

"I must take care of Jairo."

And he truly meant it from the darkest depths of his tarnished soul.

FITTEST'S SURVIVAL

Jairo was cold. His body felt ground and pounded as if somebody was preparing him to be grilled and eaten. He didn't want to open his eyes. The uncomplicated shade, perturbed by that annoying glare outside his eyelids, was somewhat comforting.

I'm Hank Marvin.

The howling hole in his stomach forced him to accept the reality of matter: no food—no life. Even the quirkiest cells he studied in his research needed sustenance. Who was he to avoid what nature intended, the survival of the fittest. The same way he turned around his appearance and behavior, not only to fit in but to conquer.

He found his bones thrown on the bathroom floor where he'd blacked out. Patting his head, he searched for a lump, a bleeding wound, anything to explain why he'd been out for so long.

Nothing.

Eleven hours and forty-seven minutes neutralized, according to the bedside clock. Twenty-two attempts of the world to communicate with him, ranging from voicemails to text messages and urgent emails. Going out for food was out of the question. An hour to dress and another waiting for a table somewhere would be excruciating and boring as hell.

No other option than to whip up something in his own kitchen. He was a good cook, but he rarely did it. He would deal with his subjects after his hunger was sated.

First, underwear. Nude cooking was for naughty TV shows and sketchy porn.

Only breakfast stuff available. Well, he was technically breaking fast after all; he hadn't eaten in twenty-six hours, seventeen minutes and nineteen seconds.

His top-of-the-line kitchen was far from the cozy, homey one he had grown up with. His only concession to filial nostalgia were the burners. His mother always said, "A stove without flame is like a house without memories."

The blue and yellow flames reminded him of something, and recognition smashed his balls like a well-aimed soccer ball. Demons had made love to him, for he hadn't been raped so much as every single entity had been rough and demanding. The way they'd looked into his eyes spoke of nothing but pure passion and endless urge to satisfy.

They'd given him so much pleasure, Jairo couldn't understand what this all meant.

Jairo was on the floor again, this time huddled against the doors of the cabinet under the kitchen island, his knees drawn up and enclosed by his arms. He rocked, trying to do a sensible analysis of what the fuck was wrong with him. Tattoo Hunk had been in both—should he call those dreams, nightmares... delusions?

Triple Z.

What kind of BS was that?

“Only the worthy learn my names,” the naked god had tossed at Jairo cryptically.

More than one name was the key here. Logic indicated there ought to be three, and all starting with Z. But what the hell had logic to do with this absurd situation? Why try to infuse rationality into this plain chemical imbalance? He needed a CAT scan ASAP, and screw everything else.

Images bombarded him. Some demons had beautiful flames all over their bodies, others appeared more human but sported bat-like wings, no—not like bats, he had seen similar wings on other creatures—dragons! Dragonmen, that's what the other demons looked like. Now he wasn't sure if the fire creatures were demons at all, when they reminded him of the comics' Human Torch. Weren't demons supposed to be grotesque?

None of these beings had repelled him.

Another lesson.

What was he supposed to learn, to be a bottom? This couldn't be about that. Had he been a butt slut from the beginning, and now his innermost desires had caught up with him? No. There was no rule saying that you had to love cock because you liked men.

Oh for Pete's sake, he was a biochemist, not a frigging shrink. Not even in his difficult adolescence had he received even eighteen seconds of therapy. He had figured it out all by himself. What he needed to do, how he needed to act, whom he must fuck to gain status. His dick had been the dominant one in every encounter. A midlife crisis? Nah, at twenty-eight, he was a long way from his ass turning the tables on him. Or was he?

Too many interrogations, and not the kind he was used to dealing with. His stomach protested, and he shook away all the question marks crowding in on him like medusae. "I hear you."

Eleven minutes and forty-three seconds later, he was devouring an omelet resembling a large pizza. A family-size bottle of OJ on its way to being gone was by his side, and he hadn't bothered to find a glass. He was drinking directly as he shouldn't do. In the end, he didn't share a thing in his apartment with anyone.

His cell phone begged for attention, ringing incessantly. Jairo didn't move from his perch until there wasn't a crumb left on his plate. He was childishly tempted to lick the plate when he finished, so ravenous he was. The stubble on his face scratched him when he cleaned his mouth with the back of his hand, after the last drop of juice disappeared. Shaving was in order if he meant to go out.

He padded to his bedroom and picked up the cell phone. With his mind resolute, he sent a simple broadcast message: *on your own tonight*.

Seven *things* had had their way with him, and before that, five pirates; his sweet body ached and there was nothing in the world he wanted more than to rest in his bed, and, if he was honest with himself, lick his mental wounds. The club and the people in it could blow to pieces for all he cared.

What, another licking thought?

Jairo was not just becoming a butt slut, but he was turning oral too? He hadn't sucked dick in any of those wretched nightmares, right?

Wet dreams. That was it, plain run-of-the-mill night emissions, nothing else. He awoke so groggy he hadn't noticed the dried semen on his chest; his hand caressed his pubes and he found more spunk, stiff and flaky. He looked

down and studied himself. He couldn't fathom whether he had come many times or several people had come on him.

Impossible.

Didn't make any sense to assign physical properties to erotic dreams. For all the hours he'd been out, he could have come several times in normal circumstances. Jairo refused to believe these things had actually happened. That stretch of science, where everything happening in your brain is real because if your brain doesn't process it, it doesn't exist, was more fucked than a guy gangbang-ed by a soccer team. Wait five nanoseconds—he was that guy, and one of the replacements had already joined the eleven field players.

Sweet Darwin.

Jairo pinched the bridge of his nose, then ran his hand over his entire face and threw his body on the bed. He stared at the ceiling, frustrated to the nth degree. His tattoo itched, and even though he knew he wasn't supposed to be picking on it, the easy relief of scratching gave him an almost orgasmic satisfaction. He closed his eyes, enjoying...

It was as if someone had a plastic bag over his head. He gasped, recovering his breathing and ready to kill the SOB. He adjusted to the minute light slowly, only to discover he was crouched on dirt and greenery and what the fuck?

This looked like a jungle. Tall looming trees and thick lianas surrounded his little clearing. Night creatures chattered and laughed darkly. Seriously? Now Tattoo Hunk would appear arm in arm with Tarzan to fuck him. Way to fall into cliché abductions. Why not bring some African warriors, since every nightmare seemed to be a gangbang-fest?

His dick was hard, and a transparent drop peeked from the slit. Jairo was not going down without a fight. His weapon was the one doing the stabbing tonight.

A more human laughter rang around him. "Delude yourself. You are mine to do as I please, and you will pleasure whomever I wish you to."

"Anyone but you, huh? What game is this?" Jairo growled, searching around him, eager to pounce. "Show your face, you asswipe."

And that glorious fucking body, too.

Coño. He didn't need his betraying hole wanting to redirect his anger. That door was sealed during this brawl.

"So be it," came from his left.

Triple—no, he was not going to call the infuriating naked god that. The idiot appeared, accompanied by six large feline men. On their heads, the silken pointy ears, between long braided masses of hair, were astonishing in their mobility. Big slit pupils dominated the almond eyes on their handsome triangular faces.

Towering at least two heads over the already impressive height of T... the guy with the tattoos, the sinewy and muscular cat people advanced toward Jairo. Surrounded by tented loincloths at almost eye level, Jairo struck the first with a secure jab, and the frigging cats didn't even flinch—which exacerbated his already volatile humor. He dished out punches and elbows and a few bites, and it was like taking it out on the damned trees.

His chest heaved, and Jairo was nearly out of breath. Twenty-two minutes of using these morons as punching bags, and they hadn't remotely blinked.

The instigator uncrossed his arms and glided from the trunk where he had been resting and observing Jairo's fruitless efforts. The monolith tabbies let him through, and his hand landed over Jairo's cranium, pushing his head down and forcing his body to kneel. "Back door closed? Fine. I will give you that small victory. But the lesson remains, so you must satisfy them as you have made others satisfy you."

Coarse ground scraped his knees. Adding insult to injury, the SOBs guffawed and flexed their legs. Their huge dripping dicks poked Jairo's cheeks, forehead and jaw. He vowed to resist and dodged the smearing poles as much as he could, keeping his lips fiercely shut.

The tattoos started to glow, blinding and enthralling. The man squatted next to Jairo and pulled down Jairo's underwear, caressing his ass cheeks with strong, sure hands. The things assaulting his face became secondary, and just those hands were important. The glare made Jairo close his eyes and shudder when the man rested his square chin on the hollow of Jairo's neck, for the

designs on his scalp shone like suns. His breathing tickled. His whisper came out as one with the thunder. “Open.”

And there was no other option than to yield, to let go.

And the first taste was explosive, sublime.

And with his mouth stretched to accommodate the pleasure, only a single mantra crashed on him like interminable waves: “As you have made others.”

STELLAR

Triple Z stroked Jairo's bearded cheek.

The gloom inside the bedroom belied the bright morning outside the blackened windows.

When Isaac the Blind had willed Triple Z into being, his purpose had been to create an agent of balance. That goal had been vilified throughout the centuries with each summoning, and Triple Z had lost his true North.

Lost in the realm of Goesta after his mortal existence had finished, and without a real reason to move forward, the incantations of the alchemist and his helpful objective had been what his wandering anima needed.

Now this creature, descendant of the dwellers of the place of his creation, had made him question his decaying essence.

Did the lessons in the Book of Splendor not teach that there was no redemption without falling? There was no significant point in being good without understanding and acknowledging the human capacity to do evil.

Jairo had been wrong, but did the one who had to climb out of the darkness not shine brighter in the light than the one that never strayed from it? And knowing how all these selfish acts had come to be, would it not make clear why these things had to happen?

His finger traced the plump lower lip. Triple Z longed to taste the ambrosia from that cruel mouth again. Long black lashes fanned like the swords of a thousand soldiers, and he dipped his head and stole a tickling kiss. His whole body responded to the contact with waves and waves of violent need and destroying hunger.

Jairo moaned, and Triple Z wanted to bury himself not just in Jairo's mind but in his body as well, and purge it, and balance it, and make it new.

He still felt the sacred burn in his palms after kneading and molding the hard, furry hills of Jairo's ass. So tormented by the urge he did not plummet into: to finger and conquer, until he plucked the coveted nub of Jairo's prostate and made him sing.

Dark cists opened with a snap, and sienna eyes stared through Triple Z. Jairo sat up on his bed and rubbed his eyes, similar to a child at the opposite end of bedtime. Triple Z sighed. He would give anything for Jairo to see him in the material world, in this realm where density was everything and he was but a mere desert breeze.

Stretching and flexing, Jairo left the bed and walked to the toys Triple Z had thought were idols. He caressed one figure and murmured, "Not today."

True, it was Sunday morning, and Jairo's ritual implied the cleaning of the Striking Six, his inspiration while on the rocky path that made him what he was now. And he too had lost the true teachings of these champions along the way. So similar and so different. So much contradiction and so much unity.

The Book of Splendor said that One had to become Two to become aware of his own existence. Had to be separated to be able to look at each other; because without the Other, One would never know that there was more to him, that his opposite was what made him real and not a dream anymore.

Perhaps Triple Z had found his Other. And that other was scratching the patterns embedded with sacred blood.

Triple Z dissolved and undulated toward his quarry, determined to expedite the lessons.

"Are you not tired?"

"Of not understanding," Jairo spat.

"The more you fight the harder it will be."

"They were in my ass, they were in my mouth. What am I supposed to learn from that?"

"There is no punishment, Jairo, only consequences." Triple Z removed Jairo's hand from his neck. In a moment of weakness he had let Jairo grab him, and his skin was scalded with that blinding, plundering hunger all anew. "This is an echo of your deeds."

"I'm a scientist, not a philosopher."

"And yet, one does not exclude the other."

"Yeah, riddles and the absurd are the best bedmates."

“To use your food metaphor, then, you are just feeding poison to your cells.”

Jairo stood there, looking at him blankly, his body stiff as if thunderstruck. Triple Z sensed a whiff of understanding, but it was quickly snuffed by Jairo’s hardened resolve to not allow softness to find him.

Here, that word—*Coño*—in Jairo’s mother language would be perfectly placed.

They were in for a long and extremely thorny road.

Triple Z opened the inner door of the spaceship and offered Jairo a seat. Jairo looked around with surprising delight. “This is more like it. The other sceneries weren’t helping with my learning method.”

“You think this is a joke, some innocuous play, a silly movie?” Triple Z glared at Jairo. “I wanted this to be swift, but I see you like it complicated and traumatic.”

“Maybe if you were my teacher, things would be different.”

The arched eyebrow and the smirk were too much. “Enough. I am going to let others take care of you.” He opened the shimmering door to exit.

“Please don’t leave.”

“Perhaps I am but a distraction, and that is the reason you are not finding answers or knowledge.”

“I’ll be good, please stay.”

“So you keep saying, but you are set in your ways.” Triple Z lowered his eyes and zeroed in on Jairo’s luscious lips. “I am never truly away, even if you do not see me.”

Jairo murmured, “What a fucked-up consolation prize.”

“Not rewards, just consequences,” and Triple Z left, letting in what Jairo called aliens and androids.

The talon clutching his heart was worse than the lump in his throat. Triple Z turned around and saw through the wall as the moon-skinned and pale-

haired aliens made Jairo float, as the androids, with faces like handsome statues and heroic bodies, prepared him to be skewered. Jairo would need to find the pleasure on his own to learn his lesson this time.

Mortified and wrecked, Triple Z hit his forehead against the metallic wall, transparent and solid for him. Even if he chose to close his eyes, all would be sensed and fully experienced because he was one with Jairo, and everything Jairo felt, he felt, and everything Jairo learned, he learned too.

The first brush of seeping fluid over Jairo's mouth was bliss and agony at once. And Triple Z beheld the red eyes of the alien breaching the cruel lips. He suffered the sublime ruin of other hands exploring and molding over swarthy skin and supple muscles.

Warm metal fingers helped in the destruction. Jairo moaned and writhed, and, in the back of their minds, Triple Z caught Understanding peeking tentatively from a dark concealed recess, all rags and famished. He yearned to nurture the one who could give Jairo the atonement he desperately needed, but she was not his to shelter. He could only wait and hope that Realization didn't take forever to join her.

Other cocks, both flesh and steel, found their way inside Jairo's burning holes, and each one was joy and torture coalesced into an otherworldly alloy, and Triple Z shuddered with all the sensation he should be the one giving to Jairo, receiving from Jairo.

His tattoos started to glow, iridescent gold filling the mental hallway, as he heard the serpentine song of Understanding fighting her way to control her vessel, to become every cell, every atom.

CURRY CACKLE

Jairo walked the silent corridor not entirely aware of where he was. So out of it, he couldn't even calculate how long he'd been there.

Somebody grabbed his chin and twisted it this way and the other. "That's not a pretty look for a Monday morning, my sweet Latin lover."

The voice seemed familiar, but he couldn't be sure. He forced himself to look at the woman's face.

Dr. Kapoor had her nails biting his flesh, and her toothy smile was insanely big. "You need shaving and a cup of coffee, and I don't know which one should be first." She laughed like a riot of mutinous birds. "Come on, I can't have my partner wandering like someone who's just inhaled belladonna."

"Thank you?"

"Oh, sweetie, you had a rough weekend, didn't you?"

She seated him in front of a large white desk and kept chatting unstopably as she moved around, collecting mug, coffee, lab coat and the hundred other things she finally set down on the table. A tiny particle still in control of his faculties wondered why this woman was being kind to him, when he had never been anything but cold and distant to her since they were partnered.

Her incessant droning was bringing back the headache he thought he'd left in the car that had carried him to the Bio Research Complex, but was also pushing out lucidity as a way to fight the hammering.

"I shouldn't have come; I don't feel... like myself."

She landed her palm on his forehead unceremoniously. "Well, you don't have a fever, but if I might say so, you do look like a pile of shit. I've never seen you this unkempt before, or disheveled at all, for that matter."

Jairo looked down and studied his rumped appearance. He sighed as he noticed a different colored sock on each foot. Yeah, he most definitely needed to go back to bed.

"Don't worry; I'll get you a car to go home right this minute."

“Thank you?”

“Not a problem, take all the time you need. Everything will be waiting for you to make magic.”

She skipped toward a phone, and he lost interest as she talked. His strength was so far away he couldn't even summon the courage to be pissed off, thinking she just wanted to get rid of him now that they were close to a major discovery.

“They are pulling a car up for you, honey. Let me help you downstairs, so you can go and rest.” She patted his head as if he were a stray puppy and hefted him, guiding him to the doors, her uninterrupted monologue pouring and pouring. “...And don't hesitate to call me if you need anything at any time. Day or night, I'm here for you.”

The impertinent woman had the courage to slap him on the butt as he entered the town car, and she blurted a “Get well soon,” but in the way you say it to a person about to enter rehab.

Still no spike of anger, just a simple, “What the fuck?”

“I'm sorry to see you unwell, Dr. Laguna.” The chauffer greeted him with a warm smile.

Jairo was having a hard time recognizing anyone around him. Somewhere inside Jairo's head, he felt ashamed. Not because he was a nice guy to everyone, he was a consummate asshole most of the time, but at least he normally knew at whom he was directing his assholiness.

“I'll get you home in a jiffy.”

“I'm hungry,” came out of his mouth before he could formulate a concrete thought.

“You want me to stop somewhere to get you food?”

Shame turned into embarrassment. “Can you do that?”

“Of course, doctor, anything for you.” The man flashed that nice, pointless smile again.

Shouldn't he be paying attention to the road? “Uh, thank you. I don't know your name.”

Yes, ask his name. That always makes people feel special.

“Arthur, doctor. I’ve taken you home several times these past six months. I have the perfect place to get you something to eat now, and you can save some for later.”

“You’re most kind, Arthur. Thanks again.” Jairo drew his wallet out and gave the man a hundred dollar bill he’d forgotten he had there, hidden behind some twenties. “You keep the change.”

“A tip is unnecessary, doctor. We aim to please our customers.” He sounded like an expensive prostitute, and they definitively loved the tips.

Jairo’s awareness wavered as the chauffer called some place and ordered food. All this niceness around him wasn’t registering well, and he was disarmed by it.

“They are not being nice to you. It is I they see and fitly respond to.”

Sweet Darwin, he was hearing voices. “Did you say something, Arthur?”

“Not at all, doctor, not at all.”

Of course not. Jairo recognized the voice, as anyone would the bell of the church they’d grown up around. His whole body trembled. “You’re not going to fuck me in this car.”

“As usual, you are completely missing the point.” The voice sounded amused and annoyed at once, if that was possible.

“Another lesson?”

“Seems to me, you only like lessons taught on your flesh.”

“Not here, please... Triple Z.”

“That trick will not work with me. It is you who needs to call me something. I am impervious to fake charm.”

“I beg you.” And Jairo was sincere in his heart for once. “Please wait until I’m alone to unleash those nightmares.”

“Be grateful to this driver.” Not an order but a stern plea.

“I will. I promise.”

In uncertain terms, Jairo accepted this mental conversation had left him weaker than before.

Sometime later, he found himself at his doorstep. Arthur kept him upright with a strong arm around his waist and enough food in a bag for at least three meals. “Doctor, I can’t go in, company policy, you see? Can you manage?”

“Yes, Arthur. I really appreciate what you’ve done for me today.” Jairo squeezed Arthur’s hand as the other man released him after opening the door. “Thank you.”

“You’re most certainly welcome, doctor. I hope you get better soon.” He stood there with his bright smile waiting for Jairo to wobble inside, then closed the door, and Jairo heard him walk away with sure strides.

“Not so hard, right?” Tattoo Hunk murmured in his ear, a whirl of smoke within his head. “If you turn that switch on more often, your life would be a lot better.”

Jairo put the bag over the kitchen island and crumbled to the floor, whimpering. “What the fuck is this? Why are you doing this to me?”

“All the answers are in your memories, in your acts.”

“I want to see you. I can’t have this conversation as if I’m insane and talking to myself.” Jairo hated the snot dripping from his nose and the childish sobs escaping him. He hadn’t cried in more than a decade. At both his parents’ and Veronica’s funerals his only emotions had been rage and resentment.

“You know what to do.”

Jairo felt the brush of fingers on his lips. He blew his nose with the hem of his ill-tucked shirt. What was he supposed to do, concentrate, get naked and finger himself?

The chuckle in his ear left him drowned in that fallow sensation of embarrassment. His tattoo band! Every time he had scratched the fucker he blacked out. Was it that simple? He wore a long-sleeved shirt, he didn’t know if he should do it through the fabric.

Once the shirt had been wrestled away, Jairo closed his eyes. He was hungry and feeble. He had just bawled like a third-grader. He had snot and

tears on his unshaved face. He was a fucking mess, and he needed to see the naked tattooed man like he hadn't wanted anything in a long, long time.

"Triple Z..." and he scratched the beautifully designed band around his arm.

Jairo didn't black out this time, but was shattered into a million pieces in the same way a wrecking ball would destroy a shot glass.

As his body disintegrated, his consciousness surged to face the glowing naked god.

They floated over a wild ocean. Rough winds threatened to send them into oblivion, but they remained immobile, eye-to-eye, mere inches apart. The only true light was Triple Z's potent golden shine against the backdrop of stormy gray clouds.

"Why others, why never you?" The roar of the wind didn't interfere with Jairo's voice.

"I was not expecting that question."

"How could you not when all I want is you?"

"That cannot be."

Wind lashed in Jairo's eyes, jerking tears away before they became real. "I'll be good."

"Redemption comes from recognition, from selfless realization."

"I don't know what to do."

"I am here just to bring out what lies within you, dormant. It is a cycle that will keep repeating itself until you accept the consequences of your actions and learn to make better decisions, for you and those around you; to heal what is wounded."

"Wounds? You *came* to exact vengeance."

Triple Z shook his head. "It does not matter anymore."

A ship neared them, fighting the weather, sure in its route. The closer it came, the more constricted Jairo's chest felt.

Below them the hoarse voice of the pirates called, “Ahoy, lad. Time to play.”

Jairo stared at Triple Z horrified. “This is what you mean by a cycle?”

The glowing god nodded. His face was ashen amid his blinding light.

“Please don’t leave me.”

“I am never far, even if you do not see me.”

LIBERATING

People called. People texted. His flock needed a leader. His subjects needed their king. Jairo always gave and wrote the same answer: *Fine, back soon.*

Jairo didn't feel like a king anymore, though, just like a mere toy.

A toy to be played with and plowed and used without reservations.

The itch was a drug, and like a filthy junkie he went for it every time the urge pushed at him.

And the cycle repeated itself: the pirates, the demons, the dragonmen, the cat people, the aliens, the androids.

And every time he returned to their realms, more of them joined the attack.

The war was pleasure. The war was pain.

And every time a new male entered him, stretching his hole or his mouth, their faces seemed more familiar, the pleasure reversed as if it had belonged to him before, and like a giant boomerang was coming his way to finish him.

The cleaning lady came and went with a passing remark about his wasted appearance. He stood out of her way and didn't encourage further comments.

Arthur floated in his periphery, ordered by his company and Dr. Kapoor to bring food and check on his progress. Jairo nourished his gaunt cells with teaspoonfuls that were mere droppers, flimsy lifesavers to the mortified survivor of a shipwreck.

The further he sank, the more poetic became the justice swallowing him. Understanding extended her hands as Jairo stubbornly slapped them to keep her at bay. Right this moment, it was all about the thrill of plunging into his abject pit of carnal gratification.

For what seem like an hour every day, he flapped his arms around, the shadow of an old man doing calisthenics, forcing his body to some semblance of activity that inevitably ended in the furtive joy of succumbing to the itch—to return later, mauled and drenched in despair, semen and sweat.

Same sweat that soon would not be worth a penny as an agent of fortune.

Sunday surged from the miasma of a wretched week, and Jairo reined in his scattered wits to drag his body to the only anchor he had left: The Striking Six.

Yes, they were plastic toys with moving parts, but their adventures inspired Jairo to overcome his bullies and become the strong dashing master of his destiny, which had brought him the consequences he refused to accept today.

Aerosol and cloth in hand, Jairo picked up the first one and caressed the silver-colored head. "I'm sorry I've neglected you, guys." He sprayed the cleaner, devoid of chlorofluorocarbon, and wiped. "Oh, Mogul5, why can I not be strong like you?" The android, who had received the heart of his creator for his heroic feats, stared blindly at him.

Next, he took Shak, shaman of the dwellers of the Befar plain. The muscular body of the feline humanoid shone as he worked the cloth with utmost care. For some unexplained reason Gem, captain of the destroyer Zephyr from Planet Golma, was really dusty. His long white hair looked gray and opaque, and his smirk was frankly stale.

Au, prince of the dragon shifters of Ur, was in a somewhat better condition, but his bat-like wings, since he had been cast in mid-transformation, were stuck, and Jairo had to use a cotton swab so the hinges could work.

The wild protector of Averno's Seventh Gate, Bloodflint, didn't have his usual flaming appearance, but an unusual dullness along the relief of his skin, which resembled lava emerging from the ground. Jairo couldn't understand how two weeks of negligence would make his beloved champions look so abandoned.

Another jet of cleaner and Corsair Purple Hat, the rapier of Algiers, with his gold loop and vibrant violet eyes, was almost done. Jairo finished and rearranged the action figures in their place of honor, the focal point of his bedroom; the only concession to color in his otherwise monochromatic environment.

Jairo sat on his bed and contemplated the six paladins from different realms and eras, united, thanks to the power of Elmar, to thwart iniquity and elevate the just, no matter in what universe the wrong happened.

And it dawned on him with cruel acuteness. The devastating blast of the atomic revelation left him hurt and numb. He had been fucked by his childhood heroes time and time again in each of his dreadful sexual nightmares. And the radioactive boomerang caught him in the face before he was able to recuperate, because he realized that each man he'd fucked from day one had something of the Striking Six in them, too. Beautiful men turned into tarnished toys.

Coño.

It was too much, too sick. The abyss engulfing him shifted and wavered. Jairo sighed, ready to be gone; the shame of his perversion a noose around his neck.

Triple Z was lightheaded. Never had Understanding hit any of his quarries with such force and potent pain. In a corner, Jairo huddled about himself like a ball of barbed wire. Waves and waves of troubled and confused images emanated from him, crashing against Triple Z, the cuts of a thousand razors.

“Jairo...”

“No, I’m a monster.”

“Stop. You did what you thought was the answer to your problems.”

“Not just a frigging monster but a cowardly one. I took the easiest path.”

“Nothing easy in what you achieved. The true easy path would have ended with many dead and you in jail. You became a brilliant scientist. You are working to benefit humanity.”

“What about the individuals I destroyed?”

“Everything happens for a reason.”

“Fuck that. What’s your reason to be here then?”

“Vengeance.”

“I knew it,” Jairo spat out between a sob and a growl. “Well, mission accomplished. I’m screwed beyond repair. Fuck humanity. And fuck me.”

“The pain you are suffering is like the pain of giving birth; a miracle comes from all that suffering.”

“You’re so full of it. You got your vengeance, why don’t you leave me the Hell alone?”

Jairo’s anger and distress were wearing Triple Z’s strength out. “I cannot.”

Tear streaks covered Jairo’s sooty face. “Why?”

“Because your learning is my learning, and with your realization came mine too.” Triple Z crouched, facing Jairo and prying balled fists from the arms wrapped around scratched knees. “We are so similar. I cannot begin to explain to you how much being around you has made me understand my path was as lost as yours.”

“You’re just saying that to make me feel better.” Hope wafted from Jairo, thin and ephemeral. “You’re a god, how can you be lost?”

“Do you know what your name means in the ancient language?”

“Someone told me once but I forgot. It didn’t seem important at the time.”

“God’s enlightenment.”

“Well, that’s a fucking snuffed candle now, thank you very much.”

Triple Z rattled Jairo. “Look at me. Stop being a whiny asshole and wake up.”

For all his bravado, Jairo’s wide eyes could not hide his shock. “I don’t want to live like this anymore. The world would be better off without me.”

The slap sounded like cannon in the tiny, grimy space they shared. “You are going to die when I decide you can. Do you understand that? You are mine.”

Recognition made Jairo’s eyes glaze over. “That woman. From the club. I know her. She’s Antoine Keller’s sister. I saw her picture in his house.” The lump in his throat was not just visible but palpable. “He’s in a coma?”

“Yes.”

“His is the face tattooed on Creepo’s chest.”

“Yes.”

“You’re here because of them.”

“Yes.”

“My name is Scum, my surname Scoria.” Jairo sighed, and then repeated over and over, “Scum, Scoria; Scum, Scoria.”

“No, no, no.” Triple Z grabbed Jairo’s face and silenced him with urgent kisses. “You were lost, Jairo.” His prey felt cold, on the verge of letting his mind go to oblivion. “Listen to me, listen.”

Jairo kept his crazy mantra every time Triple Z freed his lips.

“You are not doing this.” Triple Z heaved a limp, head-shaking, incoherent Jairo and soared, escaping the dark place Jairo’s mind had resorted to entrench itself.

The closer they came to the light, the more Jairo screamed, his body gaining strength and fighting Triple Z’s grip. “I want to die! Let go of me!”

“Do you not see it? You belong to the light. You are getting stronger. Come on, rein in your wits.”

The struggle ceased. “Light?”

Triple Z stopped his ascension. “Yes. There is no Redemption without Falling.”

“Can I be good?”

“You said so, many times.”

“Help me.”

“We will do it together.”

Jairo gave him a pained smile.

And Triple Z’s tarnished heart began its own purification.

Now, Dear Reader, how it ends is up to you. Choose an option to continue...

LIKE YOU

OR

IN OTHER WORDS

LIKE YOU

The lagoon was deliciously warm, and Jairo had begun to feel better. Triple Z swam beside him, telling him to focus his breathing and regulate his strokes.

“Come on, let us race to shore.” There was a magic ring to Triple Z’s tolling voice.

Jairo chuckled and followed the divine naked merman ahead of him. They’d talked for what seemed like hours about life and consequences, about falling and climbing out, about lessons that are meant to be painful to make us strong.

The long conversation had been spiced with kisses and soft caresses, but after all the teachings, Jairo’s newfound sexual attitude needed a deeper connection. Moreover, he was ready to ask for it.

Triple Z emerged, glistening and breathtaking. His posterior had less designs than his front, mainly consisting of a stylized Egyptian ankh turning into an anchor over his back and two mirrored animal heads that could totally be the Trussardi dogs or merely some outlined felines.

“It is Bastet’s head,” Triple Z chuckled. “Each tattoo represents the culmination of a mission.”

Dripping, Jairo hugged Triple Z from behind. “Then you’ve accomplished a lot of things in Egypt.” He bit the little left lobe and was rewarded with a shudder.

“The drawings are symbolic. My people spent a lot of time close to the Nile, and thus many of our myths have a correspondence there.” Triple Z held Jairo’s hand and guided him to the shade of a nearby willow. “These surfaced two hundred of your years ago, when I came last.” He tapped the wings and swirls on his head, framing his ears.

Before they could sit facing each other, Jairo asked, expectant, “Is there one about me?” since he thought Triple Z had accomplished what he meant to do in this visit.

“Yes.” Triple Z turned completely and showed the figure of a man in the center of his chest, his arms extended so that the tasty medallions of the god’s nipples floated like magic orbs over the silhouette’s hands, perfectly placed amid other patterns as if it had always been part of the whole.

“Sweet Darwin.” Jairo traced it with a tentative finger. “Why there?”

Triple Z seemed to consider this for a moment. “Perhaps because you centered me, brought back my true reason to exist.”

The effect of those words was immediate, and Jairo covered Triple Z’s mouth with his. The exploration began as they knelt, the sweet grass a perfect hassock for their devotion. Deft hands massaged hard muscles and spread eager cheeks. Tongues touched and swirled, discovering new ways to interact. Closed eyes could see the sacred vaults of each other’s souls.

The wind blew, and the timid song of the leaves above them accompanied their groans and grunts because words had lost their meaning, and everything was primal and urgent. Every particle, every atom of Jairo’s body screamed a single request: “Please.”

A kiss on his chin.

The slow descent over his neck, marked by soft lips and sharp teeth, was bliss. The glory of tortured nipples reverberated through Jairo’s frame, humming and wreaking havoc on his already heightened senses.

Strong cheekbones rubbed against his pecs and abs, and Jairo felt the tingling his hair caused to Triple Z’s face like a distant echo. A straight nose dove into Jairo’s pubes, inhaling and brushing—and fighting for space with the dark dick that trickled, yearning and begging for attention.

Stunned and feverish, Jairo could only pull handfuls of grass from the tender ground, unable to lay a finger on Triple Z should the illusion shatter and he awake alone and broken in his bedroom.

“I will never leave you. I am yours as much as you are mine.”

All the questions that statement should have raised were pushed aside by Triple Z’s sinful mouth mastering Jairo’s dick. The magic enveloping his shaft could not be accomplished by human cells; only the supernatural origin of his lover would explain the seismic tremor engulfing Jairo.

The shaved head bobbed, and the fiery eyes never lost their focus on Jairo's reactions. Pleasure circled in those magnificent windows in tune with the swirls of an even more magnificent tongue: disarming, conquering, owning.

And the earth was no more, and the willow was gone, and as they floated, after cupping his balls and thoroughly bathing them, Triple Z turned Jairo.

"Oh, papi." Jairo exclaimed with a long exuberant sigh. How many times had men, trying to be cute, said the same endearment to him? Now he was saying it for the first time, from the bottom of his heart and jubilant. Triple Z ran his face up and down Jairo's crack, his tongue doing wicked things with each stop on Jairo's puckered hole.

Keen to be skewered, his own hands opened his cheeks more. He turned his head to look at the man behind him and exposed the prize he'd zealously guarded until Triple Z appeared to make him sink and finally burst, liberated. No matter how many pirates and cat people and other entities had been in there, this was the real submission, the willing surrender, his utmost act of contrition. "Fuck me."

Silently, Triple Z ran the head of his cock over the periphery of the lubricated orifice, teasing and transforming Jairo into a blind and deaf mass of shrieking urgency. One poke, two pokes; a thick head invading, inching its way, sure and potent, until it was fully sheathed, and its tip pierced Jairo's metaphorical black little heart.

The pounding of a lifetime began.

With each bang of the fleshy piston, the black pebble expanded and changed. The anomaly became a gift, and its ripples had Jairo shivering and moaning. Triple Z steered Jairo's body, clutching his shoulders, and soon his knees and hands rested on soft leather, and walls covered in multicolored tiles materialized around them.

Triple Z pulled his hair and battered his hole, the force of each thrust making him swing like a loaded pendulum, the friction of tattooed thighs maddening brushes against the sensitive skin of his ass. And they came in an explosion, where light and liquid were one and the same. Myriad stars

absorbed and expelled, infinite cries of ecstasy swallowed by haphazard breaths.

Triple Z's weight over Jairo's back was the perfect summit of the mountain Jairo wanted to landslide, laughing.

Jairo recognized the place, and the circle closed.

They lay, embraced, in Tel Aviv Tattoo Shop.

Back in the haven of the willow, the sun filtered playfully, lending sparks to Triple Z's tangerine eyes. Jairo outlined the thin rosy lips. "Can I be what you are?"

"What about curing mankind's ailments?"

"Others can continue the research." Jairo added something that sounded a lot like a thing Triple Z would say. "Nothing happens before it should."

The laughter was transparent and stroked every fiber of Jairo. Triple Z caressed Jairo's cheek. "Not fair to use my own ammunition against me."

"So... what do I do?" *Please, please let me be with you.*

Triple Z pulled him down, using both hands to hold Jairo's face, and kissed him. First his closed eyes, then the tip of his nose, and finally his mouth, softly, almost in farewell. And Jairo's newly invigorated heart shattered like the smashed dreams of an orphan.

Nevertheless, the god put the petals of his lips to Jairo's ear and whispered the incantation.

Night was about to die, and after a cleansing bath and a healthy meal, Jairo sat at the end of his bed and stared at the Striking Six. In and out his breath went, calming inhalations and purifying exhalations. His voice came out quiet but firm.

"Hear me, Zohan, you inevitably handsome. Hear me, Zerach, you gloriously radiant. Hear me, Zimram, you summarily holy. I, Jairo Laguna, call your names Zohan Zerach Zimram to make me yours. To entwine me as one with you. To be with you a herald of balance. To share the infinite eons of mankind until all return to the source. I, Jairo Laguna,

vow my essence to be one with yours, Zohan Zerach Zimram, forevermore.”

The room wavered, and Triple Z was visible to Jairo’s human eyes for the first time, glowing and radiant. He extended his hand, and Jairo stood up to take it. They embraced and soared, holding fast to each other.

“You did not leave a note.”

“What for? Natural causes don’t leave notes behind.”

“True.”

“Whoa, look at this.” Jairo studied the patterns surging and shimmering on his chest. Finally, a winged solar disc decorated the space between his pecs.

“Seems like your first mission has been accomplished.”

“And what would that be?”

“You made me yours.”

THE END

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IN OTHER WORDS

Jairo rested in Triple Z's arms. The images of their previous lovemaking waved softly, with ephemeral cadence, from Jairo's resting form. Jairo on all fours, a rictus of pure bliss opening his mouth, and Triple Z commanding that body like no other one ever before.

His lover stirred, and Triple Z caressed a bearded cheek, the strong contours of his wide shoulders. He could not have enough of Jairo now that they were finally at each other's mercy. He wanted nothing else than to spend the rest of eternity with this man. Nevertheless, he did not think turning Jairo into what he would be the best idea.

The other option did not need too much compromise on his part. He was already determined not to leave Jairo's side. It was just a matter of Jairo accepting him as a man, to age together and live as long as Jairo had days left.

Dark eyes peered at Triple Z from lowered abundant lashes. "Seems like a plot to me." Understanding and forgiving himself had made the cruel mouth transform into a thing of beauty, and the radiant smile aimed at Triple Z was breathtaking. "You'd better start talking, 'cause I'm not going to let you do anything crazy."

"I am only crazy about one thing, and that is you." Triple Z held Jairo's chin and pinched it, making the cleft seem a tinier version of the sweet cheeks he had been playing with all night. "Do you want me around?"

"I do. The only problem I see is the whole blacking out to be with you. But I guess since it's not about lessons anymore, it can be arranged in a more logical fashion." Jairo chuckled. "At least the frigging tattoo isn't itching anymore. That has to amount to something, right?"

"Yes, our connection is different now, based on attraction and acceptance." Triple Z hesitated for a moment, then let it all out. "What if I could be mortal like you, would you accept me in your life?"

"What?" Jairo jumped up and straddled him, fully alert and almost trembling with anticipation. "Of course. Is that even possible?"

“I know the way. I never thought I would want it, but with you, I see myself being mortal again.”

He could see all the emotions exploding and whirling inside Jairo. Suddenly, a gray cloud hovered about Jairo, and his voice came strangled. “What about your mission? Isn’t it wrong to stop being what you are to be with me?”

“Lifetime is but a leaf in the tree of life. We can be together until your dying day, and after that, we will see.”

“You sure about this?”

“It is the right thing to do. By your side is where I belong.”

“How is it done?” Expectation rippled from Jairo.

“With a drop of your blood, since I am to be yours.”

“Just one drop?”

“As it is up is below. A drop is a Universe, and that’s all I need.”

“Ok. When?”

“Whenever you are ready.” Triple Z did not want to hurry Jairo. Maybe he needed to think about it. That part was obscure to him. He could only know what Jairo already knew, not foresee his reactions.

“Now, now. Let me wake up.” Jairo bounced.

“You have not eaten in almost a day. Do you not want to recuperate at least a little before?”

Jairo rolled his eyes. “Seriously? You said a drop, I’m not going to faint for that. Wait, if it’s my blood, you’ll be as strong as I am?”

“Just for the first few hours. As soon as I get some food in me I will be on my own.”

“You aren’t going to be a baby.” Jairo’s panic oozed from him.

Triple Z could not stop his laughter. “No, a full grown man just like you.”

Jairo placed a kiss on Triple Z’s mouth. “Then let’s do this. I can’t wait.”

“I, Zohan, the inevitably handsome. I, Zerach, the gloriously radiant. I, Zimram, the summarily holy vow my essence to Jairo Laguna to make me his. I, Zohan Zerach Zimram entwine his mortal days to me. To be by his side as One became Two to recognize himself. To share the finite days of his lifetime until all return to the source. Jairo Laguna, I, Zohan Zerach Zimram come to be yours until your rightful end.”

Zohan became visible to Jairo’s human eyes. “Hey.”

“Hey, yourself.” Jairo sat on a minimalistic high backed chair near a window showing the first rays of daylight over the city. “Now what?”

“The pin. On your left middle finger’s pad, just below the nail.”

Jairo pricked his finger, and a drop of crimson fluid emerged.

Zohan knelt between Jairo’s legs and touched the tip of his tongue to the blood. His essence absorbed the life giver and, with a devastating shiver, his body began to solidify.

As his body became solid, his connection to Jairo’s mind blurred until it was completely severed. Now he depended on his five senses to understand this man. Ready to share his newly acquired mortal life with him and all its consequences.

His first inhalation as a human after almost three millennia was permeated by the heady scent of Jairo’s leaking sex and his pomegranate shower gel. Every newborn cell screamed with pleasure and glad to be already on his knees.

The change in Jairo’s face was mystifying, because Zohan had a glimpse of the last glow of all his tattoos in those dark, coffee-colored eyes. The glimmer extinguished like a dying flame, the experience humbling and an immense turn on at once.

Jairo touched Zohan’s face using the backs of his fingers. “You’re truly here.”

“Where I belong.” His hands rested on Jairo’s thighs. Zohan leaned forward and kissed the tip of the cock ready for him, and lapped, and let his tongue swirl until he engulfed it, his hunger equally new and eternal. The

groans accompanying his sucking were encouraging and fathered goose bumps all over him.

Standing up, Jairo took control of the situation, his grip firm on Zohan's head, his thrusts measured but gaining depth by the second. When curly hair grazed his lips, Zohan opened his eyes and saw Jairo holding back, as if savoring the moment, as if never wanting it to end, frozen in time and completely lodged inside him.

"If I keep doing this, I'm going to completely lose it." Jairo pulled out and bent, helping Zohan to his feet. As they came eye-to-eye, after a brief hesitation, he murmured, "I seriously need to fuck you." He shook his head, a self-deprecating smile decorating him. "I know I should have learned my lesson and be a good bottom, but I've wanted to be inside you so badly, since the first time I laid eyes on you, it's not even funny."

"We are equals, Jairo. You have as much right to every part of my body as I have to yours. You want to fuck me? I am yours to fuck."

Kisses covered Zohan, pushing him toward the bed until he was flat on his back in the middle of acres of Egyptian cotton and fluffy pillows. The kissing continued, mapping his skin, outlining every tattoo, making him tremble, needy and incoherent.

In the perfect number for mutual satisfaction, Jairo pushed his cock into Zohan's eager mouth, swallowing the offering between tattooed legs in a finely orchestrated motion, leaving Zohan with a mouthful and breathless.

Bobbing and plunging, they turned sideways, spreading and kneading muscular cheeks and teasing burning holes, groaning and grunting in the most primitive of chorus. Balls were massaged, backs were scratched, and lips became tender and swollen.

"Don't need to prepare me that much," Zohan offered while Jairo applied a generous amount of lubricant.

Jairo tsked, shaking his head. "Since you're made of me, we're both very tight. Remember all the fucking has been happening anywhere *but* in my flesh. There's no need to hurt ourselves." He turned a little to show Zohan he was also lubricating his own hole. "This ride is both ways."

Zohan shut his eyes. The raging bolt heralding Jairo's entry zigzagged with electrical shocks throughout him, stealing his speech, his breath, and turning his every fiber inside out. And he couldn't find a better word to summarize the turmoil of searing pain morphing into forbidden bliss than: *Coño*.

Jairo pushed and pulled, drenching them not only in their perfumed sweat but soaking every atom of Zohan in the blazing fire of primal joy, enhanced by the revelations pouring from his lover's lidded eyes, from the whispers of devotion, from the confessions of a life half-lived until he understood the wrongness of his ways.

Their flesh was finishing what their souls had started. The recognition, the understanding, the acceptance all melted in one perfect alloy strengthening their bond, sealing their destiny. Zohan felt the tremor and how Jairo's harmonious pounding lost its rhythm, and his own climax galloped toward them.

Jairo's cry, universal and unique, announced jet after jet inundating Zohan. Zohan thrashed, keen to unleash his first orgasm after an hour of being mortal, when Jairo pulled out and impaled himself on Zohan's swollen cock to receive the volley deep within. And the volcano, and the scream, and the shatter of all the matter around him left Zohan exhausted and bleeding happiness from every pore.

Jairo contacted very shady characters to provide Zohan with contemporary documents and a verifiable background. Even academy credits easily surfaced. His BRC ID read: Dr. Zohan Z. Zimram.

"We can do this before work," Jairo commented, after weeks of connubial joy.

"Good thing we don't have to clock in." Zohan had his arm around Jairo's shoulder. "You sure about this?"

"It's something I must do."

Zohan nodded. "Ok. I'll wait outside." Nevertheless, something in Jairo's demeanor asked him to follow into the room. They entered together.

A man lay sprawled in a chair close to the bed surrounded by monitors, the quiet beep a sort of lullaby. He opened his eyes with a snap as the sacred space was invaded. “You!” His vision moved to Zohan and his hatred turned into undisguised horror. “What’s this?”

Before the artist could say anything else, Jairo raised his hand to stop him. “Just listen.” The man’s frown landed on Zohan, who snuffed any spark of rebellion with a pinning stare in the man’s direction. Jairo continued, “I’ve been a total asshole, and I come to ask for forgiveness, from both Antoine and you.”

“Antoine can’t forgive you, douchebag. Not from where you sent him.”

Zohan gave the wronged lover another warning look.

“The knowledge you used to summon him,” and Jairo nodded toward Zohan, “also teaches compassion. Let me do my part in his healing process.” Without waiting for the man’s approval, Jairo reached the bed and knelt on one knee beside it. He took the limp, pale hand and put his forehead on it. “I did you wrong, Antoine. I cannot change what I did, but I hope you can find forgiveness in your heart for the monster I was.” He swallowed hard. “The monster I’m working every day to leave behind.”

He kissed the hand and set it back with a trail of his fingers over it. He turned to the sitting man. His shocked expression spoke of deep confusion and profound anger. “Your vengeance brought me the biggest gift a man can desire, and for this I’ll always be grateful. If you cannot forgive me for yourself, do it for him.”

“What we do here reverberates up there,” Zohan told the artist. “You should know this. Use the tree to heal, not to harm.” He half-smiled. “Balance is the way.”

“Tell his sister to send me the bills; I’ll take care of them. And I don’t want to hear ‘no’. Pride is welcome but unnecessary here.”

They left the tattooist with his mouth agape and holding Antoine’s hand. Arthur opened the car door for them.

Jairo rested his head on Zohan’s shoulder. “I’m still a fucking douchebag.”

“Well, let’s fill that bag with rose water until you are not one anymore.”

“I don’t know whether that’s a metaphor or you’re planning some kinky enema.” Jairo chuckled, his eyes dancing.

“Both.”

THE END

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Author Bio

Born a Sagittarius in the fabulous year of the Rooster of '69, at the hour when his cat was about to become a complete dragon, Gabbo de la Parra landed on the Caribbean Coast of the outlandish Republic of Panama to start the adventure of Life.

Love and the Internet brought him to Middle Tennessee to embrace the American Dream and his husbandly romance. Writing has been an important part of his life since a very early age, and it's a pleasure to share his stories with others thanks to the wonderful opportunities this land provides. He is the author of the Spaniards series, Prince of Atlantis and other titles available through Amazon, Barnes & Noble and Smashwords.

Gabbo cherishes Life with a southern gentleman in a townhouse close to a lake, crowded with the spirits of his characters and their pets: black esoteric kitty, Luna; white emo-twink Maltese, Chance; long-lived gold fish, Fishie; and street smart Russian Blue, Bella.

His novels Septima Luna and Another Dawn on Planet X (the child of his two stories for LiAW) will come to your e-reading devices in Fall 2013 and The Pompeian Horse in Spring 2014.

Contact & Media Info

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THE THREE OF US

By Stephen del Mar

Photo Description

Three college-age men in a cuddle pile on the ground. The scene depicts deep friendship and affection between the men.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

These 3 guys are sweet together. They met in college when they were on the same dorm hall. They became instant best friends. They hang out and goof off together, have similar schedules and are just great buddies.

Please tell me how did that friendship turn into the love that we see in the picture? What was the catalyst?

Would love HEA with maybe a glimpse into the future or told in flashback form. Angst and heart break (no cheating though) definitely welcome. Bigotry from minor characters is okay as long as no life threatening injuries. I would love to cry with these guys and know that love can conquer all :)

Sincerely,

Rosie

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: college, coming of age, sports, friendship, first time, new love, interracial

Content warnings: off page non-con, violence

Word count: 23,582

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Dedication

Thanks go to Rosie on the GoodReads M/M Romance group for the prompt that started this story and Cynthia A. Roedig, my buddy since high school and a great editor. Thank you to my readers: Kat Riegel, Rosie Moewe and Nan Greenwald.

THE THREE OF US

By Stephen del Mar

Friday

The elevator opened on the seventh floor of Stetson Hall. My new home. If I kept telling myself that, it might feel real. My home and Reed's. Was it a good idea for us to share a dorm room? He kept saying he was okay with it. But was I?

A girl stood in front of our door doing something to the dry-erase message board. I walked over and set the shopping bag full of textbooks on the floor.

"Excuse me."

She turned and blew a strand of honey-blond hair out of her face. She was flushed and sweaty. She wore a faded yellow Sterling College T-shirt, the one with the Conquistador mascot on it, and well-worn jeans. A rag was in her right hand and a bottle of something in the other hand. It smelled like nail-polish remover.

I looked at the message board. Someone had scrawled "Cock Suckers" and "Faggots" on the board in permanent marker. Most of "Faggots" had been scrubbed away, but there was still a ghost of the word.

The young woman's shoulders slumped. "I'm so sorry. Are you Reed?"

I didn't say anything. I just looked at those words. There was a sinking, knotted feeling in my stomach. I'd just put that board on the door two hours ago, before I went to the campus bookstore.

"Sam, then? Sam Richards?"

She tucked the rag into the hand holding the bottle and held her free hand to me. I shook it.

"I really am sorry. We don't tolerate this at all. If I find out who did this, I'll see they're banned from student housing."

Well I guess this made it feel like home. My locker back in high school got graffitied at least once a week. Looks like college wasn't going to be much

different. I figured all the diversity and affirmation stuff was just admissions hype.

I looked at her. “Maybe I overdid it with the rainbow stickers?”

“Bullshit.”

I was impressed with the amount of venom and indignation she put into those two syllables. I smiled and reached out, taking the rag and bottle from her, poured some of the fluid on the cloth and started rubbing.

“So who are you?” I asked.

She turned and leaned against the wall. She tried to stick some of her hair behind her ear to keep it out of her face. It didn’t work. I realized she was pretty in a simple, no-nonsense kind of way.

“Sorry. I’m going nuts today. Someone from Student Housing was supposed to help me check-in the residents but I got a no-show.”

I tilted my head and gave her a little smile. She still hadn’t introduced herself.

She tapped her head. “See. Scatterbrain. I’m Jacklyn Willows, the RA on this floor, and editor of the school’s newspaper. Well, blog really. They stopped printing it on paper a few years back.” She smiled. “And somewhere I fit in studying.”

It looked like she was about to say something else, when her eyes darted over my shoulder. Her pupils dilated and her mouth parted just a bit. She exhaled. It sounded a bit like, “Oh my.”

I smelled him; that mix of Old Spice and coconut shampoo. Reed Jackson, my best friend and roommate, was standing behind me. A strong hand gripped my shoulder and guided me out of the way.

“What the fuck?” he said.

Reed was mostly naked and wet from a shower. A bright yellow towel wrapped around him. I noticed Jacklyn’s eyes roving over his smooth light-mocha skin and muscles. Reed, my pet football player.

He looked down at her. “Who did this?”

His anger pushed her down along the wall another step. I reached out and put my hand on his shoulder, soft, smooth skin over hard muscle. I wanted to squeeze and pull him toward me. Never going to happen.

“It’s okay. She’s our RA. Jacklyn.”

He turned and put his hand on my face. “It’s not okay.”

I wish he wouldn’t do that. I knew it was his way of showing his support. Showing me he didn’t have a homophobic bone in his body. I really appreciated it, but it was also like one long tease. He didn’t get that when he touched me it wasn’t just a sign of friendship. For me, it was fucking foreplay. Six years of foreplay without release. Just call me Sammy of the Blue Balls.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

He pulled his hand away from my face. “Why the hell are you sorry?”

I pointed at the board. “Look. It looks like it says ‘Reed plus Sam’ like we’re boyfriends. You know, with all the rainbow stickers.”

Jacklyn suddenly found her voice, a bit huskier than before. “You’re not together?”

“See,” I said. “Everyone will think you’re gay too. Sorry.”

“Let them think it. I don’t care. And damn it, Sammy. You know I’d be proud to be your boyfriend, except for one little problem.”

Jacklyn seemed fascinated by our exchange. “What’s that?”

I laughed. It was a little joke we’d shared ever since I came out to him in middle-school. “He’d be my boyfriend, but my tits are just too small.”

Reed started laughing. I noticed Jacklyn’s hand moved over her chest. Was that a subconscious gesture? I noticed Reed’s eyes follow the movement of her hand. It irritated me that her shirt and his towel matched. Like they’re linked somehow. Yellow was a stupid color.

I grabbed my bag of books and pulled my keys out, then unlocked the door. “You need to get dressed,” I said

“Yes, dear,” he said as he followed me into the room, but he was looking back at her. I dropped the bag of books on my bed and kicked the door closed

a bit harder than I intended. I knew he could never be mine, but that didn't mean I was ready to share him.

Monday

It was a cool morning for September in Florida. A cold front moved in during the night, blowing damp cold air in from Bennett Bay. I sat on a low wall outside the Student Union sipping coffee, a great place to boy watch. Students were staggering across the Quad to their first class of the year like a herd of pretty, preppy zombies.

The natives were bundled up against the new Ice Age. The northern boys were still running around in their shorts and sandals. They just added socks and a fleece pullover. I liked boys in shorts. I took another sip of coffee and thought about strong, hairy legs resting on my shoulders...

“Hey, Sammy.”

It was Reed. He approached from the east with the morning sun behind him like a halo. I tried to block it with my hand so I could see him. Someone was with him. I saw yellow through the glare. *Jacklyn.*

“Hi guys.” I smiled. It was for Reed, but she didn't know that.

He came up and gave me a hug. *I wish he wouldn't do that.* He pressed my face into his neck. I couldn't help but breathe him in. *Just one kiss. Just one taste. Just one time. What was it about this place that kicked the hormones into overdrive?*

Reed pulled away. “Where'd you go so early?”

I took another sip of coffee to stall for time. I was trying to decide how to ignore the girl and not be rude. “Swim practice. Coach has the freshmen in at six all this week.”

Jacklyn gave me the once over. Whenever someone found out I was a swimmer, they'd imagine me in a Speedo. It kind of creeped me out when girls did it. The guys didn't do it enough, or most of them were just too damn subtle about it. Jacklyn's blue eyes met mine. I knew what she was thinking. The same image haunted my dreams... the swimmer fucking the football player, but she probably got it backwards. Hets always got it backwards. I gave her a cold smile and dropped the coffee in the trashcan.

I said, "That's a great fleece. You know, yellow really is your color. I can see why you wear it all the time." I think I sold it as a compliment. Yeah, I was becoming one of *those* gay guys.

She grinned and snuggled up next to me. "Thanks. Where are you boys off to this morning?"

Reed pulled his phone out of his pocket and keyed in something. "Anthro 101. We needed to get moving."

"Do you have Professor Quinn?" Jacklyn asked.

I nodded. "What's he like?"

She put her arm around mine and started leading me across the Quad. "He's new. He filled in for one of the other professors last year and they offered him a permanent position over the summer. I've heard good things, but he doesn't suffer fools." She sighed. "And we have a lot of fools at this school. Rich, privileged fools."

Reed had wandered around to her other side. She reached out and took his arm too. Why did this annoy me so much? She really was okay.

I looked west down the length of the Quad. Bennett Bay was a dark metal-gray in the distance. The Gulf beyond was gray-green. The wind was kicking up, tossing waves around. I felt like that. My feelings for Reed were tossing me around. I needed an emotional seawall.

Jacklyn brought us to the front of a modern looking glass and steel building. "Okay, this is the Social Sciences building. The big intro classes are usually in the auditorium on the first floor."

She glanced up at Reed. "Maybe I'll see you at lunch? I'm meeting some friends from the drama department at Louie's."

She turned and started walking away.

"Louie's?" Reed called after her.

She turned back and said, "Yeah, Louie's Lower Level. Kind of a dive burger joint in the basement of the Union. They have pool tables and video games. Fun hangout."

“We’ll see,” I said, meaning no. I grabbed Reed’s arm and dragged him up the stairs into the building. He kept glancing behind, watching the bright yellow fleece disappear into the herd.

By the time we arrived at the classroom, Reed had managed to pull his arm out of my hand. He hadn’t said anything, just followed me. I knew I was being an ass, okay, a jealous bitch, but I couldn’t seem to stop. Maybe they put something in the water?

The room was a big auditorium. Students were filing in from double doors on the other side of the room and from doors down by the lecture stand on the lowest level. Reed pushed past me heading to the middle of the room. I followed him and took the seat next to him. He pulled his tablet out of his pack and started reading the syllabus for the class. I pulled a notebook and pen out of my pack and ignored him back.

It was still about fifteen minutes before class started. The room was half-full. Most of the students sat toward the back of the room, a few nerd types in the front row. A general buzz of young people chatting filled the space. The two guys behind us were talking about trying to bone some chick in their dorm. The girls in front of us were texting to their friends about some sorority party. We were a room full of stereotypes.

A man with long red hair pulled back in a ponytail and a neatly trimmed beard walked up to the lecture table and dropped his pack on it. The buzz of conversation paused. The man ignored everyone, and took a laptop out of his pack. He grabbed a remote off the desk and pointed it at the back of the room. A video projector came on and projected a large blank blue screen on the wall above him. Everyone went back to what they were doing.

I heard Reed whisper, “Hell. I think that’s J.J.’s husband.”

I looked at Reed. He was squinting down at the professor.

“What?” I asked.

He looked at me. “You know. My cousin, J.J., John Jackson, the deputy sheriff stationed in Cooter Crossing. I’m sure that’s his guy.”

Too much new data was coming in. Brain cells were overloading. I mean, my dick was bigger than Cooter Crossing. How could they have a gay sheriff in a place that small? And why didn't I know about it?

"There's a gay sheriff in Cooter Crossing, he's your cousin, and that's his lover?"

For some reason I felt the need to point down at the professor when I said this. Of course that's the point where a random pause ran through the crowd. It turns out the room had very good acoustics. I looked down my arm, past the point of my finger and saw Professor Quinn looking back at me over his glasses. Even from this distance, I noticed the intensity of his green eyes. They weren't amused. He shook his head and looked back down at his laptop.

I quickly shoved my hand between my legs and looked at Reed. His face was in his palm. He was trying like hell not to laugh at me.

"So, you know him?" I asked.

He looked over at me. His face flushed a darker brown and a tear welled up in his eye. He shook his head.

"No, not really. You know that big barbecue Gramps has down on the lake every Labor Day?"

I nodded. I'd been to a few. Half of east Big Cypress County showed up for them.

Reed said, "Well J.J. came and he brought Aidan and the kids."

"Kids? They have kids?" I still didn't believe all of this.

"Yeah. Two little boys, about six or seven, I think. They spent most of the time in the lake till a gator showed up. J.J. ended up having to shoot it. Grandma fried up the tail, of course. Those kids love the water as much as you. But my mom wasn't too happy about inviting them."

"Why?"

Reed shook his head. "You know how she is with the whole gay thing. But Auntie Lissa threatened to hex her if *her boys* weren't invited."

"Hex?" I'd known Reed forever but it was like I was just meeting him.

He looked embarrassed. “Well, yeah, and she’s really a distant cousin, but we all call her auntie. Anyway, her mother’s from Haiti. She was a mambo. Mom thinks Lissa’s one too, but we don’t talk about it.”

I really needed more coffee. “What the hell is a mambo?”

He looked around, like someone could hear, and whispered, “Vodou priestess.” Quickly he changed the subject. “I don’t know why mom’s so anti-gay. Her own brother is, no one else in the family cares. I think it’s that damn church she goes to.”

I wasn’t sure where to go with the follow-up. Do we do Vodou, scary churches, or Reed’s family full of queers?

“So, you have a gay cousin and uncle?” I went with the *gay thing*.

Reed nodded. “Why? What’s the big deal?”

I sat back. How did I not know this?

He reached out and touched my shoulder. “What’s wrong?”

I looked back at him. “So, for the last six years you’ve been there, listening to me trying to deal with being a gay kid in a backwater town in Florida, feeling like I was the only one. Getting harassed all the time and you never thought to say, ‘Hey, Sam, I have some family members that have gone through all of this, would you like to meet them?’ Oh yeah, and one is a cop.”

He ran his hand through his hair. “Actually, they’re both law enforcement. J.J. is the deputy and Stan is a detective with the Bennett Bay P.D.”

I gave him my what-the-fuck look.

He asked, “So would that have really helped you? I love those guys. Hell, I love you. Gay is just the way some people are. I don’t get what the big deal is. We all get hassled about something.”

I didn’t even know how to respond to that. Thank God the bell rang for class to start.

Finally, the lecture was over. I looked back down at the reading list. When was I going to have time for this? And this was only my first class. Wasn’t Sterling supposed to be a party school? “Reed, what do you think...”

His seat was empty. I saw him pushing through the crowd down the steps to the lecture table. Professor Quinn was talking to a number of students. They were pushing some kind of forms at him to sign. Reed stood off to the side waiting for the crowd to thin out. I stuffed my notebook into my pack and followed him.

Reed asked, “Aidan, I mean Doctor Quinn, do you remember me?”

The older man looked up from his laptop. He studied Reed, glanced over at me and scowled. He looked back at Reed. “The Jackson family picnic?”

Reed held out his hand. “Yeah. I’m Reed Jackson, J.J.’s cousin. You know Stan too? He’s my uncle. Mom’s brother.”

Quinn took Reed’s hand. He smiled and his green eyes sparkled. “I know Stan and Zach very well. Bear, too, of course.”

This was all too weird. My hetero friend was part of Bennett Bay gay society and here I was, standing in the background. I butted in, taking a step forward, put my hand on Reed’s shoulder, rubbed it a bit to make it more than friendly, and asked, “Who’s Bear?”

I didn’t like the scowl Reed gave me. He brushed my hand off. Quinn’s eyes followed the movement. I leaned in, closer to Reed. I wasn’t backing down. Damn it, I wanted to be part of this.

Quinn’s eyes narrowed as he looked at me. “Zach’s Newfoundland. Don’t you know them?”

Reed cut me off before I could say anything. “Gotta get to my next class. Say ‘hey’ to J.J. for me.” He backed away.

Quinn said, “We should do dinner. I keep an apartment down on the waterfront, or go out somewhere. We could include Stan and Zach. The boys love family get-togethers. They think Bear’s a horse.”

Reed was almost to the steps. “Those kids are great. And Bear *is* a horse. I’ll let you know my practice schedule. Coach is working us late for the next two weeks or so.” He turned and started scurrying up the stairs.

And there I stood, alone in an empty classroom with my professor. He cleared his throat.

I turned. He was looking at me over his glasses again. He pushed them up and stuffed his computer into his bag.

“So,” he said, “do you always embarrass your straight friends like that or are you just stupendously socially awkward?”

I stood there like the fool I am. I had nothing to say.

He grabbed his bag and put it over his shoulder. “My office hours are on the syllabus if you want to talk. I suggest you talk to someone before you fuck up a friendship.”

He turned at the door. “I know this is really none of my business, but I’ve found that Jackson men are worth the effort to keep around.”

So, I said something stupid and more honest than I intended. “But I want him so bad.”

He leaned against the doorframe and smirked. Not the support I was hoping for.

He said, “If you stop acting like a horny child, that man will be by your side forever. And that, little brother, is worth more than a fuck any day. That is love.”

“But... But I want more. I need...” He knew what I needed. I dropped my eyes to the carpet.

He snorted and turned to go. “Child, this is Sterling University. If a pretty thing like you can’t get all the cock he needs, then the Apocalypse is surely upon us. But play safe, for God’s sake.”

“You think I’m pretty?”

He disappeared into the hallway. His bright red ponytail swung back and forth, as he shook his head muttering something about the Mother of God and gay boys.

“Is a fuck *and* love too much to ask for?”

I was alone. No one answered. Damn, I was late.

I was really late. I had to use the GPS on my phone to find the little building where my freshman English class was. It was an old, yellowish, cream-colored deco building down by the waterfront. The room was full. The only free seat was in the front row. The instructor had already started talking and writing something on the whiteboard.

I stood in the doorway eyeing Reed. He hadn't saved me a seat and was surrounded by girls. They kept sneaking looks at him. He stretched and leaned back in his chair. He spread his muscular legs out into the aisle. He was wearing his black jeans, the too-tight ones. I loved those jeans.

I didn't need this; there were other sections of English I could take. I turned to leave.

"There is a chair up here." The grad student teaching the class was talking to me. She had long curly hair, a kind of dark brown color with lighter streaks. She wore one of those gypsy-style dresses that pretentious artsy types seemed to favor. It was made of a shiny green and gold fabric. The light from the window reflected in her large round glasses, obscuring her eyes.

"Please, take a seat," she said.

Shit. Everyone was watching me. I refused to look back at Reed. I flashed a false smile at the teacher and walked forward taking the seat up front, dead center. Someone snickered. College was feeling a lot like high school.

I gave the girl on my left a smile as I opened my pack to get my notebook. She frowned and leaned over to whisper in the ear of the girl on the other side of her.

Someone tapped my right shoulder and whispered, "Here you can look at my sheet."

A dweeby-looking guy, with too-curly mousy-brown hair, black eyes and very unstylish glasses, was pushing a piece of paper onto my desk. It was an assignment sheet. At the top he had printed his name, Jeff North.

"Thanks," I said, and gave him a pat on the shoulder. He just kind of froze, turned red, and made a little gasping noise. I expected him to whip out an inhaler; instead, he sat there real still, like a rabbit staring down a rattler. I decided to focus on the teacher.

That's when I noticed the stillness in the classroom. I could hear the waves lapping against the seawall and the gulls calling through the open window. Everyone was looking at me. The teacher was leaning against the board with her arms crossed.

“As I was saying, the objective of Freshmen Composition is to provide you with the skills you need to effectively communicate your ideas during your academic career. The first assignment is an assessment to help me understand your strengths and the areas you need to work on. As you see on the assignment sheet, you will pair up with someone you don't know and interview them. You will write a minimum ten-page essay about them. This is more than what they did over the summer, people. I want to know who they are as young women and men. What are their hopes and dreams? This is important because your final assignment of the term will be to re-interview them and write an analysis on how they have changed, or not, during their first three months of college. The questions on the sheet are to get you started. They are not exhaustive.”

There was a lot of chatter as people were trying to size up partners. She stopped and let the talk die down.

“Please refer to the style guide posted on the English Department's website. You may use the rest of the period to get to know your partner and schedule interview times.”

She looked right at me. “And you are all adults now. I trust you can make it to class on time from now on?”

Someone laughed. I heard “loser” from the back. I really wanted to hide. All I could do was slump down in my seat.

“So do you want to do it with me?”

I looked at the North kid. “What?”

He jumped and scooted to the other side of his chair. He was small enough that the desk actually looked big.

“Sorry,” he said.

I shook my head. This guy was just too twitchy.

“What the hell is wrong with you? Relax. Now what did you want?”

“Do you want to do the assignment together?”

I was looking around the room. Reed was in the back. He was chatting up three girls. I shook my head. Why was this getting under my skin? He had a new girlfriend every other week back home. Shouldn't I be happy my best friend was going to get some play? Fuck, I should be cheering him on and being his wingman and not, well, whatever it was I was doing.

“Oh, I see.”

“What?” I said.

I looked back at the guy next to me. At least he didn't jump this time. He was looking from me to Reed.

I asked, “What do you see?”

“You jocks want to stick together. The guys back home didn't want to be seen with me either.”

“What?” Why did I keep saying that? “I'm not a jock.”

He tilted his head like a puppy that just didn't get what you were asking it to do.

“You're on the swim team?”

“How'd you know that?”

He pointed at my warm-up jacket. It had the swim team's logo on the chest.

“Well, yeah, I don't think swimmers are really classified as jocks.”

His black eyes found mine and held them. They were full of desperate need. The kind of need that just couldn't be filled. I knew that need.

He exhaled. “I think you're amazing.”

Ping! The gaydar went off. I whispered, “Are you...” The first time in six years, I couldn't say the word “gay.” Why was I choking on this?

He realized what he had said and went from embarrassed pink to white. “Shit!” he squeaked, then grabbed his pack and bolted for the door.

“Interview going well?” It was the teacher. She was sitting at the desk watching me. It looked like she had a class roster in front of her.

“You are Samuel Richards, correct?”

I stood and slung my pack over my shoulder. “I don’t know,” I said. I had no idea who I was anymore. I headed for the door. Being southern, it was my duty to follow and offer comfort. God help the South. God help me.

It was getting colder. I zipped up my jacket. The wind had picked up and shifted more to the north. The university was on the north side of Bennett Bay so the water was calmer down by the school’s little marina. I saw him sitting on a bench by the seawall looking out at the bay. I walked over and sat next to him.

He looked up at me. His eyes were red and puffy behind his glasses. His face was wet. Oh hell, he’d been crying.

“Are you going to hurt me?”

“What?” There was that damned word again. I just looked at him.

“When they found out I was gay, back home, they beat me. A lot. So did Daddy.”

“Fuck, that’s messed up man.”

He looked down at the ground. “I didn’t mean anything by it. Don’t be upset. I’ll make sure I stay away from you. I just kind of get nuts when I see a hot guy. I say stupid stuff. It’s just all bottled up inside of me. Sorry.”

He got up to leave. I reached out and grabbed his arm. He tried to pull away, but he didn’t have much fight in him.

“Sit the fuck down.”

He fell back onto the bench. I let go and unzipped my pack, pulled out my notebook and opened it to a fresh page, because I really didn’t know what else to do. Who do you call for a gay emergency? God knew I wasn’t qualified. I’d just pawed my best friend in front of a professor. Maybe just talk to him?

I asked, “Now, what God-forsaken place are you from?”

He looked down at my notebook. “So you going to interview me?”

I gave him an encouraging smile. I thought he might still make a dash for it. He had that scared rabbit look about him.

I said, “You’re my partner, right?”

“But aren’t you worried someone will think you’re gay if they see you with me?”

If we have to do a research paper, I’m definitely delving into Karma.

I squeezed his shoulder. “No, I’m not. And if you ask the right questions, you will find out why.”

He did that puppy dog head tilt again. I tried not to think it was cute. Too damn cute.

“So where are you from? I want to make sure I never go there.”

He giggled. It was a nice sound. “Cotton. Cotton, Mississippi. But don’t worry about going there. It’s hard to find.”

“Sammy.”

We both turned and looked back at the classroom building. Reed was waving and heading our way. Two of the girls that had sat next to him followed him now, chatting to each other and texting. Why did girls text all the time? How could you possibly have that much to say to anyone?

Jeff said, “Is he calling for you? Is that your name?”

I reached out and mussed up his hair. The curls were silky and soft. “Yeah,” I said. “Sorry. I’m Sam Richards.”

He turned bright red, but held his ground this time. “Jeff North,” he said.

“Yeah. I saw your name on the paper.”

Reed came up and put his hand out to Jeff. The guy flinched just a bit. Reed frowned.

“You okay?”

“Reed,” I said, “This is my friend, Jeff. We’re doing the assignment together.”

Jeff reached out and shook his hand.

Reed said, “Okay. Cool. So what’s your next class?”

Was it too weird that I had his schedule memorized and he had no idea what I was taking? “Sailing.”

He snorted. “What? Was basket weaving full?”

Jeff said, “I think sailing sounds like fun.” Well, it was more like he kind of cringed and mumbled it. Was the little rabbit standing up for me?

Reed said, “Okay.” He turned to me. “Got a late practice tonight. Want to catch dinner afterward, then we can study in the library?”

I nodded. He turned and walked away. The girls followed him. He hadn’t even bothered to introduce them or ask about lunch. The sound of a bell drifted over from the old building.

Jeff said, “We didn’t really get to talk did we?”

“Yeah, sorry about that,” I said. “Where’s your next class?”

“I’m free till two. Monday is a light day for me.”

“The sailing class meets here.” I pulled the campus map up on my phone. “I have chemistry after lunch... looks like it’s on this side of campus. Any place over here to eat and talk?”

He was looking at his phone now. “Have you been to the student beach?”

I shook my head. “Just got here Friday, been kind of busy.”

“Yeah, me too. But there’s a student center over there. Looks like it has a place called Joe’s Snack Shack. Wanna check it out?”

I stood up. “Why don’t you go grab a table? I’ll see you around noon.”

He smiled at me. It was all warm and needy. I didn’t like how it pulled at me.

“Great,” he said.

I turned and headed for the docks. Several students stood around talking to an older woman wearing white pants and a yellow and sky-blue windbreaker, the school’s colors. I glanced back at Jeff, still on the bench watching me walk away. What the hell had I gotten myself into?

I walked south along the seawall. The beach and the South Student Center weren't too far from the marina. In the hazy distance, I could see the town of Bennett Bay, the big city of Big Cypress County.

Having grown up in the backwater town of Clear Spring, coming here had always been an adventure for the family, the chance to see a movie in a theater, not the drive-in over in Blackwater, and have dinner on the waterfront. I kicked a rock off the sidewalk and it splashed into the water. It'd been a long time since the family did anything like that. Dad lost his job and everything got hard. Joy kind of seeped away. Now it was about keeping it together. Making it month to month. Four years of keeping it together.

“Sam?”

Someone called me from the beach. I held my hand above my eyes to shade them. The lifeguard, a young woman in a sky-blue training jacket and yellow shorts, waved a yellow rescue-can at me from the beach. I hooked both straps on my pack over my shoulders and jogged toward the lifeguard station.

“Julie!”

I grabbed her, twirling her around in a big bear hug.

“Put me down! I need to watch the idiots in the water.”

I put her back down and looked out at the water. Four blond guys were splashing around in the surf.

I shook my head. “Are they nuts? Swimming in this weather.”

Julie climbed back on the wooden tower and took a seat on the platform. “They're from Minnesota. They think it's warm.” She patted the wood next to her. “Coming up?”

I looked up the beach. The student center had a patio with tables outside, but they were empty. I could see a crowd inside behind the wall of glass. Jeff was waiting for me in there, somewhere.

“I have a few minutes,” I said.

I dropped my pack in the sand and climbed up. She scooted next to me. The warmth of her body felt good in the wind. “You were supposed to call me when you got on campus last week. How's it going?”

Other than Reed, Julie was my best friend from high school. She was two years ahead of me.

I put my arm around her waist. “Sorry about that. Things have been weird.”

“You haven’t had any problem with the scholarship have you? Got your books okay?”

“Yeah. That’s fine. And thanks again for helping with that. I don’t think I could have afforded Cypress Community College, let alone this place.”

“Well, you’re the state’s freestyle champ and Sterling’s swimming program is nearly as well endowed as the male swimmers.”

I could feel my face flushing.

She said, “Aha, I see you’ve noticed.”

“Well yeah. I’m just surprised you did.”

She held her hand above her eyes, scanning the water. “Some things even a dyke can’t avoid noticing. So did you really move in with Reed?”

“Yeah.”

She shook her head. “Was that a good idea?”

I laid back on the wooden platform. It was warm from the sun and felt good on my back. I was a little sore from the morning’s practice. “I don’t know.”

She didn’t say anything. The sky above me was clearing out, the clouds blowing across the state to the Atlantic coast. I closed my eyes, focusing on the sounds of the beach, the waves, the gulls and the distant sounds of men playing. The sun was warm on my face. I inhaled the salty air. Couldn’t I just stay here?

She reached out and gently squeezed my leg. “Sam, you know you earned that scholarship. I just let them know you were interested. We’re lucky to have you on the team.”

Yeah, many schools were interested in my record, just not me. Being out and proud in high school had its costs.

“Sammy?”

I sat back up. “Yeah. I know. Just been a shitty morning.”

“Already? What, you’ve had like three classes so far?”

I smiled. “You know I’m an overachiever. I can pack a lot in.”

“What happened?”

“Reed. Well, not really him. I don’t know. I feel all whacked out. Maybe I’m more homesick than I want to admit. You know, get too far from that old black water, the cypress trees, and Spanish moss, and a boy gets nervous. Dad’s gonna be up this weekend, that’ll help.”

She nuzzled me with her shoulder, then pulled her knees up to her chest. “He still working down in Tampa?”

“Yeah. Almost been a year now. Only gets home one weekend a month now. It’s hard on Mom. My little brother Billy’s acting out a lot. I feel like I should be there helping. And here I am, obsessing about guys and taking a jerk-off class like sailing.”

She stretched her legs out. “You’re in the sailing class?”

“Yup.”

“They still get to crew on the *Basil* during the January term?”

“If we want.”

She looked at me. “How could you not want to? Ever since I took that tour in ninth grade, I’ve wanted to sail on that old windjammer. Isn’t it like a hundred years old this summer? I’ve seen the historical society posters up all over town.”

I looked south at the town. I could make out the massive old ship moored at the town’s waterfront. I snickered, “Must be a lesbian thing.”

She punched me. “Like you never dreamed about being a cabin boy?”

I rubbed my arm. “Actually, I dreamed about having my own cabin boy.”

She turned and looked me right in the eye. “And he looked just like Reed.”

I looked out at the surf. “No, they were blond boys rescued from evil Viking raiders.” I lied and she knew it. Everyone knew I wanted Reed. I’d wanted him for six years. It was getting pathetic. Wasn’t it time to grow up and move on?

“I need to go. Someone’s waiting for me.”

“New boyfriend?”

“No!”

She grinned at my overreaction.

“Really, no. Just a guy from English class. We’re doing a project together.”

“Okay,” she said.

I didn’t like how she said it.

“Just a guy from your class?” She didn’t sound convinced.

“Yes. Just a kid from class. Now I got to go.”

I started climbing down the tower.

“They’re still looking for a few guards if you need to earn some cash. They prefer team members. You still qualified?”

I looked up at her. “Yeah, till April, but I don’t know if I have time.”

“Most of the shifts are on the weekend. The pay is good and so’s the view.”

I thought about being on the tower looking down on all the guys sunning on the beach. “I’ll think about it.”

Joe’s Snack Shack wasn’t much more than a large snack bar with a beach theme skinned over concrete walls. Faux fishnets and nautical kitsch framed the windows. It was just past noon and the place was packed. The cold wind had pushed everyone inside.

Jeff was sitting at a small table by the window picking at some carrot sticks. Maybe he *was* a rabbit. He glanced up at me as I sat down, and then looked back at the water.

He said, “I didn’t know if you were going to show.”

“Why not?”

He pointed with his chin toward the beach. I looked through the netting. Julie was down on the beach now. The blond guys were toweling off and looked like they were trying to hit on her. No luck there, boys.

I looked back at Jeff. “What are you talking about?”

“I saw you on the beach. You went up in the tower with her.” He said *her* like it was something foul.

“You mean Julie? Man, she’s a friend from back home.”

He looked back at me. He was getting kind of twitchy again. “Your girlfriend?”

I froze with my notebook halfway out of my pack. “Are you really that clueless?”

He did the puppy head tilt thing. A puppy-rabbit-boy. My pet mutant.

“What?” he said.

Good it wasn’t just me that was confused. Time for direct action. I looked him right in those damn black eyes of his. “Take off your glasses.”

His hands twitched.

“Take them off.” It was an order.

He did it. But sat there with his eyes closed, and his lips pressed together like he was getting ready to be punched. I stood up, leaned over and grabbed the front of his shirt. He whimpered. His eyes opened.

“Please, don’t hurt me. Not here.”

I pulled him to his feet and brought his face to mine. His lips were softer than I expected. Warm. He struggled and tried to push me away. I parted my lips and my tongue touched his lips. He gasped. His eyes widened. His mouth opened and we found each other. And he kissed back. He grabbed my head. Held me firm. His tongue dominated my mouth, sliding around mine. We pressed together. My arm moved down his back, a strong, hard, back under his baggy clothes.

What the hell was happening? I wanted to smooch the kid to show him I was gay too. I didn’t expect this. What was this? It was good.

Someone yelled, “Get a room!”

I realized people were whistling and clapping. We kind of stepped back from one another. His face was red and wet. Was he crying again? He made an awkward bend and fell back in his chair. I realized my sweats weren’t hiding

things very well. I couldn't believe I got wood from a kiss. I couldn't believe that kiss. Shit. I did a little turn and slid into my chair. Awkward.

He wiped his face. "What the fuck man?"

I was fucking hard and breathless. And he was crying?

"Shit man, was it that bad?" My esteem was plummeting.

His face stayed red, but I don't think it was embarrassment any more. He said, "Was it *bad*? What the hell are you trying to do to me?"

I really didn't expect indignation. I said, "You weren't picking up that I was gay too. I thought if I kissed you, you know, here, you'd know that it was all cool."

He started putting his stuff in his pack. "You couldn't just say, *It's cool, Jeff, I'm gay too?*"

"I thought—"

He stood. "What, that public humiliation would be better?" And he bolted for the door.

Oh hell no, he was not getting the last word. I stuffed the notebook into my pack and went after him. He was on the walk that headed back to the center of campus. I grabbed his shoulder and spun him around.

"And why is kissing me humiliating? What the fuck is wrong with me?"

"Because you're a man."

I dropped my pack and spread my arms. "Fucking right I'm a man. I got a big dick, low-hanging balls, a tight bubble butt and an amazing swimmer's build. Not to mention a winning personality."

He cracked a grin. "I'm waiting on the last one."

I stepped closer. "So you want me? Right?"

He didn't say anything.

"I saw that your boy parts work, but are you really a man?"

He took a step back. "What?"

I pressed closer. "A man takes what he wants. What do you want, Jeff? What do you want deep down in your balls?"

He stood there and shook. I'd never seen anyone so angry. I took a step back. He lunged at me, grabbed me, and pulled my face down to his. He sucked my face hard. He took my breath away like some soul-sucking demon, a little rabbit from hell.

Eventually, we stopped kissing. He looked up at me. "I've... I've never done this before. I don't know what to do."

I still had my arms around him. I liked the feel of his hard little body in my arms. Hell, I didn't know what to do either.

I said, "We're just kissing man. You know, making out. No big deal." *Yeah, Sammy, play it cool.*

"So all kisses are like that?"

Oh hell, that was his first kiss? I embarrassed him during his first kiss.

I smiled. "No, that was special." Like the best kiss ever. I also noticed I hadn't let go of him. Did he think this much cuddling was normal? Maybe it was? I needed some experienced guy to talk to, because I had this guy with his arms around me, with his head on my chest, and people were starting to stare. I thought of Professor Quinn and then Reed came to mind.

"Damn, we have chemistry."

He looked up at me. "We? Chemistry? What?"

"Yeah. Reed's in the same class as I am."

"Oh," he said and looked a little disappointed. "Can I walk you to class?"

He pulled away and took my hand. We walked to the Science Building with Red Alert alarms going off in my head. I didn't know if they were about him, or me. Here was Sam Richards boldly going where he'd never been before. I looked down at Jeff. He squeezed my hand and leaned against me as we walked. What a fucked-up morning. Was college always like this?

I managed to ditch Jeff in the lobby of the Science Building. He had a physics class on the third floor and my Intro to Chem class was here on the main floor. I saw a sign for vending machines. They were in the back of the building by the restrooms. I started feeding bills into the refrigerated one with sandwiches. I hoped they wouldn't kill me.

The door to the restroom opened and Reed came out. A shit-eating grin spread across his face when he saw me. He put his right arm around me and gave me a bone-crushing hug. Was all forgiven?

“So, have a busy morning?”

We started walking down the hall toward the class. I looked at him. There was a mocking tone to his voice.

“Why?” Apparently, today was sponsored by the words “what” and “why.”

He stopped. “You don’t know do you?”

“What?”

He pulled out his phone. Keyed in his password and pulled something up. I heard a crowd of people clapping and wolf-whistling. Fuck no. He turned the phone so I could see the video. Two guys were making out in front of a large window with the bay in the background. The smaller guy pulled away and you could see the tall guy’s full silhouette. And I do mean the whole thing. Hell, it was me! I really needed to start wearing a jock with my sweats after practice.

“Nice showing, Sammy.”

I put my back against the wall. “How many views?”

He looked at the phone. “It was only posted about twenty minutes ago and you’re over fifteen hundred. I think you’re viral.”

“Oh hell.”

He looked back at the phone. He was playing the video again. “Is that the guy from English class?”

“Yeah. Jeff.”

“I don’t think this was what the teacher meant when she said to get to know your partner.”

“Are you enjoying this?”

“Immensely,” he said.

He grabbed me again and put his arm around my shoulders, guiding me down the hall. “So is that little guy really your type?”

“I don’t think I have a type.” Of course I did. He had his arm around me right now. I stared up at his face as we walked down the hall.

He looked down at me and said, “What, you want a kiss from me too?”

Could I? My heart really wanted to know why not. My brain was trying to answer that when he pushed me into the classroom. Everyone looked up from their phones. I tried to turn and leave. Unfortunately, a rather large football player pushed me down into a seat.

“Maybe they won’t know it’s me.”

He snorted. “Yeah, you keep telling yourself that. And eat your sandwich, lover boy. You need to keep your strength up.”

I stuffed the sandwich into my pack. I didn’t feel like eating anymore. The bell rang. Time for fun with chemicals.

The chemistry lecture was over and the herd was moving on. Reed looked over at me as he collected his things. “What do you have next?”

“We have lab. Remember, we signed up for the same section?”

He glanced away. “I changed it.”

“Why?” I was back to the single double-u question words.

“I decided I wanted to take the media production class and that was when it was scheduled. I picked up a lab on Thursdays.”

“Okay. When did you decide this?”

He stood and put his pack over his shoulder. “Last week. I was talking with Fox, he’s a media major. Sounds interesting... a good fit for us sports-hero types.”

I didn’t bite at the joke. “Who’s Fox?” I asked. Why did he avoid my eyes?

“He’s the team’s quarterback. We’ve hung out a lot the last two weeks.”

I knew the football players had to be on campus two weeks early. Did I expect him not to make friends, especially with the guys on the team? I was going nuts. Maybe I needed meds or something?

“Come to practice this afternoon, I think you’ll like him... And I miss having you there. It’s weird to not see you in the stands.”

I grabbed my stuff. I was just going up three floors in this building; I didn’t

see any reason to pack everything up. “Yeah, sure. Then we’ll grab dinner. I’m gonna be starving.”

He squeezed my shoulder and smiled. “Great! Fox texted, wants to take me—us out.”

When did this happen? I said, “He wants to take us out? Why?”

He looked away again. Reed really wasn’t the kind of guy to avoid eye contact, to be evasive. “There is a gay restaurant down on the waterfront. I guess there’s a whole pier with a lot of gay shops and stuff.”

Very slowly I asked, “And why does he want to take us to a gay restaurant?” But what I meant was, *Why are you so excited to have a man take you to a gay restaurant?*

He was totally engrossed in the floor now. Something sure the fuck was up. “Aha, well, he’s gay too.”

I should have thought, *Cool, Reed has another gay friend. This campus seems to be crawling with them. This will help me meet more guys like me.* But I didn’t think that. I said, “Okay.”

He turned and pushed his way past the last few students standing by the door. Reed liked pussy. He really did. I knew that. Then why did I feel like he was cheating on me?

There weren’t many people in the stands at the practice field. It was still windy and cold. Another band of low clouds had moved in with the front. It was a gloomy afternoon. I caught a flash of yellow out of the corner of my eye. Jacklyn was wearing a yellow Sterling University windbreaker. She waved and started climbing up toward me. When she reached the top, she snuggled up next to me wrapping her arm around mine. Apparently, we were girlfriends now.

“Hi,” I said.

She grinned and gave my arm a little squeeze. “So how’s practice going?”

“Not bad, but this coach is a real ball-buster. Running the new guys hard. Hey, who’s the quarterback down there? He doesn’t have a name on his jersey.”

She looked down at the young men on the line of scrimmage. The ball was snapped. Reed rose up and blocked a defensive lineman, giving the guy behind him time to step back and pass the ball.

“What do you mean? His name’s on his shirt.”

“But, it says ‘Sterling’ the name of the school.”

She shrugged. “Well, that’s his name. Fox Sterling. You know, the Sterlings, one of the founding families of Bennett Bay. His father’s the mayor. Fox is our own little prince.”

The guy had his arm around Reed. They were talking about something. One of the assistant coaches ran over to them and called a huddle.

“So what’s he like?” I asked.

“Spoiled and privileged. He’s been in a few of my journalism classes. I find him rather annoying and he doesn’t like me very much.”

“Why?”

She blushed a bit and turned away. I reached up and stroked her hair. “What happened? Come on, you gotta tell me.”

She looked back at me. “I refused to blow him.”

“Oh shit. You were dating?”

“Well, I thought so. Turns out that Fox doesn’t actually date. He obsesses on someone, seduces them, and then moves on. He really likes having his dick sucked. Seems I’m a bit too picky about what I put in my mouth.”

The team was back on scrimmage. Fox was behind Reed. He seemed to be a little more intimate with Reed’s ass than the normal quarterback-center relationship.

“So he’s straight?”

She was looking down at the field too. Did she see what I saw?

“I don’t think it is about attraction with him. I think it’s about challenge and conquest. That’s why I said ‘no.’ He kept pushing. He was always trying to get me drunk.”

I looked back at her. “Did he?”

“No.” She shook her head. “And I’ve never heard that he has, but you know, it just didn’t feel right.”

“Shit.”

She smiled at me, and then sighed. “Yeah, the things we learn at college. So how was your first day?” There was a twinkle in her eye.

“Oh God, you saw the video?”

She gave me a little peck on the cheek. “Yeah. I think everyone has. I wanted to see if you were okay. Kind of a lot with the graffiti and all. Who was the other guy? I didn’t know you were seeing anyone.”

“I’m not seeing anyone. Just a kid from English class.”

I looked back at the field. They had finished the play the coach was trying to drill into them. Fox was touching Reed again. It was really annoying me. I was hungry and grumpy. Was everyone trying to fuck Reed? Did I need to take a number?

Jacklyn said, “So do you kiss everyone like that?”

Fuck it. “Sure,” I said. I reached out and pulled her toward me. Our lips met. There was a brief resistance then her lips parted. I pressed harder. My tongue entered her. Explored her. I pulled away.

“See just a kiss. Doesn’t mean a damn thing. Does it?”

Reed was down on the field looking up at me. Fox glanced up at me and shook his head. He grabbed Reed and dragged him to the huddle.

Jacklyn had let go and moved away a bit. “Why did you do that?”

I should have said, *Because I’m an impulsive ass*. Instead, I said, “Didn’t you like it? I just wanted to show you a kiss is just a kiss.”

She looked down at the field. Reed was still looking at us. The coach dope-slapped him on the helmet to get his attention and to look at the playbook he was holding.

“I really don’t get what is going on with you two, but I will not be in the middle.”

Too late. “There’s nothing between us.”

She kept looking at me. “Is he gay?”

I had to laugh. “Do you really think that Reed Jackson doesn’t like girls?”

She pulled a strand of hair out of her face. I really needed to buy this girl some hair bands.

“No,” she said. “Is he bi?”

I looked down at the field. Fox was standing next to Reed. He was actually leaning against him and looking over his shoulder at some chart the coach was showing them.

“Not with me he isn’t.” I got up and started walking down the bleachers, the aluminum rattling with each step.

“Where are you going?”

I called back to her, “Homework. This is college.”

I had to pass through the Quad to get back to the dorm. It was early evening and kind of quiet. A few guys were tossing a Frisbee around but the wind was making it hopeless.

Some kid was shivering behind a hot dog cart. I got a dog and a Coke from him. He kept looking at me. Did he want to say something? I didn’t ask. I walked a few yards away and sat down on a bench. The kid pulled his phone out. The wind blew the sound of my little bit of fame to me. He grinned and made juvenile kissing gestures in the air. I raised the hot dog to my mouth then stopped. The kid was making blow job gestures now and he had his phone’s camera pointed at me. The dog went in the trashcan next to the bench, and I gave him a rude gesture of my own as I headed for the dorm.

My phone buzzed. Another text from Jeff. *We need to talk. PLEASE.* I really couldn’t put this off any longer. And we did have that damn assignment.

I texted my dorm room location back and said bring food. I thought of the carrot sticks the kid ate at lunch. Maybe I should say bring meat? But, then, he might get the wrong idea. Not that sticking my tongue down his throat would put thoughts into his head. God, I wanted this day to be over.

I sat on my bed with my back against the wall trying to wade through the first chapter of *Human Origins* by some guy named David Stokes. This was my first college textbook, so I didn't have a lot to go on, but this guy sure sounded full of himself. All I really needed was a bulleted list of facts that might show up on a test. But no, apparently I had to plod through sixty thousand years of human history. Or at least, human history as this guy imagined it.

The door to the room flew open. Reed came in. He didn't look happy. "Why'd you leave?"

"Why'd you have sex with Fox?" Shit, I'd said it. The idea had been there all afternoon. The idea I kept pushing away, because it was unthinkable that Reed would have sex with a man. A man that wasn't me.

His mocha complexion turned pale. I looked at his face; it was true. The shit.

He sat down on his bed. "I was drunk—real drunk. It was just a blow job," he said.

"So you suck dick now?"

He went from sheepish pale to dark olive. "He sucked my dick."

"Really?" I wanted to say, *prove it*.

There was a knock on the door. It was still wide open. Jeff stood there. He had changed into a pair of black jeans with a white T-shirt. He had an old faded red flannel shirt over the tee. He held two black Styrofoam food boxes. He grinned like he was the Easter Bunny and I was a giant egg. I smelled bacon—bacon cheeseburgers. My stomach rumbled.

"Hi, Sam," he said.

He smiled at Reed and was ignored.

Reed said, "They are waiting for us."

"They?" I said.

He stood. "Yes. Jacklyn is down there waiting for me. You remember her? The girl you were making out with in the stands?"

I put my hands on my head. Maybe if I squeezed my skull my brain would work.

Jeff looked like he was going to melt. “You kissed a girl?”

Oh my God. I said, “It was just a kiss, with a friend.”

“Like our kisses?”

“No. When I kissed her, I didn’t grow wood and nearly cum. Okay?”

I turned to Reed and said, “So have you talked to her about Fox?”

“Why would I do that?”

I put my hands up in the air. I really wanted to surrender. “Oh, I don’t know. How did you get her to go?”

“I... I like her. I asked.”

“Okay, why do you want me to go?”

“Fox asked.”

Was I being set-up on a double date with the guy that just blew the straight guy I had had a crush on since I was twelve? Did his mouth still taste like Reed? I shook my head. Nuts. I’m nuts. Nuts... damn... nuts, cocks and balls.

Jeff asked, “Aren’t we going to work on our English assignment?”

I stood up. “No, we are going on a date.” I took the food from him and pushed the containers into our little fridge.

He asked, “You and I are going on a date?”

I grabbed my jacket. “I thought the first kisses went well, didn’t you? So why not a date?” I looked over at Reed. “I’m sure Fox won’t mind one more.”

“Who’s Fox,” Jeff said.

“No one,” I said. “Just a guy with a car.” I put my arm around him and we headed for the elevator.

I was holding onto Jeff’s hand. I needed to hold on to something now, and he didn’t seem to mind. I pulled him into the elevator, through the resident hall’s lobby, and out the glass front doors. There was a short-term parking zone where a sky-blue BMW 6 series convertible sat purring, a four-seater. The car oozed style and *I’m gonna own you and fuck you* power.

The young man behind the wheel looked right at me. Like I was his and there wasn't a damn thing I could do about it. He had wavy blond hair and stylish scruffy facial hair. He brought a phone up to his ear. *God please don't let that be Fox.* He said something into the phone. Someone in the back seat leaned into view. Yellow. Jacklyn and her fucking yellow jacket.

Jeff's hand gave mine a little squeeze. It was a question. Fox was looking at me again. Fuck him. I turned to Jeff and pulled him toward me. I ran my hand through curly hair. How did he get it so soft? His black eyes looked at me, searched my face. Confusion? Trust? He closed his eyes and parted his lips. Epic kiss, the sequel.

I pulled back and took a breath. A tear was running down his cheek. Did he have to cry every time we kissed? I pulled him close again, my mouth next to his ear. "I'm sorry," I said.

He held on to me and whispered into my shoulder, "Why?"

"I think I'm gonna be a real jerk tonight. Sometimes I can't help it." I squeezed him back, like I wanted to make him part of me. "I don't want to hurt you. You're really great."

He said, "It's okay. I can take a lot."

Shit. I pulled back. Another tear ran down his cheek.

He went on, "I just want to be with you, Sam. I'll do anything."

God that was fucked up. But damn it, a real live man was in my arms telling me he wanted me. He wanted *me*. I bent my head down and kissed his cheek. I tasted the salt of his tears. He giggled and stepped away. I took Jeff's hand again and dragged him to the car.

"Fox?" I said.

I was close enough now that I could see his eyes, bright hazel eyes and not very friendly at the moment. He looked from me to Jeff and back.

I said, "This is Jeff." I took a breath. "My boyfriend. He's coming with." Well, he could be my boyfriend, maybe, someday. Fuck Fox.

I opened the passenger door, pulled the seat forward and scooted in next to Jacklyn. Reed came up behind us.

"Where am I supposed to sit?" he said.

I reached out and pulled Jeff in on top of my lap. “You can sit up there with Fox, we girls will take the back.”

Jacklyn gave me a what-the-fuck look. Jeff tried to turn around to do the same, but he froze. I hadn’t had time to change. I was still free-balling it under my sweats and the movement of his ass was waking the dragon big time. He squirmed again, trying to get his mouth as close to my ear as possible. He whispered, “What should I do?”

I spread my legs a bit to relieve some of the pressure and pulled him back so he was lying against my stomach. None of this helped. I breathed into his ear. “Stop moving! Or I’m gonna make a mess.”

His body went tense as he attempted to remain still. That meant he clenched his ass, tightly.

“Oh hell,” I sighed. This was not going to work. I picked him up and shoved him onto the armrest between the two seats. I leaned my head back against the headrest and started thinking of cold swimming pools, gators, and naked women. Anything to quiet the dragon.

Jacklyn snickered and looked away. Fox looked in the rear view mirror as he put the car in reverse and pulled out of the lot. His eyes caught mine. He winked. I wasn’t sure what that meant. He pulled out onto Bayside Drive and headed south toward town.

Jeff leaned over against me. His hair brushed my cheek. I nuzzled him. I smelled cinnamon and apples. Like the pies Grandma would bake on Sundays. Jeff smelled like home. Damn. If every day was like this, I wasn’t going to make it through one semester, let alone a whole degree program.

The town of Bennett Bay once had a small working waterfront. Fishing boats, cargo ships, and even passenger steamers docked and unloaded at the piers and wharves. However, not much came to town by water anymore and the area had decayed. The city redeveloped the area into upscale condos, restaurants, and shops.

One of the piers was the home of the Historical Society, and also the berth of the old, four-masted windjammer *Basil I*, named after Basil the First, a Byzantine emperor. Every ninth-grader in the county visited it on a field trip.

They learned about the group of Armenian refugees that escaped the genocide in Turkey. During the tour, Reed and I had leaned against the railing at the bow of the ship, talking about being pirates and sailing the sea. There was a little pirate in every Florida boy, even the ones who grew up in the backwater swamps like we did.

We drove past the old ship. Small white lights lined the hull and colored spotlights illuminated the mast and spars against the night sky. Jeff said, “Wow, look at that. We didn’t have anything like that back in Cotton.”

I gave his leg a squeeze. “Yeah, my sailing class is going to crew on her this winter. Wanna come?” So, I was trying to impress him now?

“You think I can?”

“I’ll find out. But I’m sure I could sneak a cabin boy on board.”

Fox just shook his head and I think Jacklyn snorted. I know I sounded ridiculous, but that’s just what my life was right now.

Fox pulled the car into a valet station and we all got out. A hunky guy in a red vest took the keys from Fox and drove the car away. Fox took the lead and headed for the wide boardwalk that ran along the seawall. We followed him to Pier Five. Those little white fairy lights lit everything. The first building was a converted wharf. It had a huge ship’s anchor and several tables out front. The mural painted on the front of the building depicted a sea battle between two sailing ships. A pirate flag flapped in the cool night breeze.

I asked, “What’s that place?”

Fox stopped and looked back at me. I didn’t like the twist to his smile. “The Jolly Roger, the town’s token gay bar. Touristy but you could get a blow job in there no problem.”

Jacklyn whispered, “Fox, don’t.”

I heard Reed clear his throat and scuff his feet on the pier’s planking. Jeff’s hand tightened on mine. I didn’t look away from Fox. His eyes reflected the many little points of light around us. Did he mean I could get sucked off in there or he’d do me in the bar? And why the fuck would he say that to me, here and now?

I let some of my pent up anger from the day seep into my voice. “Thanks,

but I'm getting all the head I need." I brought Jeff's hand up to my lips and kissed it. Thank God, he didn't say anything. Well, he might have wet himself.

I think Reed was about to say something, when four men came out of the bar laughing. The youngest one, a black man in his late twenties, looked over at us, and called out, "Reed? Reed Jackson is that you?"

He came toward us pulling a man with long red hair and a beard behind him. It was Professor Quinn.

The man was about a half-head taller than Reed and built like him—broad shoulders and heavy muscles. I wondered if he'd been a ball player too? He gave Reed a big hug. "Hey, little cousin, what you doing down here?"

Reed hugged the man back. "Hey, J.J., good to see you. We're going out to eat. You know, to celebrate the first day of school."

Is that what we were doing?

Professor Quinn shifted a bit. J.J. reached over and pulled him close. "You remember Aidan from the picnic don't you?"

Aidan said, "Reed and his friend are in my intro class." He looked over at me. Me and Jeff. His green eyes sparkled behind his glasses and he had this bemused smile on his face.

J.J. was looking at me. His head tilted slightly to the right. He reached out his hand. "I'm John, well J.J., do I know you?"

I had a sinking feeling in my stomach. I stuck out my hand. "I'm Sam. This is my friend, Jeff."

He shook our hands, but he kept an on eye me. The other two men, one black and one white and both older, now joined us. Reed grinned. "Uncle Stan!" He went over and hugged the black man. Stan stood out in the casual crowd wearing a crisp dark suit, but he had undone his tie. Reed moved to the other guy, a big bear of a man with white hair and beard and bright blue eyes. Reed hugged him too. "Oh man, Zach I've missed you."

Zach hugged him back and said, "My word. You're like a brick. How much working out do you do?"

Reed laughed. "Coach thinks I need to do more! I have to protect my quarterback." He glanced over at Fox when he said that, but Fox didn't notice.

He was standing to the side with his arms crossed, focused on me. J.J. was still looking at me too. I squeezed Jeff's hand. The squeeze back helped for some reason.

Reed introduced all of us to the men. I noticed Stan's smile became flat and somewhat forced when he shook Fox's hand.

"And how is the Mayor?" he asked the young man.

Fox smiled. It was a politician's smile. "Father is just fine, Detective Wolf. I know he thinks highly of the Police Department's efforts." There was something in the way he said *efforts* that grated on me.

Stan seemed to let it pass. He just widened his smile. "That is very kind of him. Serving the *people* of Bennett Bay is the goal of everyone at the Department."

J.J. cut in, "We're all going to The Drake. Do you want to join us?"

Jacklyn spoke up. "I think that'd be lovely." She'd been quiet, just observing. I wondered if she felt awkward surrounded by all of these men.

Zach came forward and put his arm around hers. "You know, I love that jacket. Yellow really suits you."

She giggled. "I've been told." She winked at me as they took off down the pier. Jeff pulled me after them. I turned around to follow.

J.J. said, "The video. That's where I know you from."

I looked back. Aidan was shaking his head and whispering something into J.J.'s ear.

J.J. looked at him and said, "Yeah. Well. I'm sorry. You know, law enforcement training. It bothered me. I knew I'd seen him."

Jeff looked up at me. "A video? Of what?"

Zach looked back now. "Yes, what kind of video?"

Shit. I could tell what he was thinking, as he looked me up and down. I couldn't decide if it was creepy or kind of hot to be looked at that way by an older man. I was edging toward hot, when Jeff asked again, "What video?"

No one said anything. Then J.J. whispered to Aidan, "Isn't that the other guy?"

Aidan tried to whisper back, but everyone could hear, “Oh for the Mother of God, shut up.”

Jeff moved around and faced me. “The other guy?”

Oh joy. “Yeah. When I kissed you at Joe’s, someone recorded us, and, well, we went viral.”

He pushed his glasses up on his nose. *God please don’t let him cry.* He said, “So everyone has seen a video of us kissing?”

Reed added, “You kissing and Sammy throwing major bone.”

I pointed at Reed. “Not helping.”

“Well, I haven’t seen it.” I think Zach was trying to be nice, but like I told Reed, not helping.

I looked down at Jeff. “I’m so sorry.”

He broke out into the biggest shit-eating grin I’d ever seen. “Fuck yeah,” he yelled and pumped his fist in the air.

“What?” I was lost.

He reached up and grabbed my head and pulled my face down. Epic Kiss Three.

One of the older men cleared his throat. I heard Fox say something about getting to the restaurant. I came up for air. “What was that for?”

Jeff was all smiles. “There’s tangible proof that I made out with a totally hot jock. The guys wouldn’t believe me otherwise.”

“Christ sakes, he’s only a swimmer.” Fox turned and walked toward the restaurant. The others followed. I watched him go. *Like you don’t want some swim-ass.*

I put my arm around Jeff. “What guys? I didn’t think you had any friends back home.”

“In Cotton? Hell no. But I have some good friends online. I found a gay youth site a few years ago. They really helped me make it through all the bullying at school. And the guys in my online AP classes were cool. The nerds tend to get being different.”

“AP classes?”

He smiled up at me. “Yeah. I took a lot of advanced math and physics classes. The college let me skip right to junior level classes.”

I stopped. “So are you like, some kind of genius?”

He looked away. “Well, I’m really good at math and science. Don’t know if that helps in the real world. Does it bother you?”

I pulled him back to me. “What? If you can handle me being pretty, I can handle you being smart. But one thing.”

“What?”

“You’ve got to help me with chemistry. That just doesn’t make any sense to me.”

He leaned on me as we walked. “I think we can work out the chemistry between us.”

I put him in a gentle headlock. “Funny too, I see.”

I looked at the guys in front of us and felt the warmth of Jeff in my arms. You know, it was a good day after all.

We’d fallen behind. Everyone was milling around the front of the restaurant. The Drake was about halfway down the pier. It had an area roped off for outdoor seating, but the chill had driven all but the hardiest Yankees inside. Stan and Zach and Aidan and J.J. were chatting with another couple, a skinny younger guy with long black hair and a big older man with a full black beard and mustache. Reed and Jacklyn were off to one side whispering. He leaned in and kissed her. I smiled. Yeah, I was okay with it. Things were changing.

Jeff pulled me over to the group of men. The big older guy was saying, “Yeah, the crab in lemon-butter sauce was amazing tonight. Marco put it on a bed of tomato basil pasta. To die for.” He looked over at us and smiled. “And who are these delicious young things?”

The younger man put his arm around him and said, “Down. You’ve already eaten and you’ll get plenty of dessert back home.”

The other men laughed. I was starting to like the ego stroking the older guys were giving us.

Stan said, “These are my nephew’s friends, Jeff and Sam. We just ran into them. They’re out celebrating surviving their first day at Sterling.”

He looked at us. “The bear is Kip and his little lost Irish lad is Innes.”

I put my hand out to shake, but Kip pulled me into a bear hug. “We’re family, boy, handshakes are for strangers.”

He passed me off to Innes and started to squeeze Jeff. I nearly said, “Don’t break my boyfriend.” Yeah I thought *boyfriend*, and I think I was starting to mean it.

Innes whispered in my ear as he hugged me. “Sorry, he can get a little intense, but he means well.”

I whispered back. “I think he’s amazing.”

He took a half step back and gently held me by my shoulders. His bright blue eyes scanned my face. What was he looking for? He smiled. Did he find it? He reached over and pulled Jeff into a group hug.

“Well met, little brothers. Blessings be with you.” He kissed our foreheads.

Jeff slid his arm around my waist. He was beaming. I felt it too, kind of warm and tingly and being right with the world. Like for a brief instant we belonged. Like we weren’t the queer ones in the world. *Weird*.

Kip took a step closer to Stan. “Speaking of Sterling, is that who I think it is inside?” He nodded toward the glass front of the restaurant. Fox was having an animated conversation with the hostess inside. Stan nodded. Kip continued, “Kind of awkward isn’t it?”

Stan’s face turned hard. “You know I can’t talk about that, especially not here. And neither should you.”

“Right.” Kip held up his arms. “Sorry, too much wine. Glad Innie’s driving tonight.”

That was odd. I wanted ask Jeff what he thought, but he wasn’t paying attention. He was busy chatting with Innes about gator tails and imported beer. My stomach rumbled. They all looked at me.

Kip reached out and mussed up my hair. “Better go grab a table. Don’t want to have these boys faint from hunger. You might have to give them mouth-to-mouth.”

Innes rolled his eyes to the heavens. “Okay, time for bed, old bear.”

Zach held the door open and Jeff and I walked into the lobby of The Drake. It was like stepping into an old English manor or something—all dark wood panels and old paintings of ships and exploration. Several old maps of the Caribbean and Gulf were framed, and in the center of the back wall was a life-size portrait of an old guy wearing something out of a Renaissance fair.

“Who’s that?”

Jeff looked at me like I was an idiot. He pointed at the plaque. I read it, “Sir Francis Drake. Like I said, who?”

He whispered at me, “The greatest navigator and privateer of the Elizabethan era. How can you not know that?”

Disappointment flickered across his face. Apparently, science and math weren’t the only things he was good at. The disappointment stung. I missed the over-the-top adoration. Yeah, like that was going to last.

I said, “Remember, I’m the pretty one.”

He shook his head and smiled. He kissed me on my cheek.

“Damn it, I want a table.”

We looked over at Fox. An older man in a suit had joined the girl standing at the hostess podium. Fox’s face was getting redder.

The man said, “I’m sorry, sir, but you don’t have a reservation.”

Fox hissed, “Do you know who I am?”

The man looked at Fox. “Yes, you are a person without a reservation on a busy night.”

Jeff and I moved further in as the others came into the lobby. The man in the suit looked up. “Ah, Stanley and Zachary, I was so pleased to see your names down for tonight. Your usual table?”

Stan said, “Rolf, I know you’re packed, because of the chill, but we’ve picked up a few more. Could you possibly seat nine?”

The man looked down at a seating chart. “I’ll have to put you in the back. Will that be satisfactory?”

Stan was about to speak, but Fox cut in, “I thought you didn’t have any seats?”

Rolf was clearly annoyed. “He has a reservation and is a friend.”

“I have friends.”

Rolf’s eyes narrowed. “How nice for them.” He turned to Stan. “Give me a moment to arrange the tables.”

An awkward silence settled into the space. Professor Quinn was next to me. “So what do you think of your classes so far?”

I took a deep breath and let it out. “I think I need time to process, but chemistry is going to be hard. I get to write a paper about Jeff for English—that’s how we met.”

He nodded, “I was wondering about that.”

“Yeah. Sailing’s going to be fun. It’ll be nice to get out on the water a couple of times a week. Oh and I started the reading for your class.”

Reed asked, “Is that the book you were bitching about?”

Like, not in front of the teacher dude!

I noticed Aidan going red. J.J. was watching him and smiling. He looked over at me. “So what did you think of the book? And be honest, I’m a law enforcement officer.”

Shit. “Well, all I got through was the Introduction...”

J.J. leaned in. Why was he enjoying this so much? “And?”

I swallowed. “He seemed like...”

Quinn cut in, “A pompous ass?” I couldn’t believe a professor had said that.

J.J. started laughing. He reached out and patted my shoulder. “Oh, you have no idea. He’s Aidan’s ex and such an ass.” He turned to his lover. “I really don’t know why you’re using his textbook.”

Aidan exhaled. “Because it’s one of the standard introductory texts in this country, Seabrook had already approved it, and the bookstore had them ordered.” He stuck his hands in his pockets and looked rather uncomfortable.

J.J. reached over and played with Aidan’s hair. “And you didn’t want to cancel his book and look like a spiteful jilted lover?”

“Yeah, well, there were a lot of reasons.” Aidan looked at me. “Don’t worry, Sam, I know where the good parts are. I’m only using those for class.”

“That’ll be good, sir.”

He smiled at me. “And call me Aidan. Like Kip says, we’re family here.”

Rolf came back accompanied by a young man dressed in a gold and black formal waiter uniform. The waiter said, “We are ready for your party, sir.”

I looked at the waiter and glanced into the dining room. “I’m really not dressed for this place.”

Zach stepped back and whispered in my ear. “Son, this is an upscale restaurant with a gay male clientele. Rolf would cut his balls off before he’d refuse to serve a college boy in tight sweats. You’re eye candy for the other clientele. You know, good for business.” He just snickered at my shocked expression, and then followed his partner into the dining room.

“And where are you going, sir?” Rolf had blocked Fox’s way. “I told you we did not have a table available.”

“But I’m with them. They’re the ones I was trying to get a table for in the first place.”

“I find that highly unlikely.”

Fox called out, “Detective Wolf.”

Stan turned around. “Rolf, he’s with the kids.”

Rolf stepped aside. Fox pushed his way past everyone and went into the dining room.

J.J. said, “You do know who he is?”

Rolf said, “Yes, and I know *what* he is and that’s why I don’t want him in my restaurant.”

J.J. whispered, “Be careful.”

He snorted, “The Sterlings are just bullies. I’ve dealt with bullies all my life. You have to stand up to them.”

Jeff said, “But what if they’re bigger than you?” I couldn’t believe he’d jumped into the conversation.

Rolf looked down at him. “Then, little one, you find people to stand with you. You are not alone. You know that, right?”

Jeff didn’t say anything. He didn’t look like he believed it. I tightened my grip on his hand to remind him I was here. He smiled at me, but I wasn’t sure I bought it. I looked at Rolf. I opened my mouth, but I wasn’t sure what to say.

Rolf interrupted and pushed us toward the dining room. “You boys go be pretty. Dessert’s on the house.”

Dinner was winding down. The older men at the other end of the table talked among themselves. Zach and Aidan chatted about family stuff like kids and trying to be a part of the massive Jackson clan. Stan and J.J. had their heads together whispering. It sounded like something about a criminal case, but I couldn’t hear much. Reed was next to Fox talking football. Every time Reed tried to turn to Jacklyn, Fox would pull him back. It was weird. Jacklyn kept glancing at Reed and then back to her plate of pasta. I felt sorry for her.

I leaned over and asked her, “So who was Seabrook and why did Aidan take over for him?”

She took a sip of her iced tea and looked at me. “You don’t know? I thought you were local?”

“Yeah, Clear Springs. You know, the next town of any size up the river. What’s that got to do with anything?”

She glanced over at Aidan and J.J., like she didn’t want them to overhear. “Don’t you remember the shootings a year ago, over Thanksgiving and Christmas?”

“Kind of.” I hoped that didn’t sound as pathetic as a “no.” The mileage I could get out of being a State Swim Champion was rapidly running out. Until

a week ago, my world was mostly a pool. People didn't get how much training I had to do. That I still had to do.

“Well, Doctor Seabrook was one of those killed. Actually, Professor Quinn and his nephew were shot too.”

I looked over at him. He'd been really nice so far and he was kind of hot for an older guy, you know, in his thirties or something. “Who did it? Why would anyone want to shoot college professors?”

She snuck a look at the guys then leaned back to me. “Well, they think they found the guy that did it. But...”

Okay, I was hooked. “But what?”

“I've done some research on this for the school's blog. I'm sure the man they found was guilty, but he was found shot. And he was a professional hit man.”

“No fucking way?”

She said, “Yes. So someone ordered a hit, and then killed the assassin.”

I glanced at Aidan again. “No way. You're kidding me?”

She reached down into the big purse she'd lugged around all night and pulled out a tablet. She pulled something up on it, and then handed it to me. It was an article in the *Bennett Bay Gazette* dated over a year ago. The headline read “Sterling University Professor Found Shot.”

Jeff looked over. “What's that?”

“Nothing,” I said. I pushed the tablet back to Jacklyn. I didn't think it'd be cool to start sharing this at the table.

I took a bite of the triple chocolate rum cake Rolf had brought us. *Damn, that was good.* Fox and Reed were laughing about something. I leaned back to Jacklyn. “So what's up with Stan and Fox?”

She looked at Fox and Reed. “I don't know. Maybe it's more about his dad, you know he's the mayor?”

“Yeah, you told me.”

I didn't know how long she'd put up with my questions, but I had to ask one more. “So was he like that when you were with him?”

She looked back at me. “Like what?”

I leaned in real close. “You know, all rapey and stalker like? He’s giving me the creeps.”

Her face froze and her good-natured smile vanished. I’d crossed a line. She sighed. “People change a lot from their freshman to their senior year. Sometimes not for the best.”

I looked over at Fox. He had his hand on Reed’s shoulder. But his eyes kept drifting over to me. I realized they were almost the same color as Reed’s. But there was no joy, no life in them. Something had broken that boy.

A cold clear sky stretched out above us as Fox’s convertible hummed through the silent streets of Bennett Bay. Jeff was back on the armrest between Jacklyn and me. She hadn’t said much in the last hour. I didn’t understand why Reed was ignoring her. I knew he liked her. Hell, I was starting to like her too. I didn’t get the hold Fox seemed to have on him. Did a drunken blow job really mean something to him? What kind of power did Fox have over him?

Jeff shifted. His right leg moved down between mine. He rubbed it up my inner thigh. He was a small guy, but I could feel he was well built. I rubbed his leg and looked up at him. “So do you work out much?”

“No, but I run a lot. I try to do a few miles every morning. Helps me clear my head and it’s good for avoiding the bullies. They can’t beat on you if they can’t catch you.”

I gave him a little smile and stroked his leg. I turned and looked out into the night. Getting called names in the hall back in high school and a bit of graffiti on my locker wasn’t really that much harassment. No one ever laid a hand on me. I couldn’t even imagine my dad hitting me, especially for being gay. Mom and Dad were a little surprised by the whole thing and it took a while to adjust. Hell, it did for me too, but the first words they said to me were, “We love you. That will never change.”

When I saw Dad this weekend, I really needed to say thanks. Big-time thanks. I leaned my head against Jeff’s side. His red flannel was soft and warm

against my face. His fingers ran through my hair. His index finger traced the edge of my ear and ran down my cheek. I quivered. I fucking quivered. What the hell did that mean? Guys playing with my dick had never even made me feel like this. I reached up and took his hand. I really couldn't take him touching me like that—not in the car. I so wanted to fuck him, but that wasn't enough. I wanted, needed, something beyond fucking. And I had no idea what that was. What was beyond or more intense than sex? God, I sounded like a chick.

The car passed through the gates to the campus and moments later we were pulling into the loading zone in front of Stetson Hall. Reed whispered something to Fox, but I didn't catch it. They both got out and pulled their seats forward so we could get out of the back. Jacklyn got out and headed for the front door of the dorm without saying anything.

Reed followed her, and Fox called out, "See you at practice tomorrow."

Reed stopped like someone had stunned him. He turned on the spot. "Yeah. Thanks for dinner," Reed said. He turned and jogged to catch up with Jacklyn.

I got out and gave Jeff a hand.

Fox said, "North, don't you live over in Fletcher Hall? Come up front. I'll drop you off."

We both looked at Fox. That was the first time all evening he'd really even acknowledged Jeff's presence. Jeff looked at me with those big black bunny eyes. I hadn't really thought about what would happen when we got back. It was late. I had schoolwork, and six a.m. practice. I really wanted him to come up. Reed and I really needed to talk about bringing people to the room. But hell, I wasn't ready to say goodnight right now. My hand went up and touched my ear. I wanted that feeling back.

Fox said, "Don't you have early practice?"

"Yeah, at six."

Jeff said, "Could I come by the pool and watch after my run?"

I felt my face go all smiley. "That'd be great. I can introduce you to the guys on the team."

He looked surprised. “You want them to meet me?”

“Why wouldn’t I?”

Fox got back behind the wheel of the car. “Well, aren’t you all out and proud?”

I said, “I try to be. I don’t have anything to hide.”

“North. Get in the car, now.” It was an order and Jeff hopped to obey. Fox put the car in reverse and backed out, then squealed away. I think he had more to hide than most.

Tuesday

Sterling University’s Swim Complex was mostly outdoors. Being in Florida, most of the time it wasn’t a problem. They kept the pools well heated. We had lots and lots of solar power. But on cold mornings like this, the pools created their own fog banks. If I weren’t trying to compete in practice heats, it’d be fun swimming through the steam. But right now, it was damn annoying. It was also obscuring the viewing stands. I kept looking up to see if Jeff was there. He wasn’t and the distraction was killing my time. Coach was going to have my ’nads, if the cold air didn’t get them first.

I pulled myself out of the pool and Enrique brought a towel over to me. It was warm and fluffy.

“Your time sucks, Richards. What’s wrong? And why do you keep looking at the stands? No one’s there.”

“Just an off day,” I said.

I looked back at the stands as I headed for the locker room. They were cold and empty.

I finished dressing and pulled my phone out of my locker. I texted Jeff. “Missed you. Breakfast?”

Nothing.

I pushed cold scrambled eggs around on my plate. Reed was sitting across from me holding a limp piece of bacon in his hand. The morning crowd in the Student Union thinned out as everyone headed for their first class.

I checked my phone again.

“Oh God, will you give it a rest.” Reed looked pissed. “If he wanted to talk to you, he’d call.”

“But why wouldn’t he call? We had a good time last night. We made plans.”

He stood up, slinging his pack over his shoulder and grabbing his food tray. “Maybe you just couldn’t give him what he wanted.” He kicked his chair out of the way and headed for the dish-room window.

“Reed, what the hell is wrong with you?”

He didn’t say anything. He threw his tray in the window and headed out of the cafeteria. I packed up my things, grabbed my tray, dumped it with the dirty dishes, and headed for history class.

As I walked across the Quad, I texted, “Lunch? Come on, we have the English paper. Did I do something?”

The not knowing was killing me. If he just told me to fuck off, I could deal, but this total freeze-out was just fucked up. What was I supposed to say to him tomorrow in English?

I stood in front of his door. The only thing on it was a poster for the band Ghost Ship. I heard music coming from the room, loud rock music. I didn’t really see Jeff as a rock kind of guy. But I didn’t know, because I’d never got around to asking.

I took a breath and knocked.

Nothing.

I knocked harder and the door opened.

I exhaled. Okay, I lost my breath.

A tall man with long, curly blond hair and blue-green eyes stood there naked. Well, mostly naked. He had a towel. The gold rings in his nipples reflected the light from the hallway. A Chinese dragon tattoo wrapped itself around his body. The head looked out at me from between his pecs and the tail

ran down the fuzzy trail disappearing under the towel. Did the end of the tail wrap around his cock? Why was I here again?

“Jeff.” It was more of a squeak—all I could get out.

The guy looked at me. “Nope. I’m Randy. He’s not here. Come on in, I need to get dressed.” He stepped to the side and I got sucked into the room by his presence.

He shut the door and dropped the towel. I tried to look away, I really did. And yes, it did, the tail wrapping thing.

He sat down on one of the beds and started pulling on socks. “So you a friend of his?”

“Yeah.” My mouth was really dry. I needed water or maybe bourbon.

He stood up and pulled a pair of black jeans out of a laundry basket in the closet. He slipped them on, the man kept his junk loose and free. “I really like Jeff. He’s a good kid, but kind of twitchy. Caught him watching some porn on the Net the other night and I swear he nearly jumped out of his skin. Like I care if the little guy’s gay or wanks all the time.” He pulled on a black T-shirt. It had the Ghost Ship logo on it, so the poster was his? “I think he met someone. There’s a video going around of him kissing some dude. He didn’t come home last night so I think he hooked up. I hope so. That guy really needs to get some.”

My brain snapped into focus. “What do you mean he didn’t come home last night?”

Randy went over to a desk and put on a pair of glasses, then he pulled his wet hair back and slipped on a hairband. He sat in the chair and started pulling on a pair of well-worn biker boots. He looked up at me. “I mean the dude didn’t come home.”

Randy stood up and walked over to me. He studied my face. I was very aware he was a good head taller than me. I’d seen him naked, but the muscles stretching the shirt and jeans moved my brain from lust to the fact that this guy could do some serious damage. And, he was wearing steel-toed boots.

Randy was now in my face. “You’re the guy that was sucking his face in the video?”

“Yeah.”

“And he wasn’t with you? Last time I saw him he said he was going to get some take-out and meet a friend. He was jumping around like a kid on Christmas. I saw the video after he left. I just figured that’s who he was going to see.”

I took a step back. “Yeah, he came over and we went out.”

He took a step forward, closing the gap again. “What happened? You leave him somewhere?”

“No. We said good night outside my dorm and he got a ride home.”

He stepped away and grabbed a large set of keys off his desk. He pulled a biker jacket off the back of the chair. “Who gave him the ride?”

“Fox Sterling.”

“Sterling? Like the school?”

“Yeah. His family started the place. He’s the quarterback.”

“You know where to find him?”

I looked down at my watch. “Yeah, he should be at practice.”

“Good, come on.” He started for the door, then stopped and turned. “That was some kiss on the video.”

I didn’t know where he was going with this. “Yeah,” I said.

“What are your intentions?”

“What do you mean?”

“The little dude’s been through a lot. I mean major shit. He’s my friend. You hurt him, I’ll take your balls.”

I realized that wasn’t a metaphor. “Randy, I think I love him. I’m going nuts not knowing where he is. Fuck it. I’d give you my balls right now just to know he’s okay. I’m freaking out man.” I stepped back and sat on Jeff’s bed.

“You love him?”

I looked up at the man. “I don’t know how I feel. I just want to be with him. God, I sound like a silly faggot.”

He walked over and squatted down so he was eye level with me. “Nothing silly about love, brother.”

“But I only met him yesterday. How can I feel this intense about someone I’ve just met?”

He took my hands in his. They were strong and rough and gentle. “Love is energy. It’s like fire. It can be a slow burn or it just flashes. But like a fire, it needs tending. You have to feed it and poke it and never leave it unattended. Now come on, let’s go find Jeff. I’m sure he’s okay.” He stood. “Oh, and what the hell’s your name?”

“Sorry, Sam Richards.”

He thrust his hand out to me. I took it and he pulled me up to my feet.

“Glad to meet you, Sam.”

I was behind Randy on his motorcycle. He insisted I put my arms around his waist. “You have to move with me. We have to be one on the bike,” he had said. So, as his torso flowed and rippled under my hands, I leaned my body with his. We were speeding through campus heading for the practice field.

He pulled up to the lot behind the aluminum bleachers. I heard the tweets of the coach’s whistle and the calls of the players. I got off the bike and headed for the gate that led onto the field. I saw Fox out on the field calling the offense into a huddle.

“Sammy?”

I turned around. Reed had his helmet off and was leaning against a light post behind the bench. I jogged over to him. “Why aren’t you on the field?”

He looked out at the huddle. “I don’t think I played the game right. They seem to have special rules here.”

“What?”

He shook his head. “Never mind.” He looked behind me. “Who’s that?”

I turned. Randy was standing there. “Randy, this is Reed, my best friend and roomie. Randy’s Jeff’s roommate.” The two men sized each other up as they gripped hands.

“Reed, Jeff never went back to his room last night.”

“What do you mean? He left with...” He looked out at the field. “Fox.”

“You mean that guy?” Randy was pointing out at the players.

I nodded. He started walking out on the field. Reed grabbed his shoulder and pulled him back. Randy spun around ready for a fight.

Reed held his hands up. “Just wait. They’re almost done.”

Randy grunted, but he waited. He stood there with his legs shoulder-width apart and arms crossed, a tower of badass.

The coach blew his whistle. The guys on the bench jumped up and sprinted off toward the locker rooms. The men on the field were slower to drift away.

Reed called out, “Sterling!”

Fox looked over at us. I could tell he was studying Randy. He pulled off his helmet and ran his hand through his hair. He slapped several of the players on the ass as he made his way toward us.

“Well, Richards, your taste is improving. That other one was disposable.”

Randy didn’t move or say a word. Reed was on his other side and shifted a bit.

I said, “Where the hell is Jeff?”

Fox slowly turned his head toward me. Like he didn’t want to take his eyes off the new man. “Who?”

I lunged forward, but Randy’s left arm shot out and blocked me. “You fucker,” I said. “You gave him a ride home last night.”

“Oh that.” He gave a little laugh. “Yes. Well, he wanted to taste a real man’s cock, so I took him home.”

“You what?” I was pushing against Randy’s arm with all of my might. I don’t know how he was holding me. I’m not exactly a small guy.

Fox smiled. “I gave him what he wanted. I don’t know where he went afterward.”

Reed took a step forward. “You mean you didn’t take him back to his dorm?”

“No. He seemed very eager to leave my apartment and, well, I was done with him.”

I felt Randy’s arm pull from my chest. There was a blur to my right. Before I could even turn, I heard a smack and a crunch. Reed and Randy pulled their fists back as one. Fox was flat on his back. Blood flowed from what used to be a shapely nose.

The coach ran toward us. “Reed, God damn you! You’re off the team! That’s assault! You’ll be arrested and expelled for this.”

“Shit!” Reed held out his hand. “I need your phone, Sammy.”

I pulled it out of my pack.

He started talking to Randy. “His apartment’s in a converted warehouse on Fourth and Bayside. Take Sam and find Jeff.”

Randy reached out and grabbed Reed’s forearm. “Bro,” he said. He grabbed me and pulled me toward the bike.

Reed started talking into the phone, “Stan, I need help...”

I was on the bike again—stuck in traffic. I knew we were heading for Fox’s apartment, but I didn’t know why. Did we really think Fox was keeping him there?

“What are we doing?”

Randy turned his head to the side, so I could hear him better. “I thought we’d go to that asshole’s apartment and work our way back toward campus and try to figure out what happened.”

Traffic moved a bit. I said, “But it’s almost been a whole day. He should have been back. He told me he jogs several miles every morning. Campus isn’t that far. Where would he have gone?”

Randy shook his head. “I don’t know. Does he know anyone in town? Have any family?”

Why the hell didn’t we get that damn interview done? “I don’t know. I think all of his family’s back in Mississippi. Has he made many friends in the dorm?”

“Not that I can tell. He’s kind of a quiet twitchy little guy. Keeps to himself, mostly.”

I sighed. “Yeah, like a scared rabbit.”

“Oh man, with those big black eyes of his, yeah, our little bunny.”

The light changed up ahead and the traffic began to move. The bridge over Sandy Creek was up ahead. It had ornamental railings and ornate lamps. It marked the north side of the Old Town district of Bennett Bay. We began to pick up speed, when I saw something red fluttering on the bridge railing.

“Oh fuck no!” I yelled. “Pull the damn bike over.”

Randy slowed down and pulled over to the curb. “I can’t really stop here man, what’s up?”

Cars were starting to honk. The old bridge wasn’t wide enough for the larger cars to pass the bike. I jumped off and ran to the railing. An old red flannel shirt was tangled in the bars of the railing. I pulled it free and held it to my face. It was warm, soft, and smelled of apples and cinnamon. Jeff. I turned and held it out to Randy.

He said, “Damn. He was wearing that last night.”

People were starting to yell out their car windows. Randy said, “Okay, I’ve got to get off this bridge. I’ll call the cops.” He looked right at me. “Don’t do anything stupid.” He put the bike in gear.

“Ask for Detective Stan Wolf. He knows us.”

Randy nodded as he pulled away.

I turned and looked down to the water. It really wasn’t that far down. But then, most people probably hadn’t done high diving. I’d gone off the ten-meter platform a few times just to show the divers I wasn’t a pussy. But I didn’t know how deep it was. If Jeff survived the fall, what would have happened? What was the tide like here? How fast was the creek? I thought of Jeff’s hard little body getting swept out into the bay. I looked out at the wide expanse of dark water. The bridge was over the mouth of the creek. It formed a little inlet. A rock breakwater ran along the north bank out into the bay. The gulls were circling and fussing at the end. Something white and black moved on one of the larger rocks down by the water.

It was a person. A person was laying on the rock. I looked at the wall of tumbled rocks. There was no walkway out that far. No way to get to the point except by a boat or...

I started taking off my clothes. At least I was wearing boxers today. I started breathing heavy to get as much oxygen into my blood as possible. I looked over the railing. There was just a bit of a ledge. It was enough. I wasn't a good enough diver to be on the diving squad, but I could do it, and I was a damn good swimmer. Actually, I was the best in the state.

I climbed up on the railing. I heard cars honking and screeching to a halt. I lowered myself onto the ledge. Took a few more breaths, and stepped out into nothingness.

It was cold and dark. I fought to keep my breath and kicked my way to the surface. Damn, I had drifted back under the bridge. The tide was coming in, pushing me upstream away from the bay, away from Jeff. Fuck it. I got my bearings and started swimming toward the bay and the end of the breakwater. I had to pace myself. I needed to go as fast as I could, because the cold would get to me eventually. But I didn't want to use up my strength too soon. This is what I did best, stroking and kicking and taking a breath. Again and again and again.

The tide was slowing me down more than I expected. I had to roll over on my back for a while to catch my breath. Shit, I should have been there by now. How far was it? How long had it been? I rolled back over and started it all again.

I heard splashing. I stopped and held my head up. The waves were breaking on the rocks in front of me. I could see Jeff on the rock curled up in a ball. Had he moved? Oh, please, let him be okay.

There seemed to be an eddy in the current that was moving me toward the rock he was on. I swam with my head above the water trying to figure out how to get up on the rocks. They bristled with barnacles and oysters. The sharp shells could shred me like razor blades.

“Jeff! Hey Jeff!”

He moved. He sat up and looked around. His face bruised and arms cut up, but he was fucking moving. He was alive. “Sam, is that you? I lost my glasses.”

“Yeah, I’m over here.” I moved closer to the rock. “Can you give me a hand up? My legs are starting to turn to rubber.”

He moved to the edge. “Be careful. Those shell things are sharp. I cut up my arms pretty bad... I have an idea.”

He stood up and started taking off his jeans. I gagged on a mouth full of water. He was wearing tiger-print bikini underwear. And I have to admit, he filled them out quite nicely.

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah,” I said. “Why?”

“It sounded like you’re drowning.”

“No, okay. What are you doing with your pants?”

“The denim should give you a bit of protection from the rocks. My legs didn’t get cut.”

He placed his pants on the edge of the rock, knelt down, and held out his hand for me to grab. I took it and he pulled and I kicked. The pants helped. I only got a few cuts on my legs. I sat down on the rock. He came over and wrapped his arms around me. He was shivering, but still warmer than the water. “Sam, why are you here?”

He had to ask? “Well, you know, I’m not very bright. A friend jumps off a bridge, I jump too.”

“But Sam, I didn’t jump.”

The hospital bed was a little tight for the two of us, but they’d need to call the Marines to get me out of it. I was wearing a pair of dark blue scrubs. Jeff was in one of those hospital gowns with no ass. He kept bitching about it, but I liked it. His jeans were so damn loose I had no idea he had such a little bubble butt. His arms were bandaged up and there were a few stitches in his face. They had an IV tube in his arm for hydration. Right now, he slurped some soup.

“So how did you find me?” he asked.

The Marine Rescue boat got to the breakwater moments after I did. We’d been surrounded by people ever since and hadn’t had time to talk to one another. My stomach clenched every time he looked at me. I’d never seen anyone so battered and bruised. There was this white-hot animal rage in me. It was like bile rising in my throat. I kept pushing it down. The only thing keeping Fox alive right now was my fear of being taken from Jeff.

“Sam?” he said.

“Stan told us not to talk about anything until he got back.”

He took my hand. “He said to not talk about what happened with... you know who.”

Yeah, I didn’t want to say his name either.

“I... I just didn’t expect anyone to look for me? I thought it’d be better if I just died there.”

I wanted to hit something.

I yelled. I didn’t mean to, but there was a mess of pissed off inside I just couldn’t control. “Why in hell do you say shit like that? Do you really think no one cares for you?”

He looked away. “No one ever has.”

I felt like my brain was going to slide out my ears or something. How could that be? How could anyone feel like *no one* cares for them? The anger spewed.

“Fuck that!”

He nearly jumped out of the bed. I grabbed his shoulder and pulled him around to look at me. He winced. I didn’t care.

“Okay, I know you’re like ten times smarter than I’ll ever be, but you’re still a dumb ass. A total, fucking, dumb ass. I don’t know what kind of demon-infested hellhole you came from, but you’re not there anymore and you’re never going back. You’ve been here less than a week and there are people who care a whole lot for you.”

He glared at me. I knew he wanted to say, “Who?” but was scared of me right now. So I was gonna tell the dense little shit.

“You know Randy, your roommate?”

“You know Randy?” he asked.

“Yes. I went to your room looking for you. Because I care. He thought you and I hooked up last night. He saw the video of us kissing. He was all excited, because he thought you had a boyfriend. Do you hear that? You have a straight-as-fuck biker roommate that is excited that you found someone. Because he cares. But wait—there’s more. He fucking threatened to cut my balls off if I broke your heart. You hear that? How long have you known him? And he’s getting all big-brother protective over you. And when he found out you were missing, he pulls me on his motorcycle and we go over to confront Fox and well... both he and Reed deck Fox. Because they both care. His face looks worse than yours, by the way.”

“What?”

“Shit, I don’t know if I can talk about that. But Reed and Randy assaulted him. Fuck man, they’re probably going to jail. For you. Back in the swamp, we call that love. And I jumped off a fucking bridge for you. I jumped off a god dammed bridge! Do you get that? So how long have you been here and three people have risked a lot for your little butt. Imagine how many people will be falling all over you by the end of next week?”

He pulled away from me and out of his gown. He yanked the IV tube out of his arm and ran into the bathroom. I heard the lock click.

I jumped out of bed and started pounding on the door. “Jeff. Jeff. Jeff.” I turned around and slid to the floor. I was shaking and crying. What had I done? Fuck me. Fuck Jeff.

“Sam?”

It was Stan. Aidan and Kip were with him along with the nurse that put the drip in Jeff’s arm. I wanted to run to them and just be held. I wanted to scream and beat on them.

Kip came over and knelt down in front of me. He took my hands. I looked down at them. They were all sweaty and shaking. What was wrong with me? I felt like I was trapped in a pool and couldn’t get to the surface.

Kip said, “Nurse, can you ask the attending to prescribe something for anxiety?”

She said, “Yes, Doctor.”

“Doctor?”

Aidan sat down on the floor next to me. “Kip’s a doctor of psychology. He works over at the V.A. helping the troops deal with trauma and PTSD. Do you know what that is?”

I nodded. It was hard to breathe.

Aidan went on. “I... well, my whole family had to deal with a lot last year. He helped us.”

I tried to smile.

Kip said, “Sam, what happened?”

“Fox... he...” I looked up at Stan. I just couldn’t say it.

Kip shook his head. “No. I mean right now, between you two. Why is he in the bathroom and why were you pounding on the door? Is he safe? Do we need to get in there?”

I pulled my hands from him. Oh my God, I didn’t even think of that. I turned to pound on the door again. My chest was constricting. *Jeff*. Nothing came out. Kip was saying something to Aidan and Stan. Strong arms were pulling me out of the room, away from Jeff. I screamed “No!” but nothing came out. I couldn’t breathe. *Jeff*.

The bench in the hallway outside Jeff’s room was hard. I looked down at the crumpled brown paper bag the nurse had given me to breathe into. She’d also given me a pill. Aidan was sitting next to me, trying to convince me that I shouldn’t be embarrassed about having a panic attack. I wanted to ask if it was okay to be embarrassed about having one in front of your professor, but I didn’t have the energy.

“Sammy.”

I looked up. Reed was standing there with Jacklyn. I stood up and his arms went around me. He whispered in my ear. “You okay?”

I let my arms fall to my side and sat back down. “No.”

I reached out and took Jacklyn’s hand. “Thanks for being here.”

Reed dragged two chairs from the other side of the hall and put them next to me.

“How’s Jeff?” she asked.

“I don’t know. Stan and Kip are talking to him right now.”

Reed said, “Kip?”

I shook my head. “He’s a shrink or something.”

Aidan shifted next to me. “Do you all want to be alone?”

I grabbed his arm. “Not really. If you don’t mind hanging with students?”

Reed sat down in the chair next to me. “He’s not. He’s with family. He’s my family. You are my family. We are family.” He reached out and took my hand.

“Fuck,” I said and tears started running down my face. “Why the hell can’t Jeff get this? I tried to tell him how much he meant to all of us and he just freaked out.”

Reed asked, “Why would he do that?”

Aidan stood up and started pacing. “You boys grew up in good families. You knew you were loved. Jeff wasn’t so lucky. He doesn’t trust love. Probably doesn’t think he deserves it.”

“I don’t get that. I mean what that would be like. What should I do?”

Aidan exhaled and shrugged his shoulders. “Hell, I don’t know. This relationship thing is hard. My first one was a freak show. Just go slow. Realize he’s going to have issues. Talk to people. You have to have friends.”

I put my head back against the wall and looked up at the ceiling. “So by go slow you mean, I shouldn’t fall head over heels in love with him in the first twenty-four hours and then jump off a bridge for him?”

Aidan leaned against the far wall and smiled. “Well, don’t make a habit of it. And you’re kind of new at this. It settles down. Just let it be. Don’t put too much on the relationship. Don’t think about being together forever. I know the rush of passion makes you feel that way, but that can be a heavy expectation at

first. Just be together for today. Because right now is really all you have for sure.”

I looked at him and said, “You must be a great dad.” I know it was random, but my brain was in random mode right now.

Aidan turned red. He seemed to do that a lot. “Aha, well, I try. It is much harder to explain the world to seven-year-olds.” He looked over at Reed. “Are you okay? Stan said there was some trouble at school.”

I turned. “Yeah, what happened? They gonna to arrest you?”

“I don’t know. I’m definitely off the team, at least for this season. Probably lost the scholarship.”

“Shit man. I’m so sorry.”

“Hey, don’t worry. I really don’t think this program is for me. There are other schools out there.”

Damn, I didn’t want to lose Reed.

Aidan said, “Relax. It might not come to that. I can’t say anything, but I think there’s more to this than you know.”

The door to Jeff’s room opened. Stan and Kip came out.

“I took his statement,” Stan said. “They’re going to keep him overnight to make sure he’s okay. Really, other than the cuts and the dehydration, he came through the whole thing pretty well. He’s one tough little guy.”

“Can I stay with him?”

Stan looked over at Kip. “Sam, I think he needs some time alone to process things.”

“No. He’s been alone all his life. He needs to know he’s not alone anymore.” I was ready for a fight.

Kip came over and put his arm around me. “Sam, he’s getting there, but you need to take care of yourself. You have to go to your classes and swim practice, so you can be there for him when he’s ready. He will need you.”

Reed asked, “Stan, what about Fox? Did you arrest him?”

His face hardened. “No. Not yet.”

I yelled, “What? Why the hell not?”

“Because I don’t have any hard evidence right now. We are processing the evidence we took off Jeff, but assault cases are hard to prove without witnesses. It takes time and I can’t say any more about it.”

“Uncle Stan, I... I think I need to tell you something.”

Stan walked over to his nephew, “Reed. Did he do something to you?”

Reed stood there looking embarrassed.

“Did he hurt you?”

“Not really,” Reed said. He looked at Jacklyn, then pulled Stan down the hall a few steps and started whispering into his ear. Stan started to clench and unclench his fist and shake his head.

Kip leaned in to me and asked, “Do you know what this is about?”

“Maybe,” I said.

Stan yelled, “Oh hell no!” He started moving down the hall.

Reed was trying to hold him. He looked back at us. “Help me.”

Aidan and Kip ran forward and pushed Stan back against the wall. Kip said, “Stan, calm down.”

“Calm down?”

“Yes, you’re a police officer.”

“I’m an uncle first. And that slime messed with blood. What do you expect me to do?”

“Work the goddamn case and put his pretty blond butt in prison so he can get jailhouse justice every night.”

Aidan turned and looked at us. “I think you all should go.”

Jacklyn grabbed me and Reed by our arms and started pulling us toward the elevators. “Come on. Let’s go home.”

Wednesday

I swiveled around on my desk chair. Reed was on his bed reading. I said, “Didn’t Aidan say he was going to only assign the good parts of this book?”

Reed closed his book. "I think his view of what's good might be different than ours."

"Yeah, I really love the guy, but God, his field is mind-numbing. Like a brain freeze."

"So," Reed said, "hear from Jeff yet?"

"He emailed me. Said he's okay. He got out of the hospital late and missed English. He needs to get a new phone. His old one is in the bay somewhere." I reached out and grabbed my phone without really thinking about it. No new messages. "I'm trying to give him space and go slow like Kip and Aidan said."

"Easy for them to say."

"No shit. They both have husbands. Hey, what's up with you and Jacklyn?"

"I don't know. Don't you think she's kind of out of my league? I mean she's damn smart and a senior. I know we've gotten a little flirty, but you know. You think she'd really be interested?"

I went over and flopped down on the bed next to him. "Man, I'd say most of the women on this campus are interested, and more of the men than you know."

He snickered. "From now on, there's only one man in my life."

"Yeah, who?"

He jumped on top of me and started tickling me. "Stop!" I laughed. He didn't. God I missed this. I pulled a wrestling move on him and rolled him off the bed. I landed on top. "I got you, bitch."

There was a knock on the door. We both looked at the door then back at each other. We just started laughing. He flipped me over on my back and pinned me down. "Who's the bitch now?" He leaned down and gave me a peck on the cheek. There was another knock. He got off me and opened the door.

Jeff and Jacklyn stood there. They both looked a little nervous. They looked from Reed to me on the floor. Jeff's face was purple and puffy. I jumped up.

I said, “What’s up?” It was taking everything I had to not run over and pull Jeff into my arms. Yeah, I was in full chick mode.

Jacklyn said to Reed, “Get your things. You’re staying in my room tonight.”

“What?” we both said at once.

Jeff said, “Sam and I need to talk about things. Do you mind?”

Reed was running his right hand through his hair. “Yeah. Okay. Sure. What do I need?”

Jacklyn smiled. “Well, what do you need for the morning and what do you sleep in?”

“Nothing.” He blushed. “Usually... I mean.”

She said, “Just get your shower kit and clothes for the morning.”

Reed crammed a clean shirt, underwear, and socks into his pack and grabbed his shower-caddy. “Uhhh, later,” he said to me.

The door closed. Jeff and I were alone. “Are you okay with this?” he asked.

“I don’t know. You okay? We can wait until you are better.”

He dropped his bag on Reed’s bed and unzipped it. He pulled out a large candle, a box of condoms, and a bottle of lube. He put the candle on the desk and lit it. He went over to my stereo and tuned in the jazz station.

“Turn off the lights,” he said.

I turned off the lamp on my desk and the overhead lights. The only light came from the candle. Jeff took off his glasses. Then he kicked off his shoes. He walked forward and stood before me. I swallowed. My mouth was going dry.

“Are you sure? I don’t want to hurt you.” I said.

He reached up to his face. “It looks worse than it is. And I need to clear my palate.”

I said, “I don’t understand?”

He reached up and stroked my ear. “The only dick I’ve ever had in my

mouth was his. That was my first sex. I need something amazing to wash it away. Be my first. My real first. The one that matters.”

The ear thing was starting to drain the blood from my brain to the lower regions. I didn't know how much longer I'd be able to have a functional conversation. “And you think I'd be amazing?”

His face moved in closer. I felt his breath on my lips. “You already are.” He took my lower lip in his teeth and bit ever so gently, tugging on it and then releasing. The dragon roared to life.

He stepped back and began unbuttoning his shirt. Slowly, one button opened after the other. I started to pull my T-shirt off.

“No,” he ordered. “I want you to watch me. Don't touch your clothes.”

And the dragon wept with joy.

He slowly opened his shirt then shrugged it off. It fell to the floor. The warm candlelight danced across his smooth torso. He had flat abs and nice pecs. Hard nipples cast small pointed shadows on his chest.

He undid his belt, pulled it from his pants and let it slide through his fingers to the floor. He undid the button on his jeans. The zipper parted and they fell to the floor. He took a step forward and left them there. He stood there smooth and naked wearing only his socks. He had shaved himself. God, that was hot. I wanted to shave him the next time.

I didn't know how much longer I could just stand there. His cock looked so good. It was full and hard. A drop of pre-cum glistened on the tip. Every fiber of my being wanted to taste that. To smell it.

He came forward, reached up, and played with the hair on back of my head. He pulled me to him. Pushed his lips against mine. His tongue found its way into my mouth. His dick pressed against the hardness trapped in my pants. Two dragons ready to do battle.

“Let me undress.” I panted through our kisses.

He stepped back and grabbed the front of my shirt, pulled me around, and pushed me back on my bed. Hell, he was strong. He pulled the shirt over my head, and then pushed me back down. He started undoing my jeans. I tried to help him. He slapped my hands away, hard.

“Hey,” I said.

Those black eyes looked right into my soul. “I said not to touch your clothes.”

He undid them. I lifted my ass a bit and he pulled the jeans and my boxers right off. I was naked and the dragon was unleashed. I scooted all the way up on the bed. He laid himself down on top of me and kissed me again. He started kissing and licking his way down my body. His stomach and then his chest kept rubbing against my cock. I was going nuts. Finally, his face was at my crotch. I grabbed his hair and tried to move his mouth to my cock. I needed some suckage.

He looked up at me. “No. Not yet.” And moved my hands away again. He pushed my legs apart and settled in between them. He licked around the base of my dick, then pushed my legs up. He was going for my balls, taking them in his mouth. Then, he pushed my legs up further. My knees bent up to my chest as he began to go south of my balls. No one had ever done that before. Oh my God. His tongue entered me. It was warm and wet. It went deep. He pulled his face away from my ass. He looked at me. “I’m gonna fuck the living shit out of you Samuel Richards.” And he grinned like the devil himself.

Fuck the bunny. My rabbit was a tiger. A tiger with a pet boy. I pulled my knees up toward my ears. Coach did say I needed to work on my flexibility.

“Fuck me hard, baby.” Yeah, I said that. And meant it.

Friday, Again

I made it to Friday. The cold front was wreaking havoc in the Atlantic now, and we were back to sunny Florida weather. I stretched out on the grassy lawn of the Quad trying to get my head around Avogadro’s Number and why I should care how many molecules were in something, like I’d ever need to know that. Maybe Jeff could explain it to me. He was turning out to be a good tutor. I noticed when I thought of him, my butt gave a little involuntary squeeze. Getting fucked two nights in a row was a new and very good thing. Of course, he was letting my dragon hide in his cave too, so I was a very happy boy. Happy and tired. I really needed to get my times back up or coach was gonna give Jeff another hole to fill.

A shadow crossed my book. “Hey, Sammy.”

Reed plopped down in the grass on my left and gave me a one-armed hug. I closed my book and hugged him back. I asked, “Have you heard from the Athletic Director?”

“Yeah,” he said. He pulled at the grass. “I’m suspended from the team for the year, but I get to keep my scholarship. Fox being accused of sexual assault and attempted murder has kind of worked in my favor. I mean, the guy drugged me, and well, you know.”

“Why didn’t you tell me that when it happened?”

He looked at me. “I don’t know, Sammy. I was so fucked up at the time; I thought maybe I really wanted it to happen. And I did kind of enjoy it; hell, it was a blow job. Then he just kept pushing me for more all week. And he made threats about my scholarship. But I kept thinking two things. How in the hell did I get that fucked up on one beer and, well...”

“What?”

“If I really wanted a guy to go down on me, it’d be really shitty not to ask you to do it.”

Men. Gotta love us. “Yeah, I thought so. Sorry about being kind of a jealous crazy bitch over the whole thing.”

He held his fist up to me and I bumped it.

“So are we good?” I asked.

“Always, Sammy. Always.”

I asked, “Have you heard from Stan? Are they going to fry Fox?”

“I don’t know. He keeps saying shit like ‘Justice moves slow’ and he can’t talk about the case. And that I shouldn’t talk about it with anyone, but you guys, that is. But I think there is more going on.”

“Like what?” I said.

“I’ve been hearing rumors. Something happened when he was a kid in Boy Scouts and his freshman-year roommate disappeared.”

“What the hell?”

He nodded. "Yeah. Records have been sealed and things shushed up, but people still talk. His dad's money can't fix everything." He looked out across the Quad. It was busy as students were moving from one class to the next. "Hey, there's Jeff." He started waving. He looked over at me. "So how's Jeff doing?"

I watched my man wave at us and head over our way. And yes, I went all gooey inside. I was so becoming a chick and I was okay with it. "He pretends he's okay. But you know he was forced to give a guy head, drugged and thrown off a bridge. How in the hell can you be okay after that? And all that shit from home. He has nightmares. He started screaming in his sleep last night."

"Damn. Is he talking to anyone about it?"

I nodded. "Yeah. We're going to see Kip on Sunday. I'm gonna use all of my boyfriend super powers to make sure he keeps talking to him."

Reed grabbed me and pulled my head into his chest and gave me a noogie.

I pulled away and tried to fix my hair. "What the hell was that for?"

"Cause, dude, I love you, and hearing you talk about a boyfriend is the best."

Okay, extra gooey.

Jeff dropped his pack on the ground and said, "Hi guys. We doing lunch later?" Jeff sat down and leaned against me.

"Sounds good," I said. Reed nodded.

Jeff asked, "Hey, Reed, where've you been? You stay at Jacklyn's again?"

Reed shook his head and arranged his pack like a pillow on the ground then stretched out in the sun. "No. I've been hanging with Randy. He's cool. You know, I need more het guys in my life."

"Right." I snorted and kicked his leg. He just snickered back.

"So where were you?" I asked.

"Well, I knew Jeff's bed would be empty, so I slept there. I tried not to wank too much."

“Gross.” Jeff tried to sound all miffed. It didn’t work. Hell, he’d probably stain the sheets himself just thinking about it. Yeah, I knew that look. He was thinking about it.

“Really?” I said and gave him a little push. “Speaking of sheets, we gotta do something about ours.” Yeah I said *our* sheets. And the world continued.

I lay back on the ground. The grass was cool on my back and the sun warmed my face. Jeff shifted and put his head on my stomach. I started playing with his soft curls. “My Dad’s coming up from Tampa tonight and wants to take me out to dinner. I want you to come with.”

Reed rolled over and put his arm across my chest. “Sounds great. I haven’t seen Ron in ages.”

Jeff didn’t say anything.

“Babe?”

“Are you sure you want me there?”

“I guess I wasn’t clear. I was inviting Reed. You have no option. I’m not going without you.”

I wasn’t going anywhere without my two guys. There was a lot of shit ahead, but the three of us together would handle it. We could handle anything. After all we just made it through the first week of college.

THE END

Author Bio

Stephen del Mar is a writer living in the Tampa Bay area. He writes contemporary, science fiction, and a bit of fantasy, often with gay characters and themes.

Contact & Media Info

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ONE MORE DANCE

By Nicole Dennis

Photo Description

Blond-haired man in a full side split, gazing off to the left.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

Dancing used to be this guy's only purpose in life and he wanted to keep it that way. So how does a certain someone make him crave more?

I'd prefer a longish story without D/s!

Sincerely,

Anni__

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: former military, hurt/comfort, men with pets, performing arts, reestablished lovers, PTSD

Word count: 11,660

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Dedication

With my love and thanks to Anni___ for the wonderful prompt and picture. Also to Jaymi and Nancy for the hard part of editing my rather late entry. Thanks to the wonderful crew at the M/M Romance Group for putting together these wonderful events. Hugs!

ONE MORE DANCE

By Nicole Dennis

CHAPTER 1

The music soared through the theater, infusing the dancers with additional energy and the strength to push through the last act of the performance. The *premier danseur noble* of the company rushed out across the stage, meeting the other male dancer. In a slow spiral, they twirled, jumped, and tiptoed around each other as they moved in opposite directions around the circle.

Their eyes locked on each other, watching the grace, the rippling muscles, and the gleam of sweat on their bare chests as they moved—all the potential of a pair of large felines trapped within their muscles. At one point, they pirouetted in different directions, but ended with their chests together, their hands moving over each other, before the rest of the company swept in on either side of them. In choreographed motion, the company pulled and moved the pair of lovers apart, though they fought in the dance.

Across the stage, all of their bodies became instruments of profound drama. They were trained to deliver emotion through intricate, beautiful movements and choreography. Precision. Grace. Versatility. Power.

The prima ballerina circled the principal, taking him away from the other male, as she moved him and the audience on a journey into the heart and soul of their partnership. She curled an arm around him and he raised her into a soft, easy lift to begin their *pas de deux*, a combination of intricate ballet movements mixed in with the modern and lyrical steps the choreographer was using. Within the shadows of the stage, the other male watched behind a connected wall of other dancers.

Together, the prima ballerina and principal's complex steps, graceful lifts and spins covered most of the stage. Her sheer skirt flowed around her long legs as well as his arms and body, hiding him from the other male dancer. He wore a pair of skin-tight pants in a soft fawn color that ended below his knees. His male partner wore the same pants, but in a darker tone, proclaiming him

the darkness to the principal's light and airy personality throughout the performance.

As their *pas de deux* ended with the final lifts and spins, he ended by facing the other male—who rushed forward, through the barrier of bodies, and reached for him. They circled around each other again and engaged for the last riveting minutes of the dance. Arms locked around each other as they embraced, cuddled, and then shoved apart. They danced and twirled in opposite directions, the female rushed into the middle, and the dance ended with the males reaching for each other while the female curled around the principal dancer's back.

Bright lights and a flurry of music ended in endless silence as the stage went dark around their final positions. All of them breathed hard after two and half hours of dancing. The roar of the appreciative, loving crowd filled the theater with their applause, cries of *bravo* and *bellissimo* and other praise for the opening night of the new performance.

Once the curtains closed to prepare for the turns to take their bows, the dancers and extras filled the stage. Everyone hugged one another as they celebrated their passion, the dance.

Exhausted but energized at the same time, every muscle aching and protesting, Jerome Alexander broke away from the other dancers. His thirty-eight-year-old body groaned with the beginnings of arthritis in his joints as he moved. He wouldn't be able to do a performance a night every night for much longer. Still, he managed to get through this difficult dance and this was something to celebrate. A wide grin of pleasure stretched across his face as he met the gazes of his two partners. He hugged and kissed the lady, Veronika, on her cheek.

“You were beautiful, as always, my dear,” he said.

Veronika laughed and wrapped her arms around his neck as he twirled her. “You... You were unbelievable. What got into you at the end?”

Jerome shrugged a shoulder after letting her down. He laughed when he was forced a step forward when their third partner, Marcelo, enclosed him in a big bear hug which lifted him off his feet as the man squished him. With

Marcelo over six feet four inches, Jerome felt tiny even though he was five eleven.

“What got into you? I thought you were going to pounce and jump my bones,” Marcelo said when he let him down.

“You know me... Playing the part of a torn lover,” Jerome said with another careless shrug. He accepted a towel from one of the stagehands with a nod of thanks and wiped the sweat off his face, neck and chest. He then took the offered water bottle for a long sip of cold water.

The stagehand also held out a pair of pills to help his aching joints. With a grimace at another sign of his age, Jerome took them and swallowed them with more water. The young stagehand smiled.

“It was more intense than anything we rehearsed before,” Marcelo said.

There was a reason the dance was intense. Jerome knew he wasn't dancing for Marcelo, but someone else who'd been in his thoughts for the past few months. Especially at this point of time of his career when he began to wonder if he could continue to dance. Before Jerome could say anything, the stage manager clapped her hands once.

“Places everyone! Places for the curtain call!” she said and everyone fell in lines.

The stagehand raced around, gathered all the bottles and towels, and ran off into the wing as the curtain began to rise.

The trio of dancers who led the entire performance stood in the back, joined hands with Veronika in the middle. When the main lines moved to the sides and back, they stepped forward and bowed together to another raucous standing ovation. The men let Veronika take another step ahead of them, graceful with her curtseys. She turned and accepted a large bouquet of fresh deep red roses from the choreographer and her husband, Clinton. She gave him a kiss, to everyone's delight. Then she stepped back and let the two males step forward.

The entire audience erupted into louder applause and shouts of praise. Marcelo took his bow first and waved to everyone. Then he stepped back and motioned to Jerome to move forward. Jerome waved as well, to more calls and

shouts, before he bowed low. He then stepped back to Marcelo's side. They were given smaller bouquets of roses by the assistant artistic director, Cheryl, and she kissed their cheeks.

The curtains closed again as the company stepped back. All the dancers but the main three principals left the stage. The curtains opened once more to another ovation as the three dancers bowed one more time. The curtains closed the final time for opening night.

The company knew it was now time to party and enjoy after working feverishly the last twelve weeks. After accepting the other congratulations from various people, Jerome moved through the crowd to the backstage and his dressing room.

Even with the pain medication, his body was telling him to sit his ass down now!

Reaching his dressing room, Jerome slipped inside, tossed the flowers on the table, and dropped his lean body across the couch. His feet were aching inside the dance slippers, but he didn't bother to move further than to lay an arm across his face. He was getting too old to be dancing for over two hours. Still, dancing was his entire life. His only purpose in life since he was six years old and learned the first few positions at the *barre* set above his shoulder.

Since that very first lesson, he fell in love with ballet and all things which incorporated dance. He begged his mother, who raised him on her own, for more lessons in different classes as he advanced in leaps and bounds. His goal was to either attend the school at the American Ballet Company or the prestigious dance program in Juilliard. Before his twelfth birthday, he auditioned for both, was accepted into both programs, and decided upon the ABC school. He hadn't looked back since.

Until a week ago, his main priority was always dance and the new company he joined upon graduating from the school. For some reason, he felt restless after leaving the rehearsal studios and didn't want to sit around his apartment. Since his bad bout of flu over the winter, Clinton and the head ballet master, Viktor, were worried he wouldn't recover. They already knew

one of his knees was beginning to bother him. Still, he battled his way back to snag the lead position for this last season of performances.

Except, for this one night, he needed a change, a breather, from his rituals, programs, and strict lifestyle. It was more than looking for a quick fuck in the back of a club with a cute twink he met on the dance floor. This was something deeper inside him. He wanted more than a nameless fuck.

The one long-time romance he had to his credit was one that began over fifteen years ago, just after he joined this new company. He wanted the feeling he had in the romance with the gorgeous man again. He needed to have one person who loved him as Jeremy, not Jerome, there when he got home, there when he woke up, and put up with his moods.

“Everette,” Jerome whispered to the empty room.

Even now, fifteen years after their first meeting, Jerome knew if he closed his eyes he could picture the powerful, strong male he had been instantly attracted to during a party the company threw for new patrons as well as current season ticket holders and financiers. Clad to perfection in an Armani tuxedo paired with a black and silver tie, David Everette Hastings III was literally head and shoulders above everyone else, even Marcelo. His dark hair was cut military-short and he had the unmistakable bearing of a military man.

After being introduced, he learned Everette was a Second Lieutenant in the Army and just returned from his second tour in Iraq. His face was lean and sharp, the deep blue eyes haunted by what he had seen and done, and he was considering the next move in his career. They were careful when leaving the party because DADT was still an issue.

That night after the party, oh, the passion was so hot between them. Jerome thought they would burn the sheets with the heat they generated. When the passion was finally released and sated, their bodies were covered in sweat, bite marks, hickeys, and those horrid wet spots of spent fluids. Still, they turned and looked at each other and laughed with abandon over what happened. They rolled their sore, aching bodies off the bed and into the shower. Even when they thought their cocks couldn't rise again, Everette wiggled the bottle of lube hiding behind the rest of the bottles and the heat flared.

Jerome wasn't sure if he could get up in the morning and drag his sorry body to the *barre* for his morning stretches, but damn it was hard. Still, when he looked back at the strong sleeping body stretched across his bed, he didn't regret a single moment. Luckily for them, the attraction remained strong and sparking through the entire time they spent together. That night started a three-year relationship, off and on depending on Everette's movements with the Army.

Things came to a grinding halt between them after the September 11 attacks. From their apartment window, Everette spotted the smoke rising from the North Tower while he drank his morning coffee and Jerome worked on his morning *barre* exercises. Alarmed, Everette turned on the television, and together they watched the horrible morning unveiling in front of them. They were in time to watch the second passenger airliner fly into the South Tower. Two hours later, when the towers began to fall, Jerome buried his face in Everette's chest and held on tight to him. They spent the rest of the morning in a daze, watching the television and discussing what happened.

Two weeks after the attacks, Jerome attended a mandatory meeting where the company announced that they would cease performance activity for a few months after the tragedy, but continue with rehearsals to keep everyone in shape. He came home to find Everette packing. Jerome didn't want him to leave, saying it was too dangerous, but Everette wouldn't hear of it. He was a soldier, with others who counted on his leadership. He slung the bags over his shoulder, stared at Jerome, and then left the apartment. Neither one offered to write the other because they didn't want Everette to be outted.

Twelve years later, and Jerome still thought about the man who stole his heart, a soldier who left for the war zone and whom he never heard from or saw again. Even with DADT repealed, Jerome didn't know how to begin looking for Second Lieutenant D. Everette Hastings III in the US Army. By then, he had moved with the company to Chicago from New York City, and knew it would be even harder to locate one soldier, so he didn't bother.

This last week, missing the man bothered him even more, until he couldn't stay home. He changed into club clothes, but didn't go to the usual places where everyone knew him as the principal danseur of his company. He craved

a different setting and found it at the brand new Onyx Club. Catering to the GLBT lifestyle of Chicago, but with a higher quality and edge than other clubs, the Onyx was exactly what he needed. No one cried out his stage name or recognized his face. There, he could be Jeremy Armstrong, a quiet gay male from a small town in Kansas. A gay male who missed his soldier boy.

Unfortunately, nothing happened that night and he continued to feel restless, longing for his soldier, but he felt someone watching him closely the entire night he danced in a throng of gorgeous, sweaty males. He returned to the club two more nights, but never figured out who caused the feeling.

A banging on his door pulled him out of his memories.

“Jerome! Get dressed in your tux, we’re heading over to the party. You’re expected to make an appearance,” Marcelo called through the door in his booming voice.

“I’ll be there,” Jerome called back and flipped his feet off the cushion. He cringed when his body protested the movement. All he wanted was to go home and sit in a tub of hot water and Epsom salts until the aches went away, so he could sleep. Instead, he headed to the private shower to cleanse off the dance stench and pretty himself for the financiers who wanted to grab and praise him for doing what he loved.

CHAPTER 2

Stepping from the stage area into the large front entrance hall, Jerome twitched his shirt cuffs into place under the black tuxedo jacket. A second later, Clinton pulled him to one side to be introduced to an old lady wearing too many feathers who must have bathed in horrible perfume. Still, as the principal male danseur, Jerome did his job and flirted charmingly when she twittered on about how he was her absolute favorite dancer and such a hottie. It only started the endless night of being paraded around as a jewel of the company.

Snatching a second glass of champagne from a circulating waiter, Jerome tilted half of the bubbly liquid into his throat after escaping the clutches of another lady. He found a quiet spot behind one of the large columns and leaned against it. He closed his eyes and wished he was anywhere but here.

“Well... Well... If it isn’t the gorgeous star of the Illusion Company, Jerome Alexander,” a male called in a warm, slow, teasing tone. “Or do I see the quiet side of Jeremy Armstrong?”

Okay, no one in the party knows my personal name. No one. Jerome lowered the glass and held still for a few moments, pulling his armor back into place. On the other hand, the voice was familiar to him, but different at the same time. Even though someone had found his hiding spot, he didn’t want to turn around—but if the director noticed that he was ignoring a guest, the man would climb up his ass and chew him out.

With another swallow of the expensive champagne, Jerome pushed off the column and turned to meet his latest admirer, hoping it wasn’t some old crone who wanted a boy toy. “Hello, sir. I don’t believe I know anyone here by the name of Jeremy. You must have me confused with someone else. Still, I would like to thank you for your...” Jerome stopped in practiced mid-speech as he gazed upon the person who found him. His fingers almost let go of the slender flute, but the other man stepped forward to take hold of the delicate stem and put it on a nearby table to be picked up by a waiter. “Holy shit...”

“Oh, I know Jeremy very well. Intimately in fact. Do I look that bad?” the man said with a wry smile that pulled only on the left side of his face. The

right side, from his cheekbone down, was covered in the rippled scars of an attack by fire. The scars curled around his neck and disappeared into the snowy white shirt under the black Armani tuxedo. He lifted one hand, covered in a black pressure glove, to his face.

“Everette... What happened to you? Oh my god, I never expected to see you again.” Jerome stepped forward. He reached one hand and heard a low growl. He pulled his hand back and stared down, stunned when he saw a chocolate Labrador sitting attentively next to Everette’s right side. There was an orange vest around the dog’s body and a leash curled up into Everette’s hand. “Who is this?”

“Ssh, easy, Charlie,” Everette crooned to the dog while he stroked the soft ears. “Be at ease.”

The dog relaxed his attention and leaned his head against Everette’s leg. His tail wagged with happiness.

Everette tilted his head and looked at Jerome. “This is my new companion, Charlie, a gift from my brother to help me through my days. Charlie, this is Jeremy.”

Jeremy held out his fingers for Charlie to sniff. “He’s beautiful and very sweet.”

“He’s been a lifesaver for me in many ways. As for this,” he said and motioned to his face, “well, it will take longer than a few moments to explain. I was hoping we could step away somewhere and speak with each other?”

Jerome nodded, dumbfounded at the sight of Everette standing in front of him, looking far different than he did when they first met fifteen years ago in a similar party. He looked around and then motioned to his former lover with his hand. “There’s a small conference room down this hall.”

“Good. Charlie and I’ll follow you.” Everette clicked his tongue while he tugged on the leash to bring the Lab to his paws.

Jerome looked at both of them and then around them. He turned and led the way around the corner and down the hall. He checked one handle and it opened under his touch. He let Everette and the dog enter the room and closed the door after he followed them inside.

“Charlie, relax,” Everette said and dropped the leash. The Lab curled against one wall near the doorway, his eyes on his master. Everette moved toward the table, pulled out a chair, and settled down.

After watching his former lover move around, not as gracefully as he recalled, Jerome wondered what the hell happened to the man. He went to the small fridge and pulled out two bottles of water. He returned to the table, sat in a chair near Everette, and slid one bottle down the table. He cracked open the top of his bottle and took a few long pulls to counteract the champagne.

Everette nodded and used his left hand to open and hold the bottle. His right hand almost seemed useless. “I noticed you enjoyed going to Onyx last week.”

“Onyx?” About to take another sip, Jerome stopped and lowered the bottle. “You were there? Were you the one watching me?”

“I’m a partner in the club’s ownership and creation. My brother runs the day-to-day operations with a manager since I’m unable to be there all the time. Still, I was in the upper room and spotted you on the dance floor. You’re unmistakable when you dance.”

Jerome swallowed, glanced at the dog, and then to Everette. His eyes moved to the damaged side which didn’t take away from the man’s beauty. “You... What is going on here? I don’t understand.”

“I know. My appearance is a lot to take in.” Everette fiddled with the bottle. “Perhaps I should start from when I left you in the apartment?”

Jerome nodded.

“Okay. I was offered the chance to join a Special Ops team. I had the training and knowledge from my earlier missions and I accepted. I lost track of how long we were overseas, the stuff we went through, things we did. Most of it I can’t tell you since it’s classified.” Everette ran a hand over his face. “My team was transferred to a joint task force focused on gathering intelligence and taking down various members of al-Qaeda. The last op, I tracked a militant with a suicide vest to a supposed safe house. The bastard set off the vest and I took the brunt of the explosion.”

“Oh my god. Shit. I had no idea of anything. I couldn’t write, I couldn’t even e-mail for fear of outing you.” Jerome dropped his head on one hand, pale at the thought of Everette in such danger.

“I know. It wasn’t your fault. There were so many times I wanted to tell you what was happening, but I was afraid it would only scare you.”

“I only wanted to know you were still alive.”

Leaning forward, Everette placed his hand over Jerome’s hand and squeezed. “I’m alive. I survived. I’m sorry I caused so much worry for you.”

“Such a horrible war, the fighting...” Jerome shook his head. “I saw those reports on the news.”

“It’s okay. It’s okay. I’m alive.” Everette tugged Jerome’s chair closer and wrapped his arms around him. “I’m alive. I’m alive.”

Jerome let the tears fall, unable to hold them back. He pressed his face to Everette’s scarred neck, feeling the difference in the skin. He breathed in the familiar cologne he had smelled on a pillow so long ago, the same intoxicating richness. Still, he needed to know the rest of Everette’s story. “Hmm. You have the Eternity cologne I brought you for our last anniversary together.”

“It’s my favorite stuff. A new bottle of course, but it’s still my favorite.”

“It fits you. After all this time, it still completes your style.” Jerome nuzzled his neck and tried to pick up some of the cologne, which he purchased and kept in a drawer to bring out once in a while to smell and remember his soldier. “Okay. Tell me the rest.” He pulled away from Everette and pushed his chair back to look at him. “Tell me.”

“Are you sure?”

Jerome nodded. “I need to know what happened to you.”

“After the attack, I woke up hours later to see a doctor looking down at me. He explained I had serious burns down my right side, my hand was damaged, and a few too many internal injuries. I couldn’t stay in the field hospital, so they transported me to the Medical Center at Ramstein until I was stable, and then to Walter Reed in DC for more surgeries and therapy. Eventually, I was discharged from the Army on a medical basis. Instead of going to my family in Chicago, I first went to your old apartment in New York, but...”

“The company left New York in 2004, and I moved with them.”

“I figured that out when I saw a woman living there, and found out the company was no longer based in New York City. I wasn’t sure where you were, so I headed back to Chicago, where my brother and his family lived. He helped me set up a home and find medical help, then surprised me by hooking me up with a special therapy dog from a company who trains them for returning soldiers. It’s how Charlie came into my life.” Everette glanced over at the Lab, who thumped his tail between the floor and wall when he heard his name. “He keeps me company, gives me a reason to wake up every day, and alerts me when my issues flare up.”

Jerome glanced over at the beautiful Lab and wondered what issues Everette meant. He moved his attention back to his damaged lover.

“My brother already owned a couple of clubs. He knew I was gay, and suggested creating a new, upscale club catering to the GLBT lifestyle. Within a few years, we built and started to operate Onyx. He also told me about your company and how it moved here.”

“Did you tell him about us?”

“He knew I was involved with a dancer until September eleventh. After I got involved with Onyx, I started to talk about you and Illusion. He found the website and you were named as one of the principals. I purchased tickets for various performances until I saw you dance. I learned then that you moved here with Illusion.”

“Why didn’t you come to me then? Why wait until now? Until after this performance?” Jerome banged a hand on the table, and the dog lifted his head and barked once. “Sorry, Charlie.”

Everette twisted the bottle on the table, his eyes focused on the swirling water. “I needed to wait until I was ready. Things aren’t the best at times for me. I have problems, issues that I deal with every single day. Leftovers from the accident and my years on the front.”

“So you waited.”

“I didn’t have a choice, Jeremy. I couldn’t return to you half a man, you didn’t deserve it, and neither did I.” Everette reached out his damaged gloved

hand and placed it over Jerome's fingers. "Nevertheless, I wanted to see you, talk to you, and damn, I wanted to hold you close to me again."

"Things aren't..."

"The same as when I left, yes, I know. I have one main question for you."

"Which is?"

"Are you in another relationship? Do I have a chance?"

Jerome smiled at him and turned his hand to hold Everette's hand. "No, I'm not in a relationship with anyone. I haven't been for some time. Even after all this time, you still hold a major piece of my heart."

"Then all is good and possible. I know we're both older, I'm wounded in multiple ways, and our lives are different. All I want is a chance. Another chance to be with you."

Jerome nibbled on his lower lip.

CHAPTER 3

A couple of hours later, Everette entered his home in Riverside, on the outskirts of Chicago. It was an upscale, elegant neighbourhood, and he'd found a smaller house to turn into the safe haven he needed. The windows were darkened, and extra soundproofing had been placed around the exterior of the home so outside noise wouldn't set off his various disabilities. He'd changed all the carpeting to simple bamboo floors so his sometimes shaky steps wouldn't trip or snag. He waved away his driver to let him know he was good to go and then closed the door.

At his side, Charlie stopped and looked at him. He whined and pawed Everette's leg.

“Sorry, buddy, I'm lost in thought about him. Do you like him?”

The Lab whined.

“You're hungry and want to go out. I know. Priorities of a dog.” Everette chuckled and pulled off the tux jacket and tie. He released Charlie from his leash and vest. Then he opened the back door and waved to the dog.

Charlie rushed out into the darkness and began to sniff for the perfect spot. Everette leaned against the doorway and watched the Lab do his business. When Charlie was done, he returned to the house and led the way to the kitchen and his empty food bowl. He sat and waited for his human to fill it and his stomach. Everette dropped food into the bowl, refreshed the water bowl, and added a few treats to the top of the food. He stepped back, and Charlie dove into the meal.

With a chuckle, Everette shifted around the kitchen and put together a simple snack. He needed food in his belly before taking his evening round of meds. When he heard the cell phone ring from his pocket, he set the plate, glass, and container of meds on the table. After he pulled the phone, he sat down and answered the call.

“Hey, Evan, I'm fine and home,” Everette said to his younger brother, who had become his caretaker upon his arrival home. Evan and his family even lived at the other end of the same street.

“Yeah, I saw the car go past and wanted to give you time to take care of Charlie’s needs,” Evan said with a chuckle, knowing the familiar evening routine. “So... how was the performance?”

“Fabulous, I enjoyed everything and didn’t have an episode.”

“Good to hear. And how was your dancer?”

“Breathtaking whenever he dances. I can’t believe how good he is. He fills the stage all on his own.”

“What about the party?”

“I made it through for enough time to find him. We spoke in a separate room. I told him everything that happened. I didn’t give him a full briefing about all of my disabilities, but told him I had Charlie to watch over me.”

“Then you walked out?”

“Yeah, things kind of ended after I asked him for another chance. I left him to think about things at his request. I don’t blame him for not jumping at the chance to have my scarred bones,” Everette said, dragging his damaged hand through his hair.

“Don’t put yourself down. You know I hate it when you talk like that about yourself,” Evan said.

“Don’t start, Evan. I’m tired. It’s been a long night.”

“Hey, you did what you set out to do. Which is a lot for you in your condition and I’m proud of you. You watched the performance, went to a party, and managed to find your guy for a talk. You couldn’t ask for anything better.”

“I know.”

“Okay, bro. I’m gonna let you go. Call if you need anything,” Evan said.

“Thanks, little brother,” Everette said and hung up on the call. He set the phone down, patted the Lab’s soft head when it dropped on his lap for attention. “I know, bud. I know.” He made quick work out of the small meal and then swallowed the various meds. He rose, cleaned the kitchen efficiently, and retrieved the jacket and tie from where he had slung it over the sofa, heading to his bedroom in the back.

Once he stripped out of the stifling tuxedo, he yanked on a pair of sleep pants and a long-sleeved shirt to hide all the scars covering his body. He changed the black glove with fake fingers to a support glove which helped keep the scars smooth and supple around his hand. He watched Charlie get on the bed, do his circling, and settle down. “Do you think you’re gonna sleep up there with me?”

Charlie gave him a friendly woof and dropped his head on his paws.

“Yeah, I know. You’re a spoiled rotten dog, bud.” Everette gave the soft ears another good scratching. As he was about to slide in the bed and continue reading his book, he stopped when his doorbell rang with a soft chime. Charlie lifted his head, barked, and jumped down to the floor.

Turning away from the bed, Everette followed Charlie through the house. He peered through the glass, astounded at the late visitor. He unlocked everything and opened the door.

“Hey there,” Jeremy said.

“Jeremy, what are you doing here?”

“I know it’s late, but I needed to see you. Can I come in?” Jeremy leaned against the doorframe, one ankle crossed over the other, while he twirled keys on one finger. Everette noticed he had taken the time to change out of his tux, and now wore low-slung jeans and a tight silk shirt. His highlighted, short dark hair fell in a messy disarray that fit him perfectly.

“Umm, yeah, sure, come in. I’m a little surprised you’re here. I wasn’t expecting you or anyone else.” Everette hiked up the simple cotton pants and stepped out of the way.

“Went home to think about what you said. I changed out of the monkey suit and took a soak in some Epsom salts. My poor body isn’t as happy with all the dancing anymore. When I got out, I decided I didn’t want to stay there, so I got in my car and ended up here. It’s a nice place. I’m in an apartment downtown.” Jeremy dropped a hand to scratch Charlie behind his ears as he passed the dog. He turned and pressed a button on the small remote key fob. In the driveway, a Mini Cooper convertible in British racing green with black stripes flashed its lights in answer.

“That is one itty bitty little car,” Everette commented when he saw the car. “You didn’t have this in New York.”

Jeremy chuckled. “Has more room than you think, though...” He checked Everette out slow and steady from head to bare toes. “I don’t know if you’ll fit, even with the top down. Nah, I got this a few years ago on a whim.”

“I don’t think I’ll appreciate squeezing myself in there. Besides, where I go, Charlie goes.”

“Ahh, right, we need room for the dog. Well, the seats go down so Charlie could ride in the back.” Jeremy shrugged and closed the door behind him. He slid the key fob in his pocket. Then he stepped out of the loafers to reveal his own bare feet, worn and callused from years of dancing.

Charlie looked up at them, his tail wagging. He stared at the fresh set of bare feet and dropped his front down, his butt in the air.

“Why is your dog staring at my feet?” Jeremy stopped and stared at Charlie, who placed himself in front of him.

“He likes to lick toes.”

“Lick toes? He wants to lick my crappy, horrible, nasty toes. Does he know what these stinky things have been doing for the last few hours?” Jeremy looked down at the happy dog and shook a finger at him. “No licky these toes. No toes for you.”

The Lab whined and wagged his tail. He belly-crawled closer, his tongue hanging out.

“No toes!”

The dog barked and whined.

“Everette, help.”

“Charlie, away from the dancer’s feet.” Everette picked up a favorite tennis ball and bounced it toward the Lab, who bounced and raced after the ball.

“Thank you,” Jeremy said and raced after Everette.

“Come and sit down, you goofy dancer. Put your feet up and out of the way.” Everette motioned to living room that flowed into a dining room and kitchen area in an open floor plan. He moved over to the comfortable sofa and

dropped down on one end. He patted a space near him that was covered by a blanket. “Would you like a drink or something?”

Charlie snatched his ball, tail up and happy, and trotted back to them. He leapt up and curled on his blanket, close to where Everette could reach out and stroke his ears.

“No, I don’t need anything.” Jeremy walked over, playfully growled at the dog, and found a space on the other side of Everette, away from the dog. He tucked his feet up to the side. “Ha ha. You can’t lick them.”

Charlie dropped his muzzle on Everette’s lap and whined, eyebrows moving over his soulful brown eyes.

Everette chuckled at the both of them. He moved his hand over the lab’s soft fur. “Sorry, buddy. You wouldn’t like dancer feet.”

“But you’re still a cute pup.” Jeremy reached out and scratched behind one of the ears. He got a grateful lick on his wrist by the Lab.

“So... You mentioned you thought about what I said. Do you have questions?”

Jeremy looked at Charlie and then back to him. “Why do you have a therapy dog? I could tell you weren’t telling me everything about your connection and need for him.”

Everette smiled in understanding. He knew they had to get around to this question at one point or other if Jeremy was to understand what happened to him.

Waiting for Everette, Jeremy placed an elbow on the back of the sofa and propped his head on his hand. He stayed curled in his corner and watched Everette with a calm gray gaze.

“I suffer from rather severe PTSD, like most combat veterans. Veteran therapy dogs are trained to help mitigate most symptoms of PTSD. Charlie, here, helps me with daily physical tasks, like picking things up and balancing on stairs, but more importantly, he is my constant companion. I was very prone to panic attacks, agoraphobia, flashbacks, and ‘gray outs’ where I would lose track of where I was or what I was doing.”

“Really? I didn’t understand everything, I mean, I’ve heard about soldiers with PTSD, but didn’t know how it affected everyday life.”

“It can affect and overpower every moment of every day without someone even realizing it’s happening. We’re so used to being constantly on alert, on guard, we need to completely change focus and our body’s reaction when we come home. Some of us can slip from one to the other with ease, others have more difficulty.”

“So you need Charlie to help you with those slips. What else does Charlie do?”

“Yeah, Charlie is there to stop those slips before they start. He helps to keep me in the moment and not let my mind slip into a flashback. He is trained to monitor my breathing and heart rate, so he can nudge me back to reality before a situation starts.” His mind began to circle back in time as he spoke about all of his challenges. His fingers tapped on his leg anxiously.

Charlie nudged Everette’s hand with his nose and whined. He moved his paw on Everette’s leg.

“Everette, are you okay?” Jeremy leaned forward, dropping his arm from the sofa, and placed his hands on Everette’s hands.

Everette slid a hand over his hair and then touched Charlie. “I was beginning to think about everything I went through and Charlie sensed my heart rate.”

Jeremy lifted Everette’s compression-gloved hand to his lips and kissed the fabric. He then kissed the scarred arm above the fabric. He looked at the hand and noticed the last two fingers were missing.

“I lost them due to the burns,” Everette said. “I had fake ones created for some of the day gloves I wear. I can’t use the hand without a compression glove of some type to support everything. The doctors said I was lucky to even keep this hand.”

“I don’t care what’s missing or what’s here. You’re sitting across from me. That’s all I care about right now.” Jeremy kissed the hand again. “Can you keep telling me what else you deal with?”

Everette glanced at Charlie, who rested his head on Everette's lap again. "Yes. Let's see. I was also prone to hypervigilance, something that—before—saved my life every minute of the day, but I don't need it now. No one is waiting around the corner to kill me or my teammates. I can put my hand on Charlie and feel calmness returning to me."

Jeremy lowered their hands into his lap as he kept his gaze upon Everette. "What happened before your brother helped you get Charlie?"

"I was horrible to live with, to the point where my brother moved me into a separate apartment because I was scaring him and his family. Then, I was too paranoid and withdrawn to leave my apartment. I lived like a hermit, cut off from everyone. Even with Evan visiting me, helping to bring in groceries, and making sure the bills were paid and that I was still alive. Suicide rates are high for veterans, more than any other group, and Evan feared the worst. It was then he began to look at other options for me. It's when he found out about the dogs and helped me fill out an application for one. Two years ago, I got lucky and was paired with Charlie. He's helped me reconnect with the world and gives me a purpose. We got this place last year as an accomplishment of what I've overcome."

"Why didn't you look for me then?"

"Before Charlie, I was emotionally numb. I couldn't hug my nephews and niece. I couldn't even shake my brother's hand. I was severely depressed. With Charlie giving me endless love and utter devotion, I'm starting to come back from the darkness. I wanted to give myself time to become emotionally and mentally stable before taking the chance on a relationship. Neither one of us deserves the pain and struggle which comes with someone with PTSD. Even with Charlie, I'll always suffer from PTSD. It'll never go away. I'll get better, but I'll never be what I was before I left to join the Army." Everette looked down at the dog and then at the man he had wanted back in his life for so long. "I'll never be cured, Jeremy. I accept the treatment and Charlie's care, but I'll never be cured. Understand?"

Jeremy swallowed, linked his fingers together, and stared down at the floor. "You're dealing with so much, Ev, so much I can barely begin to understand. I've never seen anything like what you went through every day

while fighting. I'm a dancer who tries to bring emotions, hopefully good ones, to the audience. I hope to take them away from their daily lives and pain and give them a high."

"And you're wonderful at doing what you do. I always feel better when I go to a performance, with or without you dancing. It's a highlight when I know a performance is coming up in my schedule. I look forward to it and I know everyone else who sits in those seats feels the same."

"What could I possibly give you?" Jeremy looked at him. "You lived with me, well, on and off, for the better part of three years. You know how I can get. I'm selfish, just like any artist. I'm strict and diligent about my physique and diet maintenance. When I'm in the middle of rehearsal, I can be a total diva."

"I adored and loved every moment I spent with you for those years. You were the best memories of those years with you. I couldn't wait for each deployment to finish so I could run up to New York and see you. No matter how diva you get, you give me the light, love, and happiness I crave to have back in my life."

Jeremy rose to his feet and paced. His body moved with the fluidity and grace built within him as a dancer. As the thoughts rolled through his head, he danced a few steps, rose on the balls of his feet, his hands and fingers moving with the rest of his body.

"Jeremy? You're dancing."

"Thinking..."

"You're thinking while you're dancing?"

Jeremy nodded. "The steps keep me focused."

Charlie whined and nudged Everette's hand. Everette glanced at the clock and noticed it was getting past his bedtime. Unfortunately, if he didn't go to bed on schedule and get the rest he needed, he suffered more episodes the following day.

"What? What is wrong? Are you all right?" Jeremy stopped and faced Everette with a fluid spin. He took a few steps forward and dropped into a graceful crouch next to the sofa. He set his hands on Everette's knees.

Everette placed his hands on Jeremy's hands. He was surprised by Jeremy's sudden concern for his well-being in time to Charlie's response. "I'm fine. Charlie alerted me that it's past my bedtime."

"You're not a child with a set bedtime."

"No, I'm an adult with PTSD. It requires, at least for me, to have a set bedtime and require a certain number of hours of decent sleep. If I'm short or restless, my symptoms are worse."

"Oh, I didn't realize you need to be so disciplined with such a simple thing like sleep. I'm sorry. I should get—"

"Join me in bed and sleep on our discussion," Everette interrupted.

Jeremy blinked and looked around. "Join you?"

"Please. I would like to hold you. Sleep like we used to do, only you'll have to be on my good side." Everette rose to his feet and glanced over Jeremy's clothes. "You're commando under those jeans, aren't you?"

Jeremy nodded.

"Figures. You have never been one for underwear, not that I hate it. I'll give you a pair of sleep pants."

"What? You don't want to keep me nekkid?" Jeremy sauntered toward him, tilting his hips in a suggestive way. He tugged on Everette's shirt. "I want you nekkid. Why are you wearing this shirt?"

"Too many scars are hidden by my clothes. Not tonight, not with so many decisions between us. Let me hold you." Everette stopped and looked to Jeremy. "I may have nightmares, though. I apologize if I hit you or scream. I don't know..."

Jeremy walked toward him and placed a hand on Everette's arm. "I'll be okay. I understand the reason for them."

"It could be disturbing if I didn't tell you. You don't have..."

"I'm not leaving. Take me to bed," Jeremy said as he slid his hand down and linked his fingers with Everette's good hand.

Everette smiled, leaned in and pressed a kiss to Jeremy's forehead. "Thank you." He turned and walked through the house with Jeremy. Charlie led the way, his tail wagging the entire time.

"You're limping," Jeremy said as they entered the room.

"Hmm. I get tired by the end of the day and lose some coordination. My hip and knee took some damage in the fall. My whole right side is a mess. When I get tired I usually have to rely on a cane and Charlie to keep me steady, but I try not to use it around the house." Everette went to the dresser and pulled out another pair of cotton pants. He held them out to Jeremy. "I shrunk these a little so they should be good for you."

"Are you trying to imply I'm a shrimp compared to you?" Jeremy glanced at the six-inch difference between them.

"Nah. I would never, and you're the perfect height for me to cuddle against." Everette let go of Jeremy's hand and moved to the bed. He pulled back the covers as Charlie jumped up, circled, and made himself comfortable at the end of the bed.

"The Lab better not hog the bed and covers." Jeremy dropped the pants on the bed, tugged off his shirt, and moved his hands to his jeans.

Everette settled against his pillows and watched the show as a gorgeous dancer's body was revealed to him. "Nah, I don't think he will. I'm used to having him close in case anything happens during the night, and I've pretty much given up trying to get him to sleep on a dog bed." He glanced at the dog and noticed he didn't lift his head, as if he knew they were talking about him.

"Hmm. We'll see when we wake up who is spread out and covered," Jeremy said while he unbuttoned and slid down the zipper. "Should I dance for you?"

"As much as I want to see this long-overdue revealing of your gorgeous body, I do need sleep."

"Take all the fun out of it." Jeremy pushed down the low-cut jeans. He straightened as the jeans dropped and revealed his body in a simple fashion. He stepped out and kicked them away. Then he picked up and pulled on the pants. While he tied them, he moved to flip off the light switch, and then

circled around the bed. Lit only by the soft moonlight, he found his way to slide under the sheets.

“Next time, you can strip-dance for me.” Everette held out his arm to let Jeremy snuggle against his side. He then wrapped his arm around Jeremy’s shoulders to help him rest his head on his shoulder. He kissed Jeremy’s temple as Jeremy wiggled and tugged the sheet and blanket over them.

“Hmm. I missed your scent,” Jeremy whispered after nuzzling him. “My favorite pillow is back.”

Everette chuckled and closed his eyes to sleep. He heard Jeremy slow his breathing to match his while they slid towards sleep. He knew his dancer was exhausted from the performance.

Soon only the doggie snores filled the bedroom, causing both men to chuckle and nudge the Lab, before they shifted and fell deeper into sleep.

CHAPTER 4

They spent the next two weeks together, talking, cuddling, and enjoying time spent in each other's company with nothing on the agenda except whatever came up. Jeremy learned about Everette's various disabilities and issues with his PTSD, and how to balance what he needed on a daily basis. Instead of the problems irritating him, he went full forward in learning how to help and assist. After watching a couple of physical therapy sessions, Jeremy insisted on taking over them, bringing equipment from his home. He helped Everette with his stretching and strength training, adding in his beloved yoga and Pilates along with the standard methods of stretching.

Going a step further, he researched various therapies online to help rehab Everette's hand and arm. Multiple pages talked about the benefits of art therapy and how soldiers worked their muscles in a different fashion sculpting in clay. He immediately went to the local art and craft store. He went through the aisles and found various types of modelling and professional clay, a silly smock, several tool sets and molds, books, and supplies. With all of his surprises, he headed back to Everette's home, and found him gone to a doctor's appointment. He gleefully set everything in the backroom, which opened onto a covered lanai.

When Everette returned home with Charlie, Jeremy fed him so he could take his meds, and then led him by the hand to his surprise. A little stunned and taken aback, Everette settled at the table, flipped through the books, and fiddled with a hunk of clay. Soon he was spending a few hours a day at the table, his hands working the clay into different forms, figures, and models. Sometimes, Jeremy worked next to him, enjoying the time to do something creative.

Throughout the time they spent together, Jeremy didn't do much dancing. The rest of the weekly performances were danced by Marcelo and another newcomer to the company, Luciano. At the request of Clinton, Jeremy danced the sold-out weekend evenings. Each time, he found his body creaking and protesting. It was funny how Everette was filling his larger Jacuzzi tub with Epsom salts to take care of Jeremy's aches instead of his own scarred body. The rest of the week, Jeremy found himself remaining behind at Everette's

house and being satisfied with the change. He didn't need to be at the theater every night or at the studio every day for practice. He concentrated on simple yoga routines with Everette to keep his muscles limber.

Curled on the sofa, leaning against Everette's shoulder, a movie on the television, Jeremy flipped the phone around in his hands after he finished the conversation with Clinton. He saw Everette's hand reach out and cover his restless fingers.

"Well? What's your decision? How did Clinton take it?" Everette asked in a soft tone after he picked up the remote and lowered the volume.

"I'm going to retire in six months, after a final dance. The dance will be centered around me as I say good-bye to the stage. A one night performance," Jeremy said. "I can't keep doing three hour performances every night. My body can't handle the pressure. My feet can't deal with the steps."

"And until the last night? What will you do?"

"I'll have a spot, something simple and light, in the next two performances over the summer. My last dance will be the first of the fall performances."

"And after that?"

"I'll stay behind scenes at the studio. I will become the new artist-in-residence and assist the dance managers in teaching the up and comers in the company. I'll help the new *premiers* with their motions."

"Will this change satisfy you?"

"I've had a long, wonderful career as a dancer on stage for almost twenty years. I lasted longer than I probably should, but the doctor told me I was getting arthritis in my lower body and would need a knee replacement within the next five years if I danced anymore on it." Jeremy shrugged. "With you in my life, I'll have everything I need."

"Are you sure about this decision?"

Jeremy set the phone down and turned to face his scarred lover. He placed his hands on both sides of Everette's face. "Yes, my decision is final."

Everette shifted a little and then lifted his fist between them. "Then will you do me the honor of becoming my husband? I was thinking of a simple summer ceremony."

Jeremy sat back on his heels and watched Everette opening his hand to reveal two white gold rings on his palm. He noticed they were exquisitely engraved. He touched a finger to one.

“Jeremy?”

Jeremy looked up and met Everette’s gaze, noticed the touch of worry in his eyes at his silence. He touched Everette’s face. “Oh, yes, I would love to become your husband. I believe summer would be wonderful for a ceremony. We can’t do this in Illinois yet.”

“No, but we can have the ceremony in either Minnesota or Iowa. We can buy a second home in either Minneapolis or Des Moines and become legal citizens there to get our license. I know you would prefer to live near a big city, perhaps even change to a different company or build your own studio.”

“My own studio?”

“You love teaching others how to dance. You would be wonderful at it. I know you have friends who are retiring from the stage and are looking for more opportunities.”

“I never thought about teaching. I would hate to leave Illusions, but for the chance to live openly as a married couple...”

“I would change anything I could to make our dreams possible,” Everette said.

“There’s another option to think about and wonder if we could make it work. We have so much for us to figure out.”

“First thing is to make our engagement official,” Everette said as he took a smaller ring and pushed it onto Jeremy’s finger.

With a smile, Jeremy took the second ring, then lifted Everette’s hand, and pushed it on the fourth finger.

“Good thing I didn’t hurt my left hand,” Everette said wiggling his good fingers.

Jeremy laughed. “We would have been unconventional and worn our rings on our right hands. I would do the same as you.”

“You would?”

Jeremy nodded. “Anything for you, my soldier boy.”

“Silly dancer boy.”

They laughed together before they closed the distance with a passionate kiss. Jeremy moved until he straddled Everette’s hips and placed his hands on Everette’s chest. He leaned back and looked at his beloved soldier. For the last two weeks, they had abstained from sex. Neither one wanted to push the connection between them. Everette was still uncertain about his appearance.

“Everette, please, make love to me. I’m not upset by the scars, they’re a part of you—like my nasty feet are of me,” Jeremy said, nuzzling his mouth against Everette’s soft lips.

“Okay. In our bed,” Everette said.

Jeremy smiled—the house had become more *their* home than just Everette’s. He had moved more and more of his stuff from his apartment to Everette’s warm house within the last two weeks. He had even set up a practice *barre* in the clay room. His clothes and things mixed in with Everette’s, and it was perfect. Pushing away from his beloved and the sofa, he got to his feet, bare in spite of the canine toe-licker, and held his hands out to help Everette.

“What about the canine?” Jeremy glanced down at the Lab, who lifted his head and thumped his tail.

“Charlie, stay here,” Everette said, adding a hand motion as he rose. The Lab whined, but put his muzzle back on his paws. “Good boy,” Everette said and looked at Jeremy. “Can you go get one of the new chewies out of the closet for him to enjoy?”

“Sure.” Jeremy rushed off to the pantry and opened the fresh box, returning to wave the big rawhide chew bone in front of the Lab. Charlie lifted his muzzle, sniffed the air, and his tail thumped. “You want this, good boy? Huh? You want this?” Charlie barked as his tail wagged harder. “Here you go. Good boy. Good Charlie-boy,” Jeremy said as he dropped the bone and scratched Charlie’s ears.

The dog attacked the bone with full gusto, holding it between his paws, and chomped galore on it with his teeth.

Jeremy then returned to Everette's side, wrapped an arm around his soldier's waist, and they walked to the bedroom. When Everette reached out for the switch, Jeremy stopped him. "It's okay. I want to see you. All of you," Jeremy said, reassuring him.

Everette blew out a long, steady breath and nodded.

"Hey, it's me. Your dancer boy. I'm not critiquing you in any fashion." Jeremy helped Everette back up until they reached the large bed. He lifted his hands to Everette's shirt and began to undo the buttons. He slid them open one by one to reveal both smooth skin and the puckered, ribbed, thicker scarred skin. He let his fingers drift down both sides of Everette's chest. He pressed a series of kisses down Everette's throat and across the chest.

Everette tilted his head back, and his hands moved to Jeremy's shoulders. "Jeremy, please..."

"I have you, I promise. I won't let you go." Jeremy finished unbuttoning the shirt and helped to slide it over Everette's shoulders and down his arms. His thumbs brushed along the skin as it was revealed to him.

"I'm a horrible mess." Everette stared down at the webbing of scars across his right side, some deeper from the fragments that had dug into his skin during the explosion.

"No. You're an honorable soldier who served his country. You should wear your scars with pride in your service. You're a brave man, who has seen unspeakable horrors and dangers. Never doubt your honor and beauty." Jeremy tugged his own shirt over his head and tossed it aside with Everette's. "Now, let's get rid of these clothes."

"Hmm. I would like to see you nekkid," Everette said with a wiggle of his eyebrows.

Jeremy laughed, kissed him, and went a little faster with removing his jeans and Everette's slacks and jockeys. He got Everette to sit on the edge and crouched to pull off the loafers and socks his soldier wore around the house. He knew his man needed them for support.

He gently pushed Everette's knees apart and moved between them. He stroked his fingers down the flat belly, tangled in the trimmed hair. "You have grays down here."

“Hey. You’re not supposed to point that out,” Everette said with a chuckle. “And they’re silver, like in my hair.”

Jeremy chuckled as he brushed his fingers through the hair, gently tugged a few curls to Everette’s delight as he moaned. His cock thickened and lengthened. It began to curl and lift toward him, and Jeremy wrapped his fingers around Everette’s cock and stroked it from base to ridge. He gave it a strong, slow tug and twist, changing the pressure and movements before he wrapped his lips around the head and sucked.

“Oh, Jeremy, oh...” Everette tried to say and ended with moans as Jeremy worked him. “No. No. Stop...”

Jeremy lifted his mouth from the crown, licked the drops of fluid that emerged, and grinned. “What?”

“I want to come inside of you.”

“You are.”

“Jeremy...”

Jeremy chuckled and nodded. He sat back. “Okay. Go lay back against the pillows. I’ll do the work. I’m clean.”

“So am I,” Everette said as he pushed and pulled his body across the bed. He piled several pillows behind his back. Then he reached out to the nightstand and pulled out a new bottle of lube. He wiggled the box of condoms and glanced at Jeremy. “Guess we don’t need these, then?”

“Nope. I want to feel every inch of you,” Jeremy said as he crawled across the bed and straddled Everette’s thighs. He snatched the box and tossed it across the room. Then he took the bottle and squeezed a generous amount on his fingers. He moved his hand behind him and worked his fingers in his opening. It’d been a while for him, only using a couple of vibros, so he took a few extra minutes to stretch himself.

“Damn, that’s so sexy to watch.” Everette picked up the bottle. He squeezed out more lube and covered his cock.

Once he felt prepared, Jeremy took hold of Everette’s cock in one hand and placed himself in position. He felt the larger head push through and enter him. He closed his eyes and moaned at the delicious stretched feeling, the beginning

of the pressure which would fill him. He raised and lowered his ass a little to work himself.

“Come on, babe, give us more,” Everette said, his jaw clenched at the feeling.

Jeremy sank down the rest of the way on Everette’s cock. He moaned loud when his prostate was nudged by the thick head. He shifted his hips, nudged and worked his ass over Everette. He got into a rhythm, raising and lowering over Everette’s cock.

“Need more,” Everette said and pulled Jeremy toward him. He rolled them over until he was on top. He pushed Jeremy’s legs back and open and began to thrust deeper inside his lover.

“Oh... Oh shit... Yes...”

They moved together, longer, deeper, harder, until their bodies were covered in sweat. With every hit and nudge on his sweet spot, Jeremy climbed higher. Finally, he exploded with his release and called out Everette’s name. His cum spilled out of his cock and across their bellies. He barely heard Everette crying out as he released deep inside him.

It took a few more minutes, but Everette slowly pulled out. Then he turned until their exhausted, sated bodies were spooned. He nuzzled against Jeremy’s neck.

“Hmm. Best part of the moment,” Jeremy said.

“There will be lots more of this for us.”

“Oh, hell yes, soldier boy. Love you.”

“Love you, dancer boy.”

CHAPTER 5

Six Months Later

The music lifted higher and higher into a crescendo. On stage, the single male dancer spun, twisted, leapt, and twirled through the intricate steps that expressed the remaining part of the dance of a male coming to the end of his life. The company raced out from different directions, swirled around him in a quick movement, him reaching for them, before they all broke away and disappeared. The dancer spun towards the front center of the stage, until he came to a stop, shoved his fist into the sky, and dropped into a split, hands reaching out across the stage toward the audience, and lay there as the music finished and the stage darkened.

The *premier danseur noble* of the Illusion Company had danced his final principal position of his professional career. As of this night, Jerome Alexander would say good-bye to the stage, but not to dancing or dancers. No, he would still be around behind the scenes, teaching the younger generation, and attending various functions.

Thunderous applause rose from the audience to celebrate his last performance as the curtain closed in front of him. Pressing a cheek to the cool wood, Jerome concentrated on his breathing and not on his aching joints.

“Can you move? You have one helluva ovation out there. I suspect several curtain calls too,” Marcelo teased as he walked over and crouched next to him.

“Ugh,” Jerome said and pushed himself up off the stage. He twisted to the side and with care closed the split. “Ahh... Damn Clinton for insisting on ending with that move.”

“He knew it would be spectacular and it was one hell of a dance to watch. I’m honored at the chance to fill your slippers,” Marcelo said as he held out his hand and lifted the other dancer to his feet. “Now smile and wave. Your husband is worried.”

Jerome slid away and became Jeremy Armstrong-Hastings, husband for three months to his beloved soldier. He shifted to the side, smiled, and waved with a kiss to his husband and canine companion waiting in the wing. His soldier waved back while the Lab’s tail wagged his entire butt.

“Curtain... Time for curtain,” a stage manager hissed.

Marcelo squeezed Jerome’s hand and then slipped away. All the curtain calls would be solo, focused only on the dancer’s last dance. Bets behind the scenes went on about how many calls Jerome would go through.

It took a grand total of ten calls before Jerome and the audience finally finished saying good-bye. He gave them a final kiss and wave with his last bow. Then he walked offstage for the last time and went right to his husband. He changed back to Jeremy, his life offstage, and wrapped his arms around his husband.

“Oooh, sweaty dancer stink,” Everette teased as he wrapped his arms around Jeremy. The Lab rubbed his head against both of their legs.

“Last time for post-performance dancer stink,” Jeremy said as he reached up and kissed his husband.

“Umm. Yeah. Gross,” the prima ballerina, Veronika, said with a laugh. She came over and kissed Jeremy’s cheek when the husbands parted. “You were gorgeous, as always. I’ll miss having you lift me high.”

“I’ll miss you too, but I’m not going away completely,” he reminded her.

“Come on, dancer boy, it’s time to party,” she said and went to Clinton.

“Can you handle a party?” Jeremy touched his husband’s scarred cheek.

“I’m good for another hour or so and then it’ll be too much,” Everette said, giving him the truth as always about his condition.

“Okay. Come with me so I can change and close out my dressing room.”

“Are you gonna jump me one last time in your dressing room?”

Jeremy wiggled his eyebrows as he led them away to begin their new life together offstage and together.

THE END

Author Bio

Ever the quiet one growing up, Nicole Dennis often slid away from reality and curled up with a book to slip into the worlds of her favorite authors. Over the years, she's created a personal library full of novels filled with dragons, fairies, vampires, shapeshifters of all kinds, and romance. Always she returned to romance. Still, there were these characters in her head, worlds wanting to be built on paper, and stories wanting to be told and she began writing them down whether during or after class. She continues to this day. Only recently has it begun to become fruitful, spreading out to let others read and enter her worlds, meet her characters, and see what she sees. No matter what she writes, her stories of romance with their twists of paranormal, fantasy, and erotica will always have their Happily Ever Afters.

She currently works in a quiet office in Central Florida, where she also makes her home, and enjoys the down time to slip into her characters and worlds to escape reality from time to time. At home, she becomes human slave to a semi-demonic tortie calico.

She loves to hear from readers and fans, so don't be shy. Find her on the 'net or send an email.

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