

LOVE Has NO Boundaries



Don't Read in the Closet Event 2013

VOLUME 4

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Love Has No Boundaries

An M/M Romance Collection

Volume 4

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 4.

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. Dozens of 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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THE TAIL OF A DOG

By Summer Devon

Photo Description

A smiling dark-haired guy in his twenties or thirties is apparently driving a car. Another man, perhaps a little younger, also with short dark hair, is resting his head on the driver's shoulder, eyes closed, a faint smile on his face. Behind them on the backseat is a dog, probably a Weimaraner, and all we see of it is the dog's big head, eyes closed, its chin on the resting man's neck. All three look utterly contented.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

This is me, the adorable one in the picture, yes the one on the left. You won't believe what I had to go through with the two cuties next to me! And what will lie ahead of us? Please help telling our story!

Thank You!

Anke

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: first person – dog's POV, sweet, law enforcement, blue-collar, lawyer, men with pets, family drama, finding a family

Word count: 10,575

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THE TAIL OF A DOG

By Summer Devon

I'm not saying that I hated people, but I came within a whisker of loathing each and every one of them. After I got dumped, I learned fear. When I saw one of those two-legger assless creatures, I'd take off running.

I'd ended up in a place that stank of any number of creatures' misery. I'm an upbeat sort of a dog, so when I think of that place, I try to remember the very last time the unbearable need hit me and how I ran with a sweet-loving dog named Growler. When I buried my nose in his flanks, his smell could block the sharpest notes of desolation.

Thinking of Growler is pleasant though it does remind me of how I'd longed to be part of a pack. No other dogs came near my patch filled with broken machines, shade-less plants, and worse, those oil-stinky cars that raced past one side of my territory.

The dangerous car-filled side killed my Growler. He bit the big tire over there. Smashed flat by one of those huge cars, his body was hauled away before I had a chance to say a proper goodbye. Two-leggers—what nuisances.

After him, I ran alone. Times got hard. There weren't nearly enough rats in my acrid territory. They got smart about me, and I began losing out on more dinners.

The two-legger idiots who came to my territory ignored me unless they threw things at me, and they rarely threw anything that tasted good, sad to say. I know because I'd go back and check after they left. Sometimes they'd leave behind scraps, but usually they'd leave horrible chewy things or objects that reeked of poison even a hungry dog would reject.

The nights got cold. And then the days and nights got cold, and I slept in a little spot under a truck that never moved, next to a wall.

The very day I figured out my time was near, I met the two-legger, Shorty. I first spotted him behind an old oil barrel. He held a big chunk of something delicious-smelling and came toward me, slowly and in a submissive position. I called him Shorty because the moment our eyes met, he got down low, pretending his arms were legs too. He crawled in my direction. I couldn't imagine what he thought he was doing but then I didn't care because I could smell what he carried. Grease, and heated red meat, and oh, my dog, I still drool and get all stomach rumbly thinking about it.

As he tossed bits of the best food, ever, he murmured at me in a croaky little voice that didn't scare me, much. Not the angry snarl most people used when they saw me.

I ignored the nonsense about what a good dog I was and how sweet I looked. I put my ears back telling him I didn't care about how good I was, I just wanted that good food.

He put down a really yummy big chunk. Perfect. Even better, he backed away from it.

“All mine?” I asked with a questioning tail-wag.

He told me I was a good dog, and I took that as a *yes the food's all yours*.

I was about to eat it when a rope thumped on my head; he'd tried to throw something around my neck. I ran off, annoyed as crap, because that food he'd put on the ground smelled delicious, hot meat, warm rolls, and I wasn't going to get it.

“Horrible assless creature,” I barked over my shoulder. “Don't you bother coming back here. I'm not going to fall for that act again, Shorty.” I said that to me as well as him; because his food filled my nose with perfection and he hadn't been scary until that thing he threw hit my head.

Sometimes I needed to remind myself that people are treacherous. I'm a person-dog. I'd just naturally liked them until I'd ended up in that territory.

Shorty got up and showed he could be two-legged and tall like any other person. He no longer hunched.

“Oh, and now I see you’re a big jerk, liar,” I barked. He ignored my insults and walked after me, whistling and calling. He almost fell over a broken brick wall—he paid too much attention to me and not enough where his spindly two legs were going.

I trotted off, winding my way through the trash, hurt by his treachery. Ungainly as I was, I still managed to leave him far behind.

But then, as I got near my nest, I heard a deep bay of a shout. It didn’t come from Shorty. The next unhappy sound came from him, though, and I turned around and headed back toward the voices.

Curiosity. It might kill cats on a regular basis, but it doesn’t do dogs any favors either.

Shorty was standing with his hands in the air. One of the regulars who showed up around there, a useless two-legger who threw rocks and cans at me, stood and snarled at Shorty.

“Hand over your wallet, moron. Don’t make me hurt you.” I’d heard this person-on-person fighting before. Not my business, of course. But I could smell the fear and rage wafting off Shorty in a steady wave. I missed his friendly-happy taste. Worse, I could smell the last tiny part of his meaty food. *My* food. He’d promised.

I growled under my breath, surprising even myself by the urge to attack.

“Listen, do you want me to take this guy out?” I asked. “I’ll trade you the rest of your food if I can just take a bite out of his leg. What do you think, Shorty? Only this time, don’t throw that thing on me.”

“Tell your dog to shut up,” the rock-tossing regular barked.

“Good girl, please be quiet,” Shorty said. He said *please*, and with that soft friendliness that made me want to trust him.

I harrumphed. “If I’m quiet, will you give me the rest of that food? Will you make Rock-tosser go away? Tell him to stay away. I know what, I’ll help you convince him.”

Rock-tosser saw me sneaking closer and showed his teeth. “Here’s a chance for me to show you I mean business.”

A loud crack—I’d heard them before—and I lurched fast to the side. Something bit my tail hard. *Kkheerowr* it hurt. I yipped and cursed and I lost my temper. I dove after the rock-tosser, barking and snarling and ready to take a bite out of him, I swear I was. But then there was another loud crack, and this time Shorty gave a yelp.

The rock-tosser did one more big explosion. I finally understood that the thing in his hand was causing all the trouble. I lunged for it and he took off, scrambling over the rubbish.

I thought about running after him but I had to explore what was going on with my poor tail. “Ow, ow, ow,” I muttered, and licked the wound. Blood tastes pretty good except when it’s your own. This had an unpleasant rank to it. Metal and artificial heat and a poison I didn’t know. Yuck.

“Good girl,” Shorty said, but he didn’t sound as cheerful as he had before. “Good girl.”

I sniffed the air near him and got a whiff of human blood. He had an injury. I got up and went to see what was going on, testing the area with my excellent nose. He’d been bitten on the leg by the thing with the nasty scent, too.

He wasn’t about to get up and run after me; I came even closer. The food lay next to him, so I helped myself.

He grumbled to himself, words all strung together like, “Shit, shit, shit. My phone’s in the car. I shouldn’t have come out here without telling anyone.” Then he had the nerve to blame *me*. “If you weren’t so pathetic, I wouldn’t have stopped for you,” he told me.

I like that. *I* wasn’t the one who bit him on the leg. He looked like he was in pain, so I forgave him.

“Can you get up?” I asked him. “You really shouldn’t stay here.” I sat down near him because now I couldn’t control my concern. I’d been like this

before, all worried and fretful about other animals. It comes over you when you're about to whelp. But no matter how worried I might be, I couldn't drag a creature this large back to my nest under the truck. He needed to find his own kind to take care of him.

I studied his bouquet and appearance. He was a pleasant tawny color, reminding me of a pale stick, a bit of a tree I'd had to chew on. His hair was dark too, the color of Growler's eyes. I sighed. I missed Growler, but you got to live in the present.

I whimpered at him a bit, hoping it would take his mind off his troubles; it seemed to, at least until he passed out. Whoops, that wasn't good.

I heard some other two-leggers carrying on nearby. I knew that raucous uproar they took up, usually after dark. I didn't like the sound of them, so I settled close to Shorty—not too close—to see what would happen.

The afternoon had grown colder, and dark clouds covered the sky. "Shorty? You need to get up, pal."

He didn't move.

I went close, actually pushed my nose at him. Yep, I touched him. A strange moment, let me tell you. It had been ages since I'd voluntarily touched a two-legger. Fear filled me at the smell, but something else too—pity, and the desire to lie next to him, a need to soak up his heat and odor. I stretched, yawned, and curled against him. Mm. So warm, and his side fit my back. And thanks to his food, I wasn't as hungry as usual.

"Fine, I owe you. I'll wait here with you, but you better wake up soon."

I heard the screaming car that hurt my ears, and that made me want to howl. I hated that sound, even if it did usually manage to drive off the rock-tossers from my territory.

The people were yelping now, and then I heard a familiar bark—it was Fried-Food, who shouted as he bounded out of the noisy car that had stopped its horrible squealing at last. I didn't mind Fried, but Hey-there, his companion

(the one who always greeted me with “Hey there girl”), was one of the most tolerable two-leggers I knew.

Hey-there’s voice snarled at one of the rock-tossers. “Drop your weapon. Get *down*, get *down*, get *down*.”

I had to fight my instinct to lie down. He carried that kind of power when he was angry.

Fried’s bark was louder than usual, too. “We have reports about gun-shots in the area. I guess you two know something about that, huh.”

I stood close enough to see and was relieved to see Fried and Hey-there had won the fight with the others, who now lay on the ground, submissive.

I inched nearer. I was glad to see that the two-legger who’d hurt my tail was caught—but Shorty still needed help. I could hear him behind me, awake again and making small sounds. Fried and Hey-there were talking too much and too loud to hear him.

I added my own voice to the racket. “Hey-there! Hey-there! I got an injured animal over here! Come on, Hey, pay attention.”

Hey-there had his knee on the back of one of the rock-tossers and was putting silver objects on his wrists. He looked up at me for a moment. “Hey, girl, how’re you doing? I’m kind of busy and don’t have any food for you.”

Fried said, “She’s too fat as it is. How come animal control hasn’t gotten that mutt yet?” See why I don’t much like him? To be fair, he does smell of sugar and grease and sometimes has left some of his fried food behind for me.

The two of them were hauling the noisy rock-tossers up now, and seemed about ready to stuff them into the car that squeals pain.

I barked harder. “Hey-there, I’m serious about this. Come *on*, Hey.” I took a couple of steps nearer. I could smell the metal and oil of their car and my hair went up. I hate those things, and now that I knew that their car made that ear-cutting racket, I hated it more. Nevertheless, I pushed my nose forward and

tried again. “I like this Shorty guy and I’m worried about him. Come see. Come on! Are you deaf? Come on!”

“Something’s bothering her,” Hey said.

See why I like him? He’s not as dumb as most of them. But apparently he wasn’t smart enough, either. He walked around the car and opened up the door to get in.

I stood on my side of the fence and frantically yelled at Hey and Fried. “Don’t go away yet. Just come take a look. I can’t leave him lying there and I really want to go back to my nest. I need to get back to my nest.”

I really didn’t want to think about what was coming. I had too much responsibility already.

“Hell. This will only take a sec,” Hey told Fried. He slammed the door shut and started toward me. Good boy!

Fried shouted about how they didn’t have time for this and they had to haul the morons in for illegal firearms and resisting arrest and yipe-yipe, yip-yip. Big whiner.

Hey ducked back through the hole in the fence and walked toward me. He crouched and said, “What’s wrong? Are you a mom yet?”

“No, no. Come on.” I turned and trotted toward Shorty.

Fried shouted, “Hurry it up.”

“I think she’s had her puppies,” Hey shouted over his shoulder.

Maybe he wasn’t so smart after all.

Fried groaned. “Christ almighty. It’s just a dog. We got work to do. Plus it’s getting dark. You’ll have a hell a time finding anything in that pit.”

“A minute.” Hey rose to his feet. He pulled out a big stick from his side, and I admit I had a minute of panic. Was he going to turn into a standard two-legged and try to hit me? Then a light appeared at the end of the stick.

“Cool,” I told him. “That’ll help.” I turned and trotted away, being careful to go slow. These animals are not real speedy.

I heard the wounded Shorty before Hey did. In a weak voice he called, “Is someone there?”

I barked, “Yes, it’s okay, Shorty. I got Hey for you.”

“Easy, girl,” Hey said.

“Don’t be stupid, Hey. I can smell more blood. Come on.” I did not get why I was panicking for Shorty, but I think even then he already felt like one of mine.

“Shit!” Hey must have finally heard or seen Shorty because he scrambled faster. A moment later he dropped to his knees by Shorty and instead of picking him up, he began talking into his shoulder, which growled back at him. Hey said, “There’s a guy out here. Gunshot wound, in and out, calf, looks like he’s lost blood. A mess... No, no weapons... Right. You put in the call. I’m going to—” He scabbled at his waist and pulled out some nasty-smelling rubber things he put on his hands. Hey looked over Shorty in a way that told me he wasn’t going to bite him or turn into a rock-tosser. I’d guessed right. He would help.

At long last, Shorty wasn’t my problem. I sat and scratched my ear. It was nice to let my mind wander again. I wondered if maybe Fried had some food in the car and where I could find another tasty rat. But I still had a job to do. So I stood with a sigh and walked over to stand near the guys.

“Sir? Can you hear me?” Hey was talking loud at Shorty.

“Yes. Thank God you’re here. I tried to get up and I think I must have passed out. Wow, it’s dark. I didn’t know.” He raised his hands and rubbed his face.

“What’s your name?”

“Shorty,” I said.

Shorty gave another answer. “Robert. Robert Talbot.”

“Nice to meet you, sir. I’m Officer Alvarez. Can you describe the person or persons who did this?”

Shorty began talking about red jackets and dark blue jeans. There was a lot of conversation between Hey’s shoulder and the two males on the ground near me.

I stopped listening, concentrating on my own problems, until I heard Shorty ask, “Is the dog okay? She got shot too. Her tail or backside.”

“Damn, poor thing has trouble enough.” Hey—and I don’t care that he called himself Officer Alvarez—aimed the light at me for a second.

“Get that thing out of my eyes,” I told him as I backed away.

But he didn’t notice because he was too busy with Shorty again. “No need to worry, Mr. Talbot. The dog looks okay. She’s the reason I found you. She came out and barked her fool head off.”

“Is that right?” Shorty grimaced.

Hey had settled on his knees. He’d reached out his rubber covered hands and did something to Shorty’s leg that made Shorty gasp again, then give a little shiver of embarrassment at showing discomfort, I supposed.

Shorty covered up the pain wafting from him with yapping. “I drive by here all the time and noticed the pregnant dog and decided that I’d catch her and take her to the vet. That’s how I got into this mess. When that jerk-off took my wallet, she attacked him. I guess she won’t be going to the vet’s after all—and I will be.”

Hey had balanced the stick of light on a rock and was cutting at Shorty’s clothes. He wasn’t paying attention to Shorty’s words, but I was. I remembered that word “vet” and wasn’t sure I liked it.

Hey picked up the light and peered down at the bite on Shorty’s leg. “I’ll tell you what, that was my plan too. I was going to come back here on my day off. Animal Control hasn’t been able to locate her, so she must hide when they come around.”

“Yeah, duh,” I told them. “You think I can’t smell frightened-animal all over those two-leggers? I’ve seen them in action and I’m no dummy.”

Ignoring me, Hey kept right on talking. “She’s a nice looking dog, isn’t she? I think there’s a lot of Weimaraner in there, although of course any dog from this part of town probably has some Pit,” he crooned to Shorty as he worked. He spoke in a sing-song voice, a puppy-soothing tone I’d heard once, long ago before my eyes opened. “You know dogs too, huh? I love ’em. That hurt? Sorry. The rig will be here soon. I just wanted to make sure the shot missed the bone. Looks like it came close. It missed an artery but only just. You’ve lost plenty of blood but you’ll be fine, Mr. Talbot. Up and about in no time.”

“I’m Robert. Call me that. I’d say something about how Mr. Talbot is my dad, but no one calls him that either.”

Hey looked up into his face and smiled. A tendril of new scent from Hey reached me, something happy and interested.

Fine, if his new smell was strong enough to cover the strident anxiety, I could calm down—and they could get going.

“You two should clear out,” I told them. I was getting crabby, a bad sign at this stage. I wanted my territory cleared of other predators ASAP, even these two.

Another horrible, wailing racket was growing louder, fast, and I longed to run, but I couldn’t. I suddenly understood part of my crankiness. Until they took him away, Shorty was part of my pack, my concern. Well, isn’t that interesting, I thought sourly. The biggest puppy I ever had to deal with. I’d have some real ones soon, judging from the ache in my back. I whined louder. “Make that noise stop, would you?”

“It’s okay, girl,” Shorty called.

“Hey there, Flora,” Hey said.

I gave a sneeze-snort. I’d forgotten he called me something other than Hey Girl.

Shorty gave a weak chuckle and tilted his head to look in my direction. “I don’t think she likes that name. Maybe you should pick another.”

“Gina? Lola? Minny? Gray-girl?”

I didn’t like any of those random names either, but I was too busy scanning the area for the voices that drifted over the lot. Too many two-leggers were coming into my area. I skulked away, but not so far that I couldn’t hear what was going on.

From under my truck, I could see lights and hear shouting, but not the angry sort. I can always tell from their tones when they’re annoyed. Most people-dogs are good at judging their animals’ moods even better than the people themselves are.

Fried was there. “Jackson and Diamond took care of our bad guys. We have the one you described in custody, Mr. Talbot. Come on, Alvarez, our shift is almost over, let’s get to the paperwork.”

“The dog!” Shorty suddenly sounded upset. “She’s going to whelp any day now, or maybe she already has.”

“Sir, please stay on the stretcher. You’ve been shot in the leg.” An unfamiliar high voice told him the obvious.

“I know that,” he snapped. “Listen Officer Alvarez, I know it’s an imposition, but could you—”

“Yes, of course. If I can find Flora, I’ll make sure she’s safe.”

“Thank you,” Shorty said. “I guess I’m more interested in worrying about her than thinking about my leg.”

“Totally understandable.” Hey’s voice still had that pleasant puppy-soothing quality.

Things squeaked and thumped. I peered out and saw that they’d hauled Shorty up and onto a rolling thing. “Just relax, please, sir,” one of them said to him, but he leaned around her and called to Hey, “What’s your first name, Officer Alvarez?”

“I’m Javier. I’ll stop by the hospital and give you a report about the dog.”

“Really? But that’s too much. You’re already doing enough.”

“I’d like to.”

“You would? Excellent. Thank you.” For an animal that had been bitten by a shot, he sounded pretty cheerful. He lay back on the rolling white thing.

The noise died away and I crawled back to the warmest spot I’d found, ready to rest. I’d miss Shorty and his warm side, and I longed for more hot food. Still, less responsibility was fine with me.

I dozed until the pains grew sharp enough to wake me up and I knew my time had come. “Come on, kids, let’s get you out and about,” I said.

I was just cleaning up the second little one when a car door slammed.

“Hey girl, hey Flora.” Hey called to me using that sing-song voice he’d used with Shorty. “I made a promise, girl. Don’t make me break my promise.”

His voice came and went as his footsteps crunched or thudded around my space. The light flashed and vanished, flashed and vanished.

Maybe he might have given up and gone away, which would have been fine with me. I was so not in the mood for company. But then a particularly sharp pain shook me and I yipped. I think it was the pup the size of a big rat, the one they call Moose. But never mind that—back to Hey and his annoying interruption of a very private time.

The light shone right in my eyes. He squatted down and stared into my face.

“When you’re all bent down like that, I should call you Shorty,” I told him crossly.

He didn’t pay attention. He scrambled closer. “*Hijo de puta!* It’s happening.”

I growled but I was not about to get up and leave. He'd just have to keep his distance or I would bite. Don't get me wrong, I'm not normally a biter, but this was not a normal moment.

He seemed to know I was not in a good humor because he didn't get too close. Yet he didn't go away either. He settled on the ground nearby and talked to me now and then. He was a large shadow, looming and waiting, but with a cheerful scent of anticipation.

I didn't pay a lot of attention to his words, friendly and soothing, but I have to say I was grateful he kept watch while I pushed out those pups.

Even then I thought he'd chase off any rock-tossers or puppy-killers.

At last the final puppy was out and cleaned up. Done. Whew. Exhausted, I closed my eyes. But then I heard the soft glug, smelled water, and a second later, Hey became my favorite creature in my world. He nudged a bowl that reeked of plastic and water at me. I drank and drank, and nothing had ever tasted so good. Not even Shorty's meaty food.

"You're doing a wonderful job," he crooned at me. "Such a good job, *mamacita*."

I grunted my agreement and closed my eyes again. Something touched my head and I started, ready to bite or flee, until I smelled Hey's calm intention. He scratched my ear. Of course I can scratch my own ear, and I do, frequently. But there is something about a hand that just feels right. It's as if they built those hands just for that job and Hey was a total natural. His fingers reminded me of all the ear scratchings I'd had back when I was very young.

I forgot about the puppies, I forgot that I was hungry again. I only leaned against his hand. It had been so long. I felt that happy peace that only a good ear and chin rub could give. Okay, the fatigue from first taking care of Shorty and then my pups helped me slide into the peaceful zone. And I could smell the pleasant ease that touching me gave Hey. The tranquility of a good scratch goes both ways.

I heaved a sigh of relief and relaxed.

I should have known it was too good to be true.

The little squeals of protests alerted me. “Mom? Mom? Mom?”

I opened my eyes. “Hey! Bad, Hey-there! What are you doing? Put those back! I worked hard for those things. Put them back.”

He kept telling me I was a good girl. I didn’t want to lunge at him because I might hurt my children—that’s right, he was touching my puppies. He was putting them in a box.

And then I noticed that the two-legger assless son-of-a-bitch had put something around my neck. Oh, *rawr*, I’d been outsmarted by one of those!

He didn’t have to drag me out because he had my babies. I came along, muttering threats. “You hurt them and you’re dead meat, Hey. I mean it.”

We stumbled through the dark to...

...A car.

“No, I hate cars, Hey. The last time I went in one of those I ended up losing everything,” I half growled, half begged him. “One killed Growler. Don’t let it kill me.”

But then he put the box of my children in the back and I had no choice. We mothers are like that. Completely led by our teats. I climbed wearily in. “At least it isn’t the wailing car,” I grumbled to myself as I picked my way over a blanket.

“Mom! Mom! Mom!” the pups squealed. I settled near their box, watching the blind little nuisances, hoping my scent would calm them as much as their fragrance settled me.

I can’t really remember that long ride. I growled at Hey over and over about how much I hated cars and I hated him and his hypnotic hands.

It was only when he led me into a house that I stopped shaking. We went upstairs into rooms that were warm and smelled like Hey and cooked meat—I began to suspect that this wouldn’t be so bad after all.

He put my children down on a nice enough nest—not nearly as nice as one I’d make of course. But I could finally get at them. I dug the blankets and towels around us to the right shape, then sniffed and licked each pup, and tasted that they were okay.

Hey left us in the tranquil warmth and the dark and returned with food and water for me.

I growled to let him know my babies were off-limits, but then I went for the food, telling him, “All right. All right. I’ve calmed down, Hey. I’m not holding this incident against you. Just leave the pups alone.”

He didn’t seem to resent my setting limits, and he didn’t touch the pups. “Wait until I tell Robert about you,” he said.

“You mean Shorty,” I corrected him as I gulped the last of the crunchy bits of food.

He sat in silence watching us for a while. Then he said, “That Robert’s a nice guy, but I suppose you know that, hey, girl? I went to the hospital to make sure he was okay. Those eyes, man. I’m a sucker for hazel eyes. Who knew? Don’t get me wrong, Flora. I’m not supposed to notice this shit, but the guy had a great bod, even in a hospital gown. Too bad he’s a totally naive moron to go wandering into that part of town alone.”

I gave a tail thump to say I agreed with him. Ow, my tail hurt. My communication was going to be severely limited.

Hey kept talking. “I got to say the guy is brave. He didn’t complain about pain, and that wound had to hurt a helluva lot.”

So did mine and *I* wasn’t whining.

“Oh and we grabbed the guy who shot the two of you, you’ll be glad to hear. What do you think? You like our Robert, girl? They say dogs are good judges of characters, but I’m not sure I believe that.”

I licked the bowl and looked up at him with my best Sad Girl eyes, even though I was sure that wasn’t going to get me more food.

A light in front of his face flashed. “A picture of you and your puppies to show Robert, *mamacita*. I’m going to go see him in the hospital tomorrow.”

He settled on the ground near me, but not too near the pups. Smart man. “They’re going to let him out and maybe he’ll come visit you soon. I can only hope, right? You think maybe he likes guys? Hmm? I got that vibe, but maybe that’s because... Well. I’ll admit this to you, if you don’t tell anyone; it might be I wanted to see that because I’m lonely. At least I have you for company now, eh? *Aiee*, I can only guess what the landlord would say. Puppies in the closet.”

His magic fingers were at work on my head, while below, the pups gathered close and nursed. I sighed and leaned against his stroking hand. This was right and good. I hadn’t known how much I’d missed the hands and the admiring voice of a person. I gave Hey a “thank you” lick on the hand.

My lick also said “Just let me stay here a while until I get my babies hunting on their own, sweet Hey. Thank you, thank you.” I was too tired to do my full gratitude ritual, but this was good.

I felt so relaxed I didn’t even protest much when he started poking around my poor bitten tail.

Okay, I jumped and growled when he put something cold and painful on it.

“Whoa, girl,” he said, in that firm voice that already seemed to have too much control over me. “This will help, I promise.”

Sure enough, when he wrapped it in some cloth, it did seem to feel better.

I waited until he turned off the light, left the room and closed the door before I ripped the thing off my tail and gave the wound a good licking. Even better.

The pups and I relaxed into heat, softness, and the fragrance of serenity, and I felt fine for the first time in many long days.

I barely noticed Hey when he climbed into the bed near our nest. I liked breathing in tune with all of my pups, including the big one in the bed.

The next day I was allowed to explore the rooms that smelled like Hey and contentment. Hey didn't like the fact that I relieved myself on a rug and told me so. Not that I got the gist of his bellowing right away. It took a while to figure out what he wanted because that rug smelled perfect. Someone else had left a marker there.

“What should I believe?” I told him. “You or my nose? Sorry, Hey, but I've known my nose a lot longer.”

He put the leash on me, and we had a bit of a tussle about who got to decide where we went. But I didn't like leaving the pups long. I gave in to his yanks so I could go back fast. I had a lot of work to do—we had a new territory to explore and I had to leave my mark. “I'm here,” I peed my hellos. “This is my territory and I am here. You will leave me and mine alone.”

Other than small details, Hey and I did well together. I think it's important to be polite, let people know you appreciate them, and by dog, I felt grateful to Hey. I stood on two legs looking out the window at a raging storm and told him thank you with several licks. “The pups and I will do our duty by you, Hey. We will protect you and this territory. If there are any rats, I promise to share. This is a solemn oath.”

He patted me. Not as perfect as a scratch, but I liked it.

He talked as he stroked me. “Do you think I should take Robert flowers? Naw, too sappy. I could take him food, but I don't know what he likes. Turns out he's a lawyer, so he probably has fancy-ass taste. I don't know squat about him, except he likes dogs. That might be an idea. A book about dogs. Good idea. You're a big help, Flora.”

I told him, “Glad I could help, but I am not a flower. I'm thinking Girl would be a fine thing to call me. Hey Girl is even better because I think you and I belong together, Hey. We could share a name.”

I don't know what time of day it was—our nest didn't have a window—but I was snoozing with the pups when Hey burst into the room, yapping fast at me. “Robert says hello. He's going to be fine. He liked the book I got him, by

the way, smart thinking on my part.” He settled on the floor next to me and scratched me a bit, still talking. “That Rob has a gorgeous smile. No wonder you trusted him. He’s a couple years younger than me. And he’s got a lot more education than me. You think that’s a problem? Naw, I’m jumping the gun, of course. We just sat and talked. They’re letting him out later on, and he promised to come see you and the babies and go with us to see the vet.”

He got up and began to pull clothes out of the closet over our heads. The word he’d used, *vet*, made me nervous again, and I didn’t like what he was pulling on over his skin, either. The blue clothes that smelled of old fear and anger—he wore those clothes in the wailing car. I’d gotten so used to him in clothes that only smelled of Hey, contentment, me and my new world; I didn’t like the reminders of that old life. Hey was mine now and I didn’t want to share him with that fear-reeking territory.

He knelt by me again. “I’m going to work and I’ll be back before you know it. You and the babies can rest, all right?”

I licked his chin and liked the way his short prickly fur on his chin tasted. He rose too tall to reach so I sighed and stretched out. If the babies got too demanding I could retreat up to the bed. Hey seemed to think I shouldn’t go up there, but if he insisted on leaving, he shouldn’t whine about what happened while he was gone.

He put the absurd and heavy thing around his middle, all clanking and thumping. Although I did like that light stick and the smell of leather, he also carried the thing he called a gun, and I’d know that sharp metal smell anywhere. My poor tail had a very faint hint of it still.

He leaned down and patted me again. “The vet appointment is right after work tomorrow. Robert is going to come along. That’ll be nice for both of us.”

“Not really,” I told him, but he was gone. Another day with nothing to do but lick puppies and tear off the newest bandage.

Bliss. I did not miss the rock-tossers or rain at all.

I will not talk about the next day's visit to the vet. In the name of love, I prefer to forget some of the more nightmarish things Hey and Shorty have had done to me, usually at *that* place.

I'd rather think about how nice it was to see Shorty again for the first time after we'd met and shared that meaty food. His name didn't fit him anymore—he was even taller than Hey. The things he used to make an extra set of legs, crutches, were frightening, and I protected the pups from them with some really vicious growls.

“Bad dog,” Hey said.

“No, it's okay.” By then Shorty had put aside the stupid big stick crutches. He sank down to my level, so it was okay.

“I am delighted to see you, Shorty,” I told him by allowing him to touch my head. Oh, yeah, he was as good as Hey at finding the right spot with those hands of his. I felt so grateful I wagged my tail even though it still hurt.

He pulled me close, and I let him.

“She needs a bath,” Hey said. “They'll give her one.”

“She's lovely.” Shorty pushed his face against my neck. He breathed me in as I breathed him too, and at that moment I knew he was as much mine as Hey ever could be. I had two wonderful animals.

“I love you,” I told him. My kind are prone to falling in love hard and fast. “I love you and I am going to climb on your lap now. Yes, pat me there.”

Shorty only grunted a little as I climbed on. “You are so sweet. I knew you would be once you stopped being afraid,” he said.

“Have you seen my babies yet? I'll let you look at them but please don't touch them—Hey! No! What are you doing?”

He was loading them into a basket. I remembered then. The vet's office. I whined. “Dog, oh dog. Do we have to?”

We did.

And as I said, I'd rather not talk about it. The bath, the sharp little bites in my backend that left my side stinking of something toxic, the nail clipping, the messing about with my teats and ass—a long list of indignities took place that day. And they did things to my pups that left them tired and trembling and calling for me.

“It is a good thing I love you,” I called from the back of the car as Hey and Shorty drove me away. “That was unforgivable.”

I nuzzled a couple of pups until they squeaked into the place I wanted them.

“They didn't need to muzzle her,” Shorty said, indignant—but not nearly as indignant as I felt at the memory. He was bunched in the front seat of the car with his big sticks and looked pretty uncomfortable. Good. Served them right.

With a big sigh, Hey glanced back at me. “I know. We'll find another vet.”

“Or, better yet, we call that over and done with,” I growled.

They ignored me as they usually do.

“I'm really grateful for all you've done, and I especially appreciate the ride, Javier, but I can take care of her now.” Shorty twisted in his seat and looked over at Hey, not me, even though he was talking about me.

I nudged the biggest pup and got him to yawn. “Cute, right?” I said proudly. “Nothing cuter than baby tongues except maybe those baby butts.”

But Shorty was still gazing at Hey, not me, with a big smile. “I'm used to her,” Hey protested. “And she's way better about not doing her business in the apartment.”

“But didn't you say you're not allowed to have pets?” Shorty exuded hope and the thicker sugary smell of yearning.

Hey made a fun gasping noise but it wasn't playful. “Yeah. It's true. All right, you should get custody. Aw, damn, I really will miss... her. And, hey, wait a sec. You can't take care of her yet.”

“I can hire someone to help until I get better.”

We stopped for some reason. The car starts and stops a lot and it’s annoying. Hey looked over at Shorty. He spoke quietly, like he did to me late at night. “No. Don’t hire someone. Let me. I’m invested in this, Rob. I care about her. I like her. A lot.”

I gave a gusty sigh of disgust. “You’re looking at him, not me. Don’t lie to us. We know you like him a lot. Only an idiot wouldn’t smell what you two do near each other.”

I laid my head down and thought of the wild wondrous time when the hunt for pleasure and release drove me and Growler together. Those two up front smelled like need in the worst way. Their mingling aromas had almost even drenched the fear, hatred, poisons and pain in that horror of a place known as the vet’s.

I wondered how they could stand to be so close without at least a nip or a lick to relieve the ache I could smell between them.

We stopped at a new territory. A bigger house with bigger windows. It smelled too clean, like someone had scrubbed signs of life from it. I liked Hey’s place better—a nose could stay busy there for hours.

My claws had been clipped, yet they still clicked on the slippery wood floors.

“This place is huge,” I said. “Too open and exposed for the pups.”

I had to walk from room to room because Hey carried my babies as Shorty gave him a tour.

“Put the pups down,” I said, but they ignored me.

“I’m sleeping down here in my office,” Shorty said. “Just for a day or two until I get used to the stairs or I stop using the crutches.”

Even though the day had turned to night, there was too much light and air in Shorty’s house. I’d gotten used to nice, private, closed places. I went up some stairs looking for a good place for me and the babies. Hey followed after me.

“It’s okay, let her explore,” Shorty called from down below.

I stopped to take a dig at the carpet. It felt excellent under my paws. Mm.

“No, Flora!” Hey scolded.

I stopped because his voice had that effect on me. But I couldn’t help a little sneer. “I don’t smell *you* here. This is Shorty’s territory. Why do you get to tell me what to do?”

“We’re going back downstairs,” Hey muttered. He shifted the box of puppies in his arms and I went into high alert.

“We need to get settled.” I nudged his thigh.

He took the hint and started down the stairs, talking under his breath. “This house is huge, huh? Rob drives a goddamn Toyota so how was I supposed to know he had so much money?”

“Your place smells way better.” I sniffed the carpet just to show him. “Ew. Practically no aroma at all. In your territory, I can smell cooked food all the way from the door to my den, Hey. That’s delicious. Much better.”

The people decided to settle me in the kitchen. Sure it smelled like food, but it also smelled like nose-deadening cleaner, which I hated then and still dislike now. And the whole space way too big and exposed. I didn’t get a vote though—they put up fences at the doors. *Baby-gates* they called them, but my babies didn’t need anything so tall.

“Do you like your new bed?” Shorty asked me. “I bought it at Petco. I had a field day there.” He leaned over and thumped the side of a plastic container that had some kind of mattress in it.

“This smells like someone’s misery and chemicals. Where are the towels and blankets for me to scratch into place? All right, I’ll stop complaining. I am not a whiner. This is okay, but as soon as these guys eat some dinner, I want to go back to Hey’s place.” I licked at a puppy, pushing it into place. “Puppies need a bit of clutter, Shorty.”

The lights went out. The two men left the kitchen.

“Where are you going? In Hey’s place, he keeps me company,” I whined after them.

“You’ll be fine, Flora,” Hey called.

I sighed. “I don’t count this as the very best day ever, guys. The vet and now this.”

“Mom? Mom? Is that you?”

I forgot what I was upset about when I realized that one of my pups had swum out of the nest. I wished I could show Hey or Shorty how smart the puppy was, but later.

In the morning, Shorty showed up to let me out. He had a sizeable territory in the open air, but someone had put up big wooden barriers so you couldn’t go past its back. “You should knock down this big fence,” I advised as I sniffed and marked my signature and greetings along the edge. “All this wood is in the way. I can hear what’s happening on the other side, but there’s no way for me to get over there and protect you.” I gave a few experimental shouts to see if anyone answered.

“Hush, girl,” Shorty said. “Some of the neighbors are sleeping.”

We went back into the kitchen where we had breakfast together. I watched the world outside the glass door and wished I could take on the squirrels that came right up on the deck.

After breakfast, Shorty drank coffee and tapped on his computer in the kitchen. He kept his bandaged leg up on a chair. The pups woke and called me, but they didn’t have that frantic sound that made me have to go to them.

“Yo, Shorty, where’s Hey? How come he didn’t take me back to our territory?”

He didn’t answer of course.

I could smell Hey’s scent on his skin, but not all over. I’d expected the sweet, thicker layer of scent two-leggers wore when they mated.

Shorty rubbed my back with his uninjured foot and we relaxed together. I liked the sound of his tap-tapping and the occasional whiff of his interest in something on the computer. Life in this territory was calm and good. No sounds of cars came into the big house, only the jeering calls of birds outside. Shorty let me go out and take care of that problem. It felt great to chase squirrels for the sheer fun of it.

After that, Shorty and I wandered around the house for a while before I went back into my nest to give the more annoyingly energetic pups a snack.

The bell rang, announcing an intruder.

“Hush,” Shorty told me as he got up and made his way to the front door. He closed me into the kitchen with the baby-gate, and not a door, so I could still see down the long hall to the door where a blurry figure stood outside our house.

“I’ll get ’em, Shorty,” I bayed. “Let me out of this place and I’ll rip you to shreds, intruder! Get in here so I can crunch down on your bones and rip out your entrails and—Oh, hello, hello, Hey! Nice to see you! Glad you’re back.” I switched from aggressive to delighted fast and easy. I am one adaptable animal. “You smell like unhappy people though,” I told him. “I can smell it from here. You ought to stop driving around in that car with Fried. No one you talk to is glad to see you.”

He came down the hall and almost at once I caught the other scent on him, resentment and unhappiness, but this had his signature; it didn’t come from a stranger he’d met that day.

“Nice to see you, Flora.” He vibrated with irritation. When he didn’t look at Shorty, I could tell the trail of his emotion was directed at Shorty, not me, but that didn’t stop me from apologizing to him with a quick lick and a flip, flip of the end of my tail. I can’t help trying to make things better with the guys.

“Do you want some coffee?” Shorty asked.

“No. Thanks. I don’t think I’m sticking around.” He scratched his face and I smelled his disappointment layered on that anger.

Shorty didn’t get it—I swear two-leggers are cute but sometimes dumb. “How are you?” he asked.

“Fine.” Hey straightened and tucked his fingers in the big loop around his waist, his face bunched into a scowl. He didn’t even glance at my pups.

Shorty finally smelled the anger as well. And he seemed to get that Hey was mad at him. “Are you going to tell me what is wrong?”

I joined the conversation. “Did Shorty take a dump on your floor, Hey?”

Shorty leaned over and stroked my head, but I could feel his distraction and smell his concern. I leaned on his legs to tell him, “Here’s the deal. Stop pooping inside. It makes Hey crazy for some reason.”

Shorty said, “We’re making Flora nervous. Come on into my study and talk to me.”

“There’s not much to say. Does the name Officer Lamont mean anything to you?”

“Oh. Well.” Shorty’s smell changed from embarrassed to angry with one breath. “Javier, for God’s sake, I know what’s wrong and I don’t think it’s worth this fuss.”

“What’s wrong is that you didn’t tell me. I found out today when one of the guys talked about what a hardass that lawyer Talbot was in the courtroom. Some cop I am. It took me a while to figure out he meant *you*. You took Lamont apart on the stand and let a goddamn gang-banging fool back out on the street. Tell me this: If the guy who shot you and Flora had enough money, would you take him on?”

“Take him on? Let me,” I said. “I’ll show him what he can do with that biting thing of his.” One of the pups began *keyeeking* when it stumbled from the nest. I went over to haul it back in.

Of course the minute I turned my back, the two-leggers took off, climbing over that cursed baby-gate and leaving me alone in the kitchen.

I listened to them talk in the distant room.

“I told you I was an attorney.”

“You didn’t say anything about being a defense lawyer.”

“Yeah, well, I got tired of divorce cases. I did mention that. So here’s a bad news alert, Javier—lately most of my practice is defense. Thank God that’s not against the law or you’d arrest me, huh?”

They had a long discussion about who liked and respected the Law more. I thought maybe they should stop worrying so much about what Law liked and maybe give each other a lick or two.

“Do you want me to apologize for my job?” Shorty growled.

“No of course not.” Silence for a time, and then Hey talked, but with less of a growl in his voice. “I just wish you had told me. It’s like a lie, not telling me. I had figured we were friends and I wanted that...” Hey breathed in hard through his mouth. “And more.”

“More?” Shorty was so quiet I had trouble hearing.

“Keep it down,” I told the biggest pup, who, as usual, was whining about wanting more food.

After a long silence, the scent suddenly changed from disappointment to the perfume of anticipation.

“See, I really do like you and I thought maybe you—” Hey’s words stopped.

That’s the drawback to using only your voice for talking. Something happens to your mouth, like someone else licking it, and you can’t say anything. Those guys needed tails or better ears or something. Their faces and interesting eyebrows did a bit of talking, but not nearly enough.

I perked up when their odors did more talking and anticipation turned into something stronger—a nice rich smell that made me want to join them.

“You’re right,” Shorty said. “I didn’t want to tell you right away because you’re a cop. I figured you’d turn tail and run.”

Hey heaved a sigh that even a room away I could hear had a ring of *let's play* in it. Some of their sighs are easy to understand. "You really think I'm that shallow? Come on. I know you guys are the scum of the earth, but I'll get over it. Now the fact that you have a buttload of money is a real problem because—"

"Don't be a jerk." The play note was in Shorty's voice too. "I know you want me as much as I want you."

"I might, but, Rob? Part of why I was upset is that I thought you don't trust me to be more than a roll in the hay. I don't do quick fucks."

"Mm. Me neither."

"The mutual attraction—"

"The *huge* mutual attraction—"

"It isn't the only thing that matters. I mean what do we have in common?"

"A rescue complex when it comes to dogs? Custody of Flora and six puppies we need to find homes for? I am sorry about the lie of omission. Now, give it a rest, officer. Leave the arguing to an expert. Here's my strongest argument..." The aroma went straight to hunger now. They both groaned and I could smell Shorty's statement of *mine, give me you now*.

The main trouble with my guys is, I know they're not very good at speaking the fragrance language, so I figured I'd try a little verbal interpretation.

I gave them some encouragement. "Attaboy, Shorty. Tell him what you really think. Good boy, Hey. Don't forget to take that dumb belt off."

Hey said, "We're worrying Flora—she's whining."

"She'll be fine," Shorty murmured. I heard the soft sound that sometimes meant they were calling me.

I got out of the basket and some of the pups dragged along. The little buggers were getting strong.

More of the kissing sounds came from another room and I figured out Hey and Shorty weren't calling me.

I turned away from the door to amuse myself by watching the loose pups swim around on the floor. The kids got really upset, so I picked them up and dumped them back in the nest and told them to settle down. "Greedy little pups," I told them affectionately. "You just ate."

I left them and got a drink, dug around under the stove and fridge looking for snacks. There was nothing. Shorty really needed to get some lessons in housekeeping from Hey. I went back to the nest for a nap.

I had to wait quite a while before Shorty on his crutches and Hey on his own two bare feet shuffled into the kitchen. Shorty opened the back door for me. I ran out into the brisk night air. I could smell snow coming. The last time I'd seen snow, I'd been locked away, alone and cold, shivering on a stone pad listening to the endless yelping cries and conversations of the dogs around me. That was before I ended up in the territory with Growler. And now...

"This is a vast improvement," I told the night sky.

The guys eventually came outside and stood in the brown winter grass with me.

"Just in time!" I told them.

I have a ritual of thanks that I like to go through at least once a day. Now I really had something to focus on: my very own lovely assless two-legger boys. I knocked my head against Shorty's leg, ignoring his "Ow!" because I had to tell him, "Thank you for the meat when I was so hungry. Thank you for the nice nest, even if it isn't as nice as Hey's place. Thank you, thank you."

To Hey, I said, "You are a good boy, Hey; I am so very glad to know you. You're nice to my pups and I love the way you scratch my neck."

I wove-walked around the two of them with my chanting ritual.

They got into it too. "Who's such a good, good girl? You're such a pretty girl, such a good momma."

"You bet I am. Did you see how some of the pups' eyes are opening?"

“Your puppies are so cute, we’re thinking of keeping one,” Hey informed me. He must be learning my language since he stayed on topic.

“Whatever you want, but don’t keep the big one. He’s a real pain. Always wanting to nurse, always climbing around when everyone else sleeps.”

Guess who they kept? People are idiots sometimes. Sweet, endearing, but sometimes not big in the brain department.

I admit that once I got him off the teat, Moose stopped being such a nuisance. I’m in charge and he knows it.

He’s not in the picture I’m showing you because he’s asleep on the seat behind us, passed out after running for miles. That’s our pack after a long walk in some woods where I got to tree more squirrels than I’d ever seen before in my life—and our territory has plenty of ’em.

Yes you’re right, that’s us relaxing in a car. Me in the car, happy. Really—see how blissed and peaceful I am on Shorty’s neck? Funny, huh?

Turns out I can handle rides, as long as Hey or Shorty are with me and we’re not on our way to the V-E-T. They’ve taken to spelling it, as if I don’t understand everything they say. Silly but cute, those animals.

When I have both of them with me in the car, I can relax completely. I love it when the whole pack rides in the car together to the woods or the salty water. Adventure! Fun! Squirrels! Barking! Water! I love it all, and tell the two-leggers every day.

The story isn’t entirely happy; we never made it back to Hey’s. My two-leggers must have gone there—they came back smelling of the place. But I guess they thought they shouldn’t haul the pups with them. No pups meant no Hey Girl visiting her old territory so she could say goodbye to the first spot she ever felt completely happy.

True, some of the objects from Hey's territory moved into the new one. When I want to remember those days, I climb on the sofa they brought back from Hey's house.

Don't get me wrong. I love Shorty's territory, especially now that all three of us have claimed it—or rather I should say four, because Moose does count, unless he tries for one of my chewies or wants to play too long. “A little play is fun,” I snap at him. “But enough is enough, pup.”

Fine, yes, I admit I like having another dog around, even if Shorty and Hey would have been enough.

More than once we've driven in our car past the place where I found Hey and Shorty. I've caught that acrid scent of desolation that hangs like a fog there. But we don't stop, thank you, dog. My insides go empty, an echo of past misery and hunger, when my nose catches its signature.

I remember the rock-tossers, and I whine my sorrow and anger that seemed twined with every smell from those old days. Of course when I do that, Moose wants to know what the matter is.

“What's the matter, Hey Girl? What's going on?” Once he got off the teat, he stopped calling me Mom. I still get to call him pup.

I told him all about the lack of pack that means no smells of contentment. I tried to tell him about the hunger created by the cold and the loneliness, but he didn't understand. Because I want to think of good things as well, I told Moose about Growler and the times we had together. Moose said the nights running in the asphalt and weeds might be pleasant, but he'd rather live with our pack. “I'd miss Hey and Shorty too much,” he told me.

I agreed with him.

THE END

Author Bio

Summer Devon is the alter ego of Kate Rothwell, who invented Summer's name in the middle of a nasty blizzard. At the time, she was talking to her sister who longed to visit some friends in Devon, England—so the name Summer Devon is all about desire. Between them, Kate and Summer have written books that have won a number of awards. She writes m/m stories on her own, as well as m/m historicals with Bonnie Dee.

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BACK FROM THE PAST

By Mia Downing

Photo Description

He stands naked in hip-high water in a lake, gazing down as his hand dips beneath the surface in a ripple of muscle and grace. Damp, dark hair drips from his head, his dark-eyed gaze one of contemplation. He's perfect in form, chiseled through the waist, his abs rippled, his chest broad and firm. However, as beautiful as he is there's a vulnerable air about him that begs one to question how he got there.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

This summer has been so incredibly hot. Sure, we used to get the occasional day or two of scorching heat, but lately it's been unrelenting. For weeks now, I've been heading to the river every evening to find some relief, and yesterday I saw him. I know I should've walked away. I know I shouldn't have watched... but I couldn't help myself. He's still as beautiful as he ever was. When did he get back?

Why?

I'm heading back to the river again today. Maybe I'll have the courage to ask him why he left me without warning... why he broke my heart.

Sincerely,

Bookbee

Story Info

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Dedication

I'd like to thank Christi, Kim, Lynne, Emma and Lee for cheering and the beta reading. And thanks to Diana Carlile for the line edits and amazing cover. Thanks to the people behind the scenes in this amazing event for making it happen so seamlessly

BACK FROM THE PAST

By Mia Downing

Gregg Madison wiped the sweat from his brow as he stepped over a pile of horse manure. He yanked off his shirt as he turned off the main path, ducking under a low-hanging branch. The shortcut to the lake had become overgrown over the years, now that he and his brothers were older and too busy to make the trek to sneak in a quick swim. His summers as a teen had been spent diving off the little dock or jumping from the tire swing into the cool water, the only respite in the midst of a long Texas heat wave, much like the one they were in now. Each night over the past few weeks he had vowed to bring a pair of shears for the low-hanging branches, and yet he never did.

In the distance, firecrackers crackled, the product of neighbors celebrating the Fourth of July a day early. A huge party occurred every year in honor of Everett Addams, the town's mayor, to celebrate his birthday. With chores done, most of Gregg's family and the ranch hands were off celebrating. He had elected to stay behind, partly to keep an eye on a mare ready to foal, and partly to lick his wounds. Ten years hadn't changed how he felt about the date, not one bit.

He scrambled down the slight hill, sending a spray of rock and dirt from under his booted feet. God, he could almost taste the water, and he licked his parched lips as he tossed his sweaty shirt on a branch, kicked off his boots, and removed his socks. And then he heard a splash.

With a swipe of his hand, Gregg parted the branches. A dark head surfaced a dive's length away from the dock. The guy started swimming, his strong arms slicing the water in perfect, freestyle strokes, propelling that familiar body up the lake toward Gregg. There was no mistaking the width of those shoulders, or the strength of those large hands as they cut through the water.

His heart pounding in his chest, Gregg gulped in a huge breath of air. He fought the onslaught of memories that had fueled his fantasies for a decade.

Heated flesh singed his, the hard cock against his leg as insistent as the tongue probing his mouth... Gregg shook his head to clear it. Everett had hired a new hand to help out, and since the lake was nestled between the two properties, it had to be the new guy.

The swimmer reached shore and rose from the water like a Greek god cast in tanned skin. He shook his head, the spraying water droplets sparkling in the light of the setting sun. No way could Gregg deny who stood not fifty feet from him in waist-high water.

Jase Addams had finally come home.

Gregg's gut tightened and he leaned a palm against a tree to steady himself, unable to tear his gaze away. Jase turned, giving Gregg a profile view. God, ten years and the attraction hadn't faded, his dick now throbbing in his jeans. Every muscle had been honed to military perfection during Jase's years in the service, his body now that of a man instead of an eighteen-year-old boy. The tattoos on his firm, right bicep were new additions and unclear at this distance. Jase always talked about getting a tattoo despite his father's beliefs. Good for him for doing it. Jase hadn't stood up for much against his dad. It was nice to see he'd finally followed his desires in one avenue at least.

Jase glanced down into the water, his right hand dipping under in a motion way too suggestive, one that brought images of how that silky hardness had once pressed into Gregg's hand. Gregg half-moaned and then smothered the rest of the noise with his fist against his lips. He grabbed his shirt off the branch with the other hand and turned, ignoring the swirling mix of angst and desire in the pit of his stomach. No way in hell could he sit there and watch Jase stroke himself, not when that's how it all started.

"I know you're there," Jase called. "Might as well come out."

Gregg froze, reluctant to step out through the branches to reveal himself and his hard-on. What the hell did one say to a former lover, especially one who had up and joined the Marines without any warning? Damn him—without even saying good-bye? The hurt he'd kept at bay for so long slammed into

him, catching his breath in his throat. Fuck Jase. Gregg swallowed and turned, ready to creep away. Jase didn't know it was him, anyway.

“Gregg? Come on, man. I swam over here to talk to you. Come out.”

So much for anonymity. Gregg shoved aside the branches and stepped out onto the graveled shore, the pebbles digging into his bare feet. He let his shirt dangle in his hand so it covered the slight bulge he had going in his jeans. The remembered pain had taken care of most of it. “How did you know it was me?”

Jase shrugged. “Tommy said you were the only one using the lake regularly, and I've been spying on you for the past five days, trying to get up the courage to say something.”

“Oh. I didn't see you.” Gregg's heart hammered a little, since he'd swam nude and jacked off at least twice during that time frame. Had Jase witnessed that?

That smile that used to come so easily lifted the corners of Jase's mouth. His gaze flitted to Gregg's jeans and then the smile broadened. “I'm a better spy than you are. Uncle Sam taught me well.”

Gregg rubbed the back of his neck, willing away the creep of heat there. “Yeah, well, the horses don't like to be spied on.”

“Ranch life seems to agree with you.” The glance Jase cast over Gregg's body sent a flush of warmth wherever those brown eyes touched. From his bare feet, up his jean-encased thighs, over the shirt he clutched in his hand to his abs and chest, lingering on his lips...

Gregg shivered, unsure what the intensity of that gaze meant until the brown depths finally met his and held. For a split second, Gregg saw everything he'd ever wanted to see—hunger, longing, and a touch of sadness. Then Jase ducked his head and Gregg wondered if he'd imagined the whole thing.

“It doesn't matter if it did or not. You know I couldn't leave.” The anger he'd held at bay for so long bubbled up. That had been the argument so many

years ago. Jase had wanted out of their narrow-minded town, out of Texas, away from his father. But Gregg's family had needed him then, and Jase had left despite the agreement they'd reached.

Jase stared intently at the swirls he made with his fingertips on the surface of the lake. "Yeah."

Gregg cleared his throat. "You back for your dad's birthday?"

Jase shrugged. "Sorta."

Jase's father's birthday was on the fifth. Since the Addams owned half of the little town, they always held a big picnic in his honor on that day. Jase had always said it was just an excuse for the town to extend the holiday since the crusty bastard didn't give two shits about anything but making money.

"How long are you home for?"

Jase shrugged again and stared out at the water. "I'm not sure."

"A day, an evening, a week? Until he kicks you out?"

That got a smile. "He's already threatened."

"Probably the minute you slammed the screen door, right?"

Jase nodded, then finally met Gregg's gaze. "No one knows, but he has cancer. Liver."

Gregg sucked in a breath, his skin going cold despite the heat. It was rumored Everett had been weaned on whiskey and had cut his teeth on a Longhorn skull. He'd earned every penny of his fortune the hard way, which Gregg admired. But as far he knew, the man had nothing nice to say about anyone except Jesus, his mother, and his deceased wife, in that order. His sons had suffered under his cold and harsh rule because coddling didn't grow boys into men. Gregg didn't think anyone even breathed without Everett's permission. So the idea that he was just as human as everyone else scared him a little.

Gregg found his voice to ask, "Is he dying?"

Jase nodded again. “Unless he can get a transplant, and then the prognosis would be good. I’m a match for a live donor. I’d give him some of my liver, and it would regenerate to what he needed it to be, cancer free. It’s the best solution, and he won’t take it.”

“Why not?”

“He just won’t. You know my dad. Once he makes up his mind, there’s no discussing or convincing.”

“Is Tommy a match, too?” Tommy was two years younger and worked at the bank in town.

“No, his blood type is wrong. But I’m the same. It’s just a matter of setting up the appointments for the rest.” Jase looked lost, more eighteen than twenty-eight at that moment. “I came home to convince him.”

“The Marines let you leave?”

Jase frowned. “I’m not in the service anymore.”

That made no sense. Wouldn’t Jase have come home when his enlistment was up? Deep down, that’s what Gregg had waited for all of these years. For Jase to be done proving he was a man, to realize he was already man enough for Gregg. “Then—”

Jase cocked his head. “You want to swim? You came down here to use the lake.”

Would swimming calm the growing pit in his stomach? Damn, he wanted answers on so many levels. But Jase made it sound like he wasn’t going to disappear any time soon. Gregg could afford to be patient, and that trait had gained him many good things in life. “Sure.”

Then Gregg realized he’d need to strip. His dick had gone soft, so that wasn’t an issue, but the thought of Jase’s eyes on him again... Gregg tossed his shirt over a fallen tree and peeked at Jase as he stood in the hip-high water. Years of honest ranch work had honed Gregg’s body, but he wasn’t hard and ripped like Jase. He had part of a four-pack of abs where Jase had a full six.

Thankfully, Jase took that moment to swim a few strokes away from shore, giving Gregg time to shuck his dusty jeans and sweaty boxers. The humid, hot air was still cooler on his bare skin than clothes. He dove shallow from the shore, knowing the water got deep quick over on this side, the spring-fed water cool and inviting.

Gregg surfaced and wiped the water from his eyes. “Damn, that’s good.”

“Yeah.” Jase treaded water a few feet away. “So your family... I asked Tommy and he said they’re good?”

“Yep.” It felt good for Jase to check up on them from afar, at least.

“Peanut still riding?”

His sister’s nickname always made Gregg smile. “She’s a madwoman. Did the barrels at the last rodeo.” Gwen had been born with cerebral palsy. She walked with a cane but her horse, Dragon, had become her legs. God help the man or woman in her path when she was on a tear.

It hadn’t always been that way, though. She’d fallen in love with horses at five, and Gregg had made it his duty to find out everything possible about making riding safe for her. He volunteered with a local program that specialized in riding for the disabled and learned the ropes. He chose and trained her horses for her. Eventually, he went to school to earn his certification to teach therapeutic riding and to learn how to run a program competently. Now their family’s dude ranch offered what no one else did—a ranch getaway for the entire family, despite any disabilities.

“How old is she now? Sixteen?”

“Eighteen.” Jase had helped choose Gwen’s first horse and train it, and she had worshipped the ground Jase walked on. She’d been eight and bawled like a calf stuck in underbrush when Gregg told her that Jase had left.

The memory of his sister’s pain made him brave enough to say, “You broke her heart when you left, you know.”

Jase heaved a huge sigh. “I’m sorry. You think a dozen roses and dinner at Troy’s Steak House will fix it?”

“No.” A part of Gregg wanted to know where was his steak dinner—screw the roses—but he shifted that aside. “But you could sure try.”

“I’ll stop by the ranch tomorrow.”

“She’d appreciate that.” So would he.

Gregg ducked down and swam a bit, and Jase fell into an easy pace beside him. They swam the length and back, finally stopping at the dock and small boathouse where the water was waist-high. The lake was shared by the Addams and Madison properties, the dock and boathouse sitting smack dab along the property line. The lake was probably the only thing Everett ever openly enjoyed and could often be found fishing at dawn in his silver rowboat.

If that dock could talk... How many couples had stared up at the Milky Way at midnight, shared their first kiss, loved for the first time? Gregg eyed the worn boards and the neat pile of Jase’s clothes atop his sneakers. He’d often come and sit on the dock and just think. And remember.

But at times, the memories were too much. Jase’s touch, that first time they kissed, his hard flesh against his... Gregg cleared his throat, embarrassed. “You were here, watching me this week?”

“Yeah.”

“Why didn’t you come out, say hi or something?”

“Uh.” Jase rubbed the back of his neck, his muscles flexing and rippling in a way Gregg liked too much. “You were *busy* the first time. I figured that wasn’t the best time to make an appearance.”

The back of Gregg’s neck went hot and prickly. He wanted to make excuses—it’d been late, no one would have seen, he was damned lonely—but knew it wouldn’t matter. “Please tell me you didn’t watch.” *And didn’t hear me call your name as I came...*

Jase waded closer, inches away so Gregg could smell the familiar notes of spice and citrus. Jase's jaw worked for a moment, his lips pursed as if it pained him to think whatever he contemplated. He finally snapped his gaze to Gregg's. "I missed you, too."

Gregg's breath caught in his throat as he took a step back. "Not enough to come home."

"That had nothing to do with you."

"I find that hard to believe. We cross over the line from friends and—*boom*—you up and leave? Without a word? That wasn't what we had planned. I figured you'd serve your four years and return smarter, not return ten years later because your old man—of all people—needed you."

Jase raked a hand through his damp hair and heaved out a huge breath. "Does it matter how I got here, as long as I'm back?"

"Hell yes, it matters. Damn you. I thought..." Gregg bit his lip just in time to catch his slip. They'd never said anything about love, even then. They'd always been close friends. Both knew early on they were gay, so it made sense in their tiny town that they'd turn to each other. But Gregg had loved Jase from day one. He just didn't know it until it was too late. "You should have said good-bye."

Jase hung his head. "I'm sorry."

"Why did you leave?"

"Like I said, it doesn't matter. Let's just move on, okay?"

"Fuck you, Jase." Gregg dove under and swam toward the other end of the lake, his hands pounding the water with every stroke. His lungs burned and he welcomed it, embraced the sting of his muscles as he stretched his arms out and kicked his feet. Anything to kill the pain.

Gregg turned his head for a breath just as Jase grabbed his ankle and pulled him under. He struggled in a flurry of bubbles, his free foot connecting with a hard thigh. Jase released his leg, his fingers digging into Gregg's bicep. His

other arm wrapped around Gregg's chest, hauling him back and at the same time, lifting his head out of the water.

A rush of hot, humid air filled Gregg's lungs and ignited a bellow of pain and anger. Jase had always been bigger, stronger, taller, the football star to his smaller, more wiry, cowboy frame. The hard muscles of Jase's chest pressed into his back and Gregg lunged forward, trying to break the grip. Unsuccessful, he tried turning, shoving Jase's shoulders, pushing his legs for leverage against Jase's thighs. Gregg's right foot slipped, and where there should have been shin he met with a swirl of water in empty space.

Gregg froze. Jase also went still, the water just deep enough for him to stand on tiptoe and not go under. Gregg lifted both feet this time, found purchase on Jase's thighs and trailed his toes down the corded lengths. His left foot hit knee. His right slipped off right below the knee. Oh, shit, nothing, not even when he kicked out, hoping Jase's leg was just bent, out of the way... nothing. His gaze snapped to Jase's, searching the depths of those brown eyes for an answer.

"It's been nine years," Jase said softly, his arms still wrapped around Gregg. "It's okay."

"What the hell?" Gregg croaked out. "Your leg."

"Why don't we get out and sit on the dock." Jase tugged Gregg's arm and he sank into the water, doing a sidestroke with Gregg in tow.

"But your leg." Oh God, what an asshole to make Jase do all the work. Gregg shrugged out of his grip and swam on his own, his mind spinning. Jase was so active, so full of life. Jase used to run, ride, play football... "You outswam me!"

"I've always been faster than you. Some things are never going to change." Jase laughed as they reached the end of the dock. "It doesn't define who I am. Hell, you teach enough people with disabilities to know that. I never expected this reaction from you."

In a ripple of muscle and tanned skin, Jase pushed his palms on the dock and launched himself up, turning slightly in the air to settle his bare ass on the worn wood. He winced and leaned to the side, arranging things.

Gregg vaulted up to the right of Jase, his movements nowhere as fluid, water dripping from his body. As badly as Gregg wanted, he refused to look down, instead taking in the tattoos on Jase's bicep. "Semper Fidelis" encircled his arm in flowing script. Just above, a fire-breathing dragon flew in a blaze of red scales, ridden by a...

"Peanut?"

"What?" Jase glanced over his shoulder, checking the beach, then turned back with a furrowed brow.

Gregg pointed to Jase's arm. "Why is the peanut dude riding a dragon?"

He always loved that soft smile, the one that hinted of all the warmth Jase hid. "It's not a peanut *dude*. Think about it."

Gregg studied the intricate design again, the pink bow on the peanut's head. Peanut. His sister, and her horse, Dragon. That realization stirred every ounce of bittersweet agony. Jase had spent just as much time helping to train Dragon and assisting Gwen as Gregg had. He'd spent more time at the Circle M than at home. Gregg swallowed the lump in his throat, longing to trace the outline of those broad wings with his finger. "You cared."

Jase shook his head. "I still care. Your sister was a huge role model for me during my recovery. She had overcome so much, achieved so much, and never complained. I had loved helping you train Dragon for her. That summer was magical for me."

"Not magical enough for you to return." That sounded every bit as spoiled and petty as Gregg felt.

Jase sighed and stared out at the water, looking much older than twenty-eight. For the first time, Gregg noticed the dark shadows under his eyes and a deeper furrow in his brow. "I couldn't."

The finality in that statement gripped at Gregg's heart and squeezed. "But—"

Jase shook his head. "It's the past. It's over. It changes nothing."

"It changes everything. A part of me has been waiting for you to come home to tell me to move on, to even tell me to fuck off. So... get on with it."

"Shit."

Gregg drew in a ragged breath, wishing he could take back those words, but at the same time, needing to hear them. "Do it."

Jase's jaw clenched and he ground his teeth, just like he used to when stressed. His lips straightened into a firm line, his narrowed, brown eyes taking on a dangerous sparkle. "I can't," he said hoarsely.

Jase leaned in and brushed his lips against Gregg's, his mouth softening despite the tension radiating off his body. A shudder swept through Gregg, and he closed his eyes, inhaling Jase's citrusy scent. He savored that sweet, gentle caress of Jase's slanted mouth, the light pressure enough to send shocks along Gregg's upper lip. Damn it felt good, way too much like the fantasies that had fed his dreams for a decade. Only real.

Just when Gregg thought Jase would pull away, he leaned closer, his hand cupping Gregg's jaw. Those lips grew more insistent, Jase's tongue tentatively tasting the seam of Gregg's mouth. Desire heated his skin like it had baked for a day under the sun. His balls tightened and his cock stirred again.

Something buzzed from across the lake, the noise loud and too familiar.

Gregg ended the kiss and rested his forehead on Jase's, trying to catch his breath. "That's my alarm."

"You set an alarm?"

"I have a mare who looks ready to foal, and she's had issues in the past. I want to check her every hour. She usually waits to foal until the middle of the night..." He pulled away, avoiding Jase's gaze. Damn, he didn't want to leave.

The alarm stopped but he knew it would start in again, very soon, reminding him of life and his duties.

Jase nodded slowly, his caressing thumb sending shocks along Gregg's jaw. "But you're worried."

"Yeah." That word hurt to say when Jase was finally touching him. "You know mares. They choose when it's most inconvenient."

Jase's hand slid down his jaw, his fingertips lingering for a heartbeat on Gregg's chin then falling away. "Go."

The damned phone buzzed again, and Gregg sighed with regret. "Will you stop by tomorrow? To see Peanut?"

"Of course." Jase's Adam's apple bobbed in the shadows of dusk. "Just because I didn't contact you, doesn't mean I didn't miss you."

It was so hard to believe. Growing up, he'd spent every day with Jase since kindergarten, when Everett bought the ranch next door after the boys' mom had died. They'd been almost inseparable until Jase left. Whatever kept him away... It had to be bad, right?

Gregg ignored the tightening in his gut as he cleared his throat. "See ya tomorrow."

Gregg slipped into the water with a small splash and dove shallow. He surfaced and rolled in the cool water, taking in Jase's form on the dock. He looked like the Jase he knew and loved, only missing part of a leg. In fact, the stump wasn't any more interesting than the ones he'd seen over the years with his work at the ranch.

"Hey," Jase called with a lift of his chin. "You fixin' to sleep in the barn?"

"Yeah."

"What if I came by later and kept you company?"

Gregg fought the surge of desire stirring the heat. How many nights had they spent in the hayloft? Talking, dreaming, sleeping, sharing a stolen kiss

out of sight of prying eyes... Damn, he had missed Jase. Even if he just came and they talked... that would be enough. "Just like old times."

"Yeah. I'll bring a sleeping bag."

"Later, then."

Jase walked back to his dad's place fighting the extra spring in his step, using the flashlight app on his phone to light the darkening path. Crickets chirped in the still, humid air, their trill quieting as he passed them, only to start up again once he was gone. He'd had a crush on Gregg since he was fourteen, but had run to the Marines at eighteen, afraid of the pain and turmoil those feelings would eventually cause. Now he was back, and damned if he didn't want to give in to the swirl of emotion that made him want to give a fist pump from sheer joy.

And damn if it still wasn't just as risky now as it was a decade ago.

As sternly as Jase had lectured himself to not get involved again, to leave the past in the past... it hadn't worked. He'd only gone down to the lake to swim, never dreaming he'd catch Gregg there that first night, swimming in that lazy sidestroke he liked to use. He'd hunkered down in a secluded location and relished the simple act of Gregg toweling off like a starved man.

The next night he returned at the same time, and then the next, telling himself it was just to swim, not to watch Gregg stare sadly out at the water only to lie back on the dock and stroke his hard cock to orgasm. Desire and jealousy had stirred in Jase then just as it did now. Who did Gregg think of as he arched his back and came?

Jase kicked a rock out of his path. That jealousy was what made him call out to Gregg earlier. As potentially dangerous as it was to be involved with Gregg, he couldn't resist the urge. Finally seeing Gregg and connecting with him... damn awesome. Kissing him... fucking awesome. He closed his eyes for a moment, hearing his dad in his mind, lecturing him about the foul

language. *Once a Marine, always a Marine* is what he'd say in retort. But hearing that admonishment from his father always stung.

No matter what Jase did, he never felt like a man in his father's eyes. Joining the Marines would have been up there, if not for the real reason why he went. It was just a sham, covering up Jase's failures. Then he had to go get his leg fucked—*er, sorry Dad*, screwed—up and amputated—more failure.

His career as an occupational therapist in Washington, D.C. slanted the path straight to hell a little, so it was inclined like a slide to Satan instead of a free-fall drop. Helping wounded soldiers acclimate to life was noble as far as his dad was concerned. Nothing truly took away the pain and humiliation of having a gay, crippled son.

Jase rounded the corner of the barn. Ahead, the main house loomed dark, with only the porch light shining. His dad would be in town at the celebratory picnic taking place in his honor, with Tommy as his escort. The picnic would be followed by fireworks and had been held a few days early because the fifth was a Monday and a Monday holiday in his honor just wouldn't do. Everett did not tolerate excessive celebrations, nor did he tolerate partying on the Sabbath.

The small motor home Jase had purchased when he sold his home in D.C. was parked between the barn and the main house. He'd bought it when he made the decision to come home to beg Dad to take his liver, figuring it would be easier on everyone if he had his own space. What he hadn't counted on was Everett pitching a fit about it, because family stayed with family, not in some rolling bed on wheels. That had been said with a sniff that implied sin and debauchery took place all across America in that bed. Jase snorted. He wished.

Actually, he didn't. Not at all.

Jase opened the door and climbed in, heading to the back to the tiny bedroom and the closet just outside. Clean jeans and a shirt were in order, and he shoved them in a duffle. His hand settled on the handle of a built-in drawer and his heart hammered. Should he? It had been so damned long. After a second's more hesitation, he opened the drawer and pulled out some condoms

and lube. Better to be safe than sorry later. But his fingers trembled around the bottle of lube, and all of that guilt and excitement mingled to gnaw at his stomach lining.

“Fuck it,” he muttered and chucked it in. He whipped out his phone and texted Tommy that he was going out and to call his cell if they were looking for him. His father would never admit to needing him. Tommy responded with a quick “K,” and that was that. No battle, no third-degree, probably because he hadn’t mentioned it to their dad.

That done, Jase went back outside to the beloved Jeep he’d hauled across the country behind the camper. Tonight was about seeing an old friend again, nothing more. If they got a healthy foal out of it, all the better.

Jase pulled the Jeep over to the far side of the barn, away from Gregg’s house. His headlights illuminated corrals of horses in the distance, their coats gleaming in the light, the fencing neat and orderly like it had always been. The Circle M was known far and wide for their excellent care for both the horses and humans who inhabited the ranch.

Jase had kept up with the Madisons through the internet, spying from afar as their unique business venture grew in popularity. He told himself he was just keeping tabs on things back home, but he’d printed a few of the articles where Gregg was featured, proud as heck his childhood friend was making a difference in the world. A dirty part of him had wanted the Gregg in the photo to turn around so he could get a view of his tight ass in those jeans. Or be able to lean in and smell the leather mixed with sweat, or to make those blue eyes sparkle again like they were in the photo...

The Jeep now parked, he climbed out and grabbed his duffle. He rounded the corner, noting the main house still looked much like his own, dimly lit by just a porch light. The new barn glowed with light, though, and he went in through the large open doors. There appeared to be ten stalls on each side, divided up in the center by closed doors probably for the office or the tack room. Everything was neat and tidy—the wood stained, the paint crisp, every

tool hung or hidden. The barn smelled of fresh hay, one of his favorite scents, one that his mind could conjure anywhere, be it in a hospital or the back of some military vehicle.

“Hello?” he called.

“Hey.” Gregg’s voice drifted down the cement aisle. “I’m in with Tasha.”

Jase left his duffle on the floor by the big doors and ventured down the aisle. All the stalls were empty but tidy. The last generous stall was bedded knee-deep in straw, and in the corner a bay mare pulled hay from a rack.

Gregg was at her rear end, his hand on her dark brown hip as he glanced at his watch. He had changed into beige shorts and a blue sleeveless T-shirt, his sandy hair a little damp, and his shoulders and hair were flaked with tiny bits of hay. His biceps bulged a little as he shifted and cocked a hip, his sneakered feet crossing to display firm calves and thighs.

Jase swallowed despite his mouth going dry. “How’s she doing?”

“She’s fine.” Gregg removed a thermometer from under her tail and checked it. “Everything’s normal and she’s not the least bit interested in popping out a baby at this moment, as you can see.”

The mare snorted as if in agreement and Jase laughed. “She’s beautiful.”

“She’s my dad’s prized broodmare. Her last colt sold for a bundle.” Gregg wiped the thermometer with a rag from his pocket and put it back in the container. He gestured toward the stall door. “Shall we?”

They exited and Gregg slid the door shut behind them. He stashed the thermometer and rag on a shelf in front of the mare’s stall, squirted a bit of antibacterial gel onto his hands from the same shelf, then scribbled something on a clipboard filled with columns.

“Okay, that’s done.” Gregg hung the clipboard on Tasha’s door and shoved his hands in his pockets, his shoulders rolling slightly. He smiled that crooked smile Jase had missed so much, one that was about as far from sexy as tousled hair flecked in hay.

“When do you check her again?”

“Midnight, then we all take different shifts so none of us are going days without sleep. I’ll do six.” He removed a hand from his pocket and gestured toward the door. “Ready?”

They fell into step next to each other and Jase grabbed his duffle from the floor. Gregg hit a light switch so the aisle went dark, except for a light coming from Tasha’s stall. “We’re really going to hang out in the hayloft?”

Gregg laughed. “Yep.”

He turned left and climbed the stairs, Jase falling into step right behind him. Not smart. How had he forgotten what Gregg’s ass did to him? Now that he’d given in to his attraction to Gregg, a trip up the hayloft stairs was all it took to get hard. He fought the swirling of heat, his balls growing heavy as his cock stiffened. Quickly, he thought of his dad and the voice of disapproval, an instant cure for anything sexual. So when Gregg reached the landing, the evidence had disappeared. Gregg opened a door and stepped aside so Jase could brush past him.

Jase steeled himself for dusty bales and cobwebs but was met instead with a comfortable leather sofa and other contemporary furniture in a small, neat apartment. Off to the right was a small kitchen area, and in the far back a door opened to a dim bedroom. “Oh, wow.”

A light flicked on, and Gregg crossed the room to flip another switch by the desk. “Not what you expected, huh?”

“No, not at all.” Jase set his duffle down on a chair and stepped into the living area. A sweet flat screen TV occupied one wall, flanked by two bookcases. Those held photos in decorative frames, a few books, and a few old trophies. He picked up a picture of Gwen bent over Dragon’s neck, hugging him. She was still just as pretty, her blue eyes shining from under the brim of her hat.

Jase returned the photo to the shelf and turned. Gregg was in the corner leaning over a desk, looking at a small monitor. He frowned. A quick dial

adjustment and the pregnant mare flickered onto the screen from her stall, still eating hay.

Jase gestured to the screen. “You can watch her from here?”

“Yeah, but I still go down and check her when it’s time. There’s a monitor in the main house, too.” Gregg nodded with satisfaction and smiled at Jase. “My parents built the barn after you left and added in an apartment, too. They figured I needed my own space when I hit my twenties.”

For some reason, the idea of Gregg in his own place and entertaining random guys—or worse, boyfriends—drummed up jealousy. He had no right, but it still stung. “Still awkward for relationships, though. Right?”

Gregg froze and then shrugged, his eyes averted. “Not really.”

That only fueled the fire. Jase tamped that churning down right quick. *You have no right.* “Do they know? Your parents?”

“Yes.” Gregg adjusted another knob and sound kicked in. The mare snorted and then munched along to a soft, mechanical hum. Gregg sighed, pulled a rolling desk chair over, and plopped down on it. “They found out when they read a letter I had written to you. I’d left it in the living room.”

Oh God, to be eighteen and face that hell alone... It was why Jase had left. But Gregg had a different life, different parents. “Were they mad?”

Gregg’s lips thinned, and his eyes narrowed. “They were more concerned at how upset I was, to the point they were relieved to finally understand what the hell was wrong with me.”

He hadn’t wanted to consider that. He had figured Gregg would rebound quickly, move on, and forget him. Jase had stepped into the hell of basic training to help him along, though his nights had been treacherous. “Gregg. I’m sorry.”

“Are you?” Gregg cocked his head. “You never answered my letters, once I found out from Tommy where to send them. You never called, even when

you would have needed a friend.” His blue eyes flicked to Jase’s prosthesis, hidden under his jeans. “You just turned tail and left.”

“I did what I had to do.” It was getting harder and harder to believe that, though.

“I think you owe me an explanation.” Gregg pointed. “Sit.”

Maybe he did.

Jase dragged over the second chair, sat at the desk and picked up a paper clip, the metal cold under his fingers. He played with it a little, letting it bite into the pad of his thumb as he weighed his options. So hard to admit the truth, especially when he’d never voiced this aloud, to anyone. Ever.

“I left because my dad found out—somehow—that I had been messing around with guys. Only, he didn’t know it was you.”

Gregg’s expression softened to one of understanding. He wheeled his chair over so his knees brushed Jase’s, his hand sliding to Jase’s thigh. “You could have come to us. My parents would have understood. Maybe they wouldn’t have approved, and we sure as hell wouldn’t have been welcomed as lovers, but they wouldn’t have turned you away.”

How he wished he could have done that. Jase stared at the monitor, the mare now taking a long sip of water from her bucket. She’d be a wonderful mother, strong and protective, and she’d love her baby no matter what. If only humans were that simple. “I love my dad, you know I do. But he’s a bastard.”

That got a quirk of a smile. “No shit.”

Half of Texas probably knew Everett was a hardheaded bastard. “He’s very religious, and if I were to label him, I’d say he was homophobic.”

“Again, no shit. We go to the same church, Jase. He owns half of the town and has no problem voicing how he feels. You knew how I felt about your relationship with him. I think it’s noble as hell that you’d come back and offer him part of you liver, and it doesn’t surprise me one bit he said no.” Gregg

touched Jase's thigh softly, the pads of his fingers hot through the denim. "But I still don't get why you thought you had to run."

Big, deep breath. Jase fought to keep himself in the now instead of fading into the very vivid memories. "He was livid. He told me if he ever found out who I was screwing, he'd ruin their lives with every penny of his fortune. He'd run them out of town and out of Texas. My *problem* was nothing that religion and service to our country couldn't fix, once he purged the sin from the area."

Gregg blinked rapidly, his chest rising and falling in short breaths.

Jase shrugged. "I know that's not true, but he was serious. The next day, he ripped apart my room looking for proof, for names, for someone to blame. He had the power even then to ruin your family. You were just getting the dude ranch off the ground. He could have made all of those plans virtually impossible."

"No." Gregg shook his head.

"Yes, he would have. So I made him a deal. I'd join the service, I'd pray every day. He thought that would be enough to make me straight again." Jase twirled the paper clip on the desk. So many thoughts to gather, to sort, to share. "I didn't come home after I lost my leg because it was too soon. I was still afraid, even though I wanted my friends and family more than anything. I missed you every day. But a part of me felt like a failure. Maybe a childish part believed him. I was defective for being attracted to you and all I needed was an ass-whooping from a drill sergeant to make it all right."

"It didn't work." Gregg's hand cupped Jase's thigh, the touch more soothing than intimate.

Jase barked out a bitter laugh. "Of course not. I tried dating girls but they didn't have what turned me on." And if he were perfectly honest... Jase drew in a ragged breath, met Gregg's gaze head-on, and whispered, "And the guys... they weren't you."

"Jase," Gregg whispered back.

This time, Gregg leaned in to kiss him. Those firm lips brushed his softly, and just like the hand on his leg, it was more soothing than sexual. Jase closed his eyes and let himself sink into the experience. Gregg's hand on his thigh, the other now sliding to cup his jaw, Gregg's thumb brushing his cheek. The faint scent of fresh hay and spicy deodorant offered another layer of comfort, one that Jase relished and hadn't realized he'd missed.

Gregg pulled away. Breathing ragged, he rested his forehead on Jase's. "So. What made you brave enough to come back?"

"I figured Dad wouldn't broadcast my return, and when I first showed up, Tommy neglected to tell me Dad wouldn't take a donation from me. He had just said to come. I figured he'd want my liver and I could use it to negotiate."

Gregg snapped back and leaned into his chair, his eyes wide. "Wow. That's... wrong on a few levels."

Yeah, it was. "You know my dad. He understands deals and negotiations. He lives for them. He's never going to accept that I'm gay. But I had sort of banked on him choosing life over my issues." Now Jase had no clue what to do.

Gregg nodded. "Did he come out and say that's why he didn't want your liver?"

"Uh, no. He just looked at me with that stern, no-nonsense glare and said, 'No. End of discussion.' I figured he didn't want a gay, crippled boy's liver. It has to be as much of a failure as I am." Jase steeled himself for the pity but instead caught a glint of anger in Gregg's eyes.

"Jase. You're not a failure. Like I said, the fact that you'd come back and offer... amazing." Gregg raked a hand through his hair, scattering the bits of hay all over his shirt and the desk. He brushed them off and sighed. "I think you need to talk to him, even if you're not planning to stay. Clear the air, find out why. I can just imagine how tense the house must be."

Jase didn't want to contemplate that conversation. Not tonight. "I bought a motor home. I have my own space."

Gregg quirked a brow and a smile grew. “Nice, dry bed?”

Jase grinned back. It had been an inside joke between them since preschool. Gregg had company one weekend and had complained about sleeping with his cousin, who had wet the bed. “I splurged on a great mattress.”

They sat in companionable near-silence disturbed by the sound of Tasha’s munching. Gregg cleared his throat. “You want to watch a movie?”

“Yeah.”

Gregg rose and gestured to the couch. “Let’s go. I’ll make popcorn, you pick something out. I’ve got beer, too. I hope you like the small brewery stuff.”

“Yeah, I do.” Jase grinned and went to do as asked. Damn, it felt good to be home.

Gregg finished recording stats on Tasha’s clipboard and turned to Jase. He leaned against the opposite wall, hands behind his back. That stance puffed out his already muscular chest, the ripples of muscle there and along his stomach visible through the material of his T-shirt. “No baby tonight.”

“No?”

“I doubt it.” Gregg shifted a little, afraid to ask *what now*. How long Jase would be in town was iffy, and he didn’t dare ask about the future. Gregg wanted more time, more closeness, be it quiet companionship, or a kiss, or... sex. He just wanted more Jase.

Earlier, they’d put in a movie, but it had turned out lame. The conversation, though, seemed to flow fine, talking about everything and anything—family and friends, Gregg’s experiences learning to become a therapeutic riding instructor, Jase’s struggle to learn to walk again. They skirted personal relationships and sex as if they were both taboo topics. Not that Gregg had much to talk about anyway. A few dates, some groping in a dark, Houston bar,

a few one-night stands. But as Jase had said, none held his attraction or attention because they weren't Jase.

He didn't want to know who Jase had screwed or loved. Well, a sick part of him did, but he was realistic. Jase had walked away, never expecting to return. No way in hell had the man been celibate.

And what guy wouldn't want to tap that? Six feet of sheer muscle and strength, intelligent brown eyes and a killer smile. That Jase had kept himself in tip-top shape said a lot for his drive and ambition. And coming back for his dad like that despite their issues... pure loyalty and inner strength. Jase had been born and bred to be a Marine on so many levels. He just didn't recognize the qualities he had that made him a cut above the rest.

"So," Gregg ventured, breaking the silence. "What now?"

Jase's Adam's apple bobbed and he glanced to the main house where the lights were still dim. "Are you kicking me out?"

"Hell, no!" Maybe that sounded a bit too forceful.

But Jase grinned, those even, white teeth flashing in the dim light. "Do you have ice cream?"

"You know it." Jase loved ice cream. Funny that Gregg didn't crave it like some guys, but he'd always kept a half gallon in the freezer, just in case. He usually ended up sending it the main house but ice cream inadvertently ended up in his freezer the next shopping trip.

"Then... sundaes?"

"Done deal." Gregg led the way down the aisle and up the stairs. Behind him, Jase sucked in a breath and Gregg froze. He turned at the top of the stairs, concerned. Jase was fine, though he shot him a pained wince. "You okay?" He wanted to ask about his leg, but figured it was rude.

"Damn it." Jase shook his head and shifted his hips. "I'm sorry if this is too much of an echo of the past, but you can't climb the stairs in front of me. Your

ass is too fine. It's true, damn it. Every time I watch you climb the stairs, I get wood."

Gregg's heartbeat amped up a notch and his dick immediately jumped to attention. Sure enough, a tell-tale bulge pressed against Jase's zipper, heading off to the left in a ridge of hard-on. "You didn't get wood earlier."

"I did. I just hid it well."

Oh, shit. He didn't need to know that. Or did he? Gregg met Jase's gaze and went immediately rock-hard. Those irises had dilated so his eyes were almost black with lust. Desire for him. Gregg licked his lips and Jase's gaze darted to follow the sweep of his tongue, his expression becoming hungrier by the second.

Outside, a horse whinnied and another answered. Gregg blinked and fought for composure. For a moment, vulnerability made his confidence falter. The chemistry between them crackled and burned, promising explosive sex. A part of him wanted that, badly. But a part of him feared the next day, or the next week, when Jase would leave again.

The cicadas buzzed a little louder in the distance, as if spurring Gregg on to make a choice. When they climbed those stairs, Jase would be his. Jase cocked his head as if he sensed Gregg's dilemma but he balanced on the step, waiting patiently.

Gregg swallowed and made his choice. "Still coming up?" He'd be damned if he missed this opportunity to hold Jase again. He wasn't strong enough to say no, even if he wanted.

Jase's grin could light up the darkest cave. "You bet."

Gregg opened the door, conscious of Jase's gaze on his ass as he brushed by. Gregg shut the door and then deftly locked it, the sound of the lock causing Jase to turn with a questioning glance. Gregg never had to lock the door before, seeing as he'd never brought home a guest before. Not this kind, anyway. Then realization must have dawned because Jase's gaze got even hungrier as he perused Gregg's form with a slow sweep of his head.

Before he lost his nerve, Gregg crossed the floor and embraced Jase, cupping his jaw in his hand as their mouths met. Jase moaned, and immediately the kiss turned hot and wet, lips parting, tongues clashing. Gregg's chest tightened, the furious pounding of his heart mixing with a rush of adrenaline. The rasp of Jase's tongue against his sent a tingle of electricity straight to Gregg's cock. The blood surged and his entire shaft tightened. Jase tugged Gregg closer, wrapping his right arm around him so their hips collided.

Jase broke the kiss and slid his mouth to Gregg's ear, his tongue hot along the outer shell. Shivers of delight danced along Gregg's spine and he tugged Jase's T-shirt from his jeans, wanting to spread a few shivers of his own. Jase used one arm to yank his own shirt off over his head and returned to kissing Gregg's neck, then his jaw, then finally his mouth again.

It had been too long since Gregg had enjoyed the hardness of a man's body. Jase's form had filled out since the last time, and he savored exploring each valley and hill of flesh. The hair on Jase's chest was crisp and not too dense but thicker than when they were teens. Gregg teased the pucker of Jase's nipples with the pads of his fingers, loving how Jase moaned and arched under his touch.

Gregg had to taste Jase's skin again. He ended the kiss to explore with his mouth, starting at Jase's collarbone. Gentle kisses made a path between the swell of Jase's pecs, then off to the side to taste his right nipple. The nub hardened even more as his tongue rasped over the tip. Jase rocked his hips against Gregg's, his erection insistent.

“Stop,” Jase groaned. “It feels good but I want your shirt off, too.”

Aware they were in the entryway with a set of windows facing the main house, Gregg decided it was time to move the action. “Bedroom?”

Jase dropped a kiss to Gregg's lips and smiled. “Yeah.”

Jase held Gregg's hand as they headed for the bedroom, excited and a little nervous. It had been eons since he'd had sex, and that meant he had to make a

decision—prosthesis on or off. He was leaning toward off, but it felt awkward and odd, yet exciting, all at the same time.

Gregg rounded the bed and clicked the light on the side table. The soft glow caught the glitter in Gregg's eyes, now turbulent and dark with lust. He yanked his shirt over his head, his chest and stomach nicely muscled from honest work, not from living at the gym like Jase. Jase got his boots and jeans off, then sat at the edge of the bed to remove his leg.

Gregg sat next to him and unlaced his sneakers. "I had wondered if it needed to come off."

"Does that bother you?"

"Hell, no." Gregg leaned over and cupped Jase's erection through his boxers. He palmed the length, stroking from root to tip, then back again. "It would bother me if this weren't hard, though."

"No problem there." Jase's cock went from hard to diamond-hard, his shaft straining against the cotton fabric, wanting more of Gregg's touch.

"Good." Gregg turned Jase's chin with his free hand and kissed him hard, his tongue plunging between his lips with firm strokes. Jase leaned to the side a little, taking Gregg with him as he tucked his prosthesis out of the way, under the bed.

As soon as Jase righted himself, Gregg broke the kiss and shoved him back on the bed. "Let's get you out of these boxers."

Insistent fingers wrapped around the waistband of Jase's boxers and tugged. Jase lifted his hips, and as the material slid down, his cock bobbed free. The boxers sailed through the air to the other side of the bedroom and Gregg's mouth settled over the head.

Jase hissed and bucked, surprised by Gregg's boldness. In the past, Jase had led the way. But Gregg wasted no time in swirling his tongue around the tip of Jase's cock, sweeping the slit for pre-cum, exploring the sensitive knot of flesh on the underside. Jase sank a hand in Gregg's hair and closed his eyes,

reveling in the soft suction, the gentle licks of tongue, and the caress of Gregg's hands along his thighs.

"Fuck, no, too fast," Jase said in between pants. Already his balls were tightening, threatening to put a halt to the pleasure. Damn it, he wanted to last.

Gregg lifted off Jase's shaft with a long, slow lick. "You can come again. We have all night. I get tomorrow off from work. I don't care how we do this. We don't even have to do intercourse. As long as I get to love you, I'm happy."

The word "love" tugged at Jase's heart. He swallowed as Gregg busied himself again with languid strokes of his tongue on Jase's cock. He wondered if Gregg even knew he'd said that. Love. "Would you top me?"

Gregg planted a hot kiss above Jase's navel. "I'll do whatever you want. I can make you come like this and be just as happy. I think you'd like some lube, though."

"In my duffle." Gregg sprang from the bed with lightning speed, and Jase had to laugh at his eagerness. Jase called, "There are condoms, too."

Gregg returned with both, his hard cock bobbing with each step. "Thank God you had something. I didn't."

For some reason, Jase didn't want Gregg getting the wrong idea. "My roommate had left a brand-new box in the motor home. The lube is mine, though."

"Let's put them to good use." Gregg squirted out a generous dollop of lube into his palm and his hand covered Jase's cock again. "Much better."

Jase grabbed the lube and did the same, his hand finally settling over Gregg's shaft. So damned good to stroke Gregg again. They lay back and kissed slow and deep, Jase's tongue exploring Gregg's mouth in languorous strokes. With every pump of Gregg's hand, Jase panted and writhed, bucking harder into his strong grip. He slid his hips closer to Gregg until his cock and Gregg's hand brushed his own fist. Gregg moaned and they synchronized their strokes, matching each sweep in intensity.

As much as Jase wanted to wait... he wanted to come with Gregg more. Now. His breathing came in ragged pants and he broke the kiss to get more air. He clutched Gregg closer, mashing their chests together nipple to nipple. Jase licked and sucked Gregg's neck, relishing his earthy scent, loving the slide of his tongue over Gregg's flesh.

Gregg hugged him back, his grip fierce as his hips ground into Jase's. This is what he'd craved, what he had missed, those strong arms clutching him tight, welcoming him. Jase's cock tightened in Gregg's firm grip, his skin all over his body tingling with energy.

"God, yes, Jase. Yes," Gregg whispered against Jase's neck. "Come for me."

That was all it took, the sound of Gregg's voice launching him over the edge of bliss. Jase's hips jerked and pleasure exploded from his balls and the base of his cock. He came in hot, satisfying streams that covered their hands and his chest, Gregg's too. Spent, he rocked gently a few more times despite the flush of pleasurable fatigue.

Gregg followed him in ecstasy just a heartbeat behind, his low moan one of pleasure. His lips sucked at Jase's neck as he shoved his cock into Jase's grip, his orgasm spilling hot and thick along the same path Jase's had taken.

Finally, Jase collapsed into the mattress in a haze of pleasure, unable to do more than pant and hope to hell his heart wouldn't hammer out of his chest. He nuzzled Gregg's neck, then worked his way across Gregg's stubbled jaw to his lips, kissing him softly this time.

"That was amazing," Jase said when they ended the kiss and their breathing returned to normal.

"I missed you," Gregg murmured. "Not just that, but all of you."

Warmth flooded Jase's veins, bathing him in a simpler kind of pleasure. He just wanted to relax into the sensation of being one with Gregg and never let go. But eventually, they'd need to clean up. "I know. Same here."

They languished a moment in companionable silence before Gregg rolled and rose from the bed. He padded to the bathroom and ran some warm water. He returned a few minutes later with a damp towel and tossed it to Jase.

Once clean, Gregg settled back onto the bed, his head on Jase's shoulder. Jase sighed as Gregg brushed his hand over Jase's bicep, tracing the wings of the dragon.

Gregg asked, "Not to kill the mood, but now what?"

Jase cocked a brow in Gregg's direction, trying to lighten things up. "More sex?"

"Well, yeah. But at some point we need to discuss the future. I'm not letting the past repeat itself."

Jase sighed and rolled so he could study Gregg's expression while he talked. This wasn't going to be easy. "I don't know what to tell you. I have a few job offers, one in Houston, another in Seattle near my cousin." Jase propped himself up on an elbow. "It all depends on Dad, but I could stay."

"He doesn't need to know about us."

Jase sighed, wishing they could keep it a huge secret. Jase bit his tongue on what he wanted to voice—if his dad didn't take the liver, they wouldn't have to hide for long. Guilt gnawed at his conscience and Jase wished he was a better man.

Instead, Jase said, "Eventually, he'll figure it out. If he does, he can and will make your life miserable if he chooses. He can foul up the permits you need, or screw you out of loads of feed, or he can make sure the farrier and vet are too busy to come out this way. All he has to do is drop a few dollars, spread some rumors that have nothing to do with sex and the Circle M will be in trouble."

"I'm going to sound like a two-year-old when I say this, but screw it. It's not fair for him to rule your life and mine like this."

And suddenly it was almost the same discussion they'd had a decade ago. Jase couldn't stay, Gregg couldn't go, and there seemed to be no middle ground in between. Not unless his dad could be made to see things differently. And just like when he was eighteen, Jase felt the walls closing in.

"Life isn't fair." Jase kissed Gregg gently on the lips, and suddenly found the words he wanted to say. "I promise I'll stand and fight this time, though. I won't run without telling you. I'll face the problem head on and see where the journey takes us."

"Thank you." Gregg kissed Jase and his hand roamed over Jase's body. Despite having one hell of an orgasm not that long ago, Jase's cock began to stir as Gregg's hand caressed lower, and lower, and lower...

Jase's shaft stiffened in Gregg's fist and the grin Gregg shot was purely devilish. "Now, more sex?"

Who could pass up an offer like that? Jase grinned back and began his own exploration, starting at Gregg's stomach. "You're on."

Jase pulled the Jeep up behind his motor home just after six thirty in the morning. They had checked the mare one last time, then showered together due more to time constraints than intimacy, though it had been damn fun. He'd kept his emotions in check, focusing on how good it felt to stroke Gregg to orgasm under the hot spray, instead of the bittersweet pang he'd felt when he woke to stare into Gregg's eyes. Then he'd kissed Gregg good-bye, promising to stop back later in the day to visit with his family.

Jase felt a little foolish now though, because the longing—both for sex and companionship—had caught up with him. Those feelings weren't supposed to surface. He should be feeling damned satisfied and want nothing more than a long nap, but all he wanted was to crawl back into Gregg's bed. He'd almost consider trying to ride again if it meant spending more time with Gregg.

Gregg hadn't offered yet to set Jase up to ride, and he was a little glad for that. Jase didn't know why the idea rankled wrong with him—his disability

warring with Gregg's ability to get him riding again. But for some reason, it did.

Jase parked the Jeep and opened the door to the motor home to be surprised by his father, seated at his dining table. His dad sat up a bit taller in the bench seat and Jase couldn't help but pity him a little. Jase figured his dad would sleep in after the party. Despite being a morning person, he slept in more and more lately, the fatigue from his cancer evident in that and the naps he now took as well. That fatigue lined his face and shadowed under his brown eyes, and for once, Jase realized his dad was old. And just as vulnerable as everyone else.

"Dad," Jase said. He stepped up the stairs and shut the door. "Need something?"

"Home a little late."

No one did disapproval like his father. The eighteen-year-old boy would have shrunk from the hard edge, but the adult Jase squared his shoulders and owned it. Damn straight he was late. But respectfully he said, "The Madisons have a new foal on the way. I went over to take a shift, hoping to catch the birth."

"You always had a soft spot for that."

"I love horses. Always have, always will."

"That Madison boy can get you riding again, you know." Everett waved a hand toward Jase's legs. "With your bum leg and all."

Wow. Jase blinked back the surprise. "I think that's the first time you've mentioned my prosthesis."

Everett grunted and glanced out the windows.

Jase sighed and ran a hand through his short hair. He could hear Gregg in his ear almost, begging him to clear the air, to make things right, but he just couldn't do it. His dad came to him. It would be better to see what he wanted first. "Do you need something?"

Everett turned back, his brows furrowed. “Why did you offer me your liver?”

That surprised Jase more than if his dad had jumped up and hugged him. But the answer came easily with no thought. “It’s what a good son does for his father. You taught me to do what’s right. I know we don’t see eye-to-eye on a lot of issues, but I try.”

Everett thought for a moment, his white brows furrowing deeper between his eyes. “Even though I kicked you out.”

Jase curled his fingers around the strap of his duffle and held on tight, digging his fingers into his palm. “It didn’t stop me from being your son.”

“I see.” Everett shifted in the seat, his face grimacing in pain. Jase fought the pity and schooled his face to blankness, knowing full well Everett wouldn’t want to see it. “Would you still consider the donation, then?”

Surprise, surprise. “You’d take part of a liver from a gay, crippled son?”

“Boy, I know I’m a bastard on a good day, but even I know that calling you a cripple is not politically correct.”

“Answer the question, Dad.”

Everett huffed and set his jaw, his fingers drumming on the table top. “I’m going to accept the offer of part of a liver from my son, the Marine.”

“Why now?” Jase tossed his duffle down the hall and slid into the bench seat opposite his father. “I came home over a week ago and your answer was a definite no. What changed?”

Everett sighed. “I went to that damned picnic. Your brother let it slip that I have—that I’m not up to snuff.”

“I see.” Wow, that took balls. But Jase knew how stressed Tommy was about the whole thing, and he’d need support to deal. It wasn’t a secret anyone but a true, close friend would keep. He doubted even Gregg would keep the news to himself. “And how did people take the news?”

“They were happy I had a potential donor. They were proud of my son for returning.” Everett jerked his head. “Well, everyone but Zane Ashby. He’s fixin’ to run for mayor as soon as the dirt hits my coffin. I told him he had a better chance of being hit by lightning while riding a Brahma bull.”

So there was Everett’s motivation. He wasn’t ready to relinquish his reign over his town. Whatever it was, it worked in Jase’s favor. He folded his sweaty palms on the table in front of him, hoping he appeared calmer than he felt. “You realize I’m still gay, don’t you, Dad? The Marines couldn’t beat it from me and prayer didn’t oust the devil, either.”

Everett’s brown eyes flashed and his mouth thinned to a firm line. “I don’t like it one bit. It’s wrong. Immoral.”

“And who are you to judge? When I die it will be me and Jesus to sort my sins out. I doubt you’ll get an invitation.” Jase sighed even though his heart hammered a million miles a minute. There was no way he was winning this battle, not the fair way. The thought of Gregg and his family made Jase buck-up and be strong. “Can we make a deal?”

Everett’s eyes widened. “Sorta rude to offer up a deal to a man with cancer.”

“Just as rude to threaten to ruin your eldest son and his lover’s lives because they’re attracted to each other.”

“I would have, too.”

Jase closed his eyes for a dozen heartbeats. It was wrong to hate his father, but he’d be damned if he didn’t right at that moment. “Dad, if you want my liver, anyone I’m associated with is off-limits to your hatred. The Marines allowed me to serve as long as I kept my mouth shut about my preferences. I’m willing to do the same for you.”

“Leave the Marines out of this.”

“I’m serious, Dad. If you want to climb up on your soapbox and preach about my depraved sex life, go for it. I don’t care. But I absolutely forbid you to slander anyone I’m associated with. In this day and age, who will vote for

you for mayor next year if you're talking poorly about your son who just donated over half of his liver? I was afraid at eighteen because I thought it was you against me. Yes, then you could have ruined Gr—”

Oh God, he'd almost slipped. Jase swallowed quick and amended, “*His* life. But ten years have made people a lot smarter and a hell of a lot more understanding. They may not approve of my sexual choices, but they sure as hell won't approve of how you treat me after going under the knife to save your life.”

Everett huffed, his chest rising and falling in shallow breaths. Jase could almost see the wheels turning behind his eyes, weighing the possibilities. Never would his father approve of his sex life, but he'd damn well better keep his mouth shut for a change. “Where will you live?”

“The Madisons will take me in after the surgery if you won't. And I have the motor home. I have a little money and a few job offers. I just don't know if it's worth staying in this area.”

Everett heaved a huge sigh and drummed his fingers in a pattern that sounded like a galloping horse. It was something he'd always done, and Jase had worked out that distinct pattern as a tell for what Everett was thinking. This was his most thoughtful rhythm. “That Madison boy... he always had it bad for you.”

Jase clutched his folded hands tighter together, his knuckles going numb under the pressure. “Excuse me?”

“After you left, he rode over here, asking after you. He looked like someone killed his horse when I told him you'd up and enlisted.” Everett shook his head, disgust curling his upper lip. “I figured you were gone, there was no reason to lecture the boy. His parents could deal with it on their end. I had a town to run.”

As bad as Jase hated to do it, he nodded and said, “Thank you for doing that.”

Everett nodded and slid his hand over the table, palm to the side. “Deal, then? I’ll try to look the other way. You don’t rub it in my face.”

Jase wanted to scream at him, to beg him to just accept him for who he was, to love him just because they shared the same DNA. He tamped down that desire, knowing it wasn’t going to get him what he wanted. A life in this area, hopefully with Gregg. And to be fair... at least this was a baby step. Maybe someday his dad would take a bigger one.

Jase took his dad’s hand, wrinkled and clammy, in his. “Deal.”

Everett gave his hand one last shake and slid from his seat. He paused in the doorway. “I’ll see you at breakfast, son.”

“Sure thing.”

Everett left and Jase slouched into the bench seat. “Wow,” he whispered. So many changes in his life. Tomorrow he’d put a call in to the doctor about further testing for the donation screening. He’d also look into the therapy department hiring in Houston. Maybe look into that parcel of land the Donovans were selling off. But today...

With shaking hands, Jase dialed the phone.

Gregg picked up on the first ring. “Hey.” His voice was husky and warm, and Jase’s insides warmed a little.

Jase gulped and whispered, “It worked. My deal worked.”

“Hold on.” Gregg must have shifted the phone and walked a few paces because his voice was louder and sharper, despite being a hushed tone. “You talked to your dad?”

“Yes. He agreed to the Addam’s version of ‘Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell’. He’s taking the liver and he’s not happy, but it wasn’t a fight.”

Gregg let out a whoop. “Jase. I’m so psyched, buddy.”

So was he. Jase’s mind became cluttered with tasks and chores. He needed to make a list. “Look, I’m going to be busy for a bit. I have to line up that job and talk to doctors.”

“I don’t care, as long as you’re staying. Just tell me you’re staying.”

Jase realized then that was the approval he’d been waiting to hear. Gregg wanting him to stay despite the pain they’d been through... “I’m staying.”

“Then welcome home, Jase. Welcome home.”

THE END

Author Bio

Mia Downing started creating heroes at age four, but her heroes back then rode ponies to rescue the princess, and only kissed her on the cheek. Today, Mia's heroes still rescue those in need, but the price of their toys and the expertise of their seduction leads to a lot more than a peck on the cheek. When Mia isn't busy creating new stories for her readers she fills in as an underwear model for a prestigious lingerie company. She also lives in Connecticut with her family, and enjoys horses and knitting.

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THE LODESTAR OF YS

By Amy Rae Durreson

Photo Description

The photo shows an intense, dark-haired young man, clad all in leather. He is holding a drawn bow and arrow and aiming upwards into the forest.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

His younger brother was supposed to marry the prince of their neighboring country and so form an alliance against the Perth Empire. Good thing too, that it was his brother, since Sjurd couldn't stand the bookish princeling and that feeling was mutual. His brother's fiancé thought him brutish and dumb; at least, he managed to insult him every time they met.

All would be well, if his selfish brother didn't elope with his best friend—a Lord of the realm, and their second cousin. Now Sjurd, the heir apparent, has to honor the marriage promise or risk war, which they couldn't afford. Even worse, he has to actually go on a month-long honeymoon, with a guy whom he can't stand and has nothing in common with—or does he?

Please let those guys make their marriage of convenience work!

No incest, rape or BDSM please! I'd like to see a sarcastic prince who is not meek and doesn't cower before Sjurd.

Thank you!

Sincerely,

Anas

Story Info

Genre: fantasy

Tags: royalty, arranged marriage, slow burn/UST, enemies to lovers, weddings, warfare

Word count: 46,058

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THE LODESTAR OF YS

By Amy Rae Durreson

CHAPTER I

Celyn: Aged 14

The first time Celyn met the oaf was aboard the flying ship *Llinos*, on the eve of their betrothal feast.

Not, of course, that they were supposed to be marrying each other. Celyn was sister's son to King Pryderi of Ys, which meant his main value to the crown was as a minor marriage pawn. He certainly didn't have anywhere near enough status of his own to merit an engagement to the newly selected First Prince of Axholme, who had been named heir elect by the acclaim of his gathered bloodline; was military leader of already legendary status; and was (Celyn was soon to learn) an all round arrogant prat.

No, First Prince Sjurd the Great Oaf got to be engaged to Mathilde, second daughter of the Principality of Challoner, a realm bigger and richer than Celyn's beloved Ys. Challoner, not coincidentally, was possessed of a very large standing army and an unenviable geographical position right between the Axtooth Range and the border of the Perth Empire. Celyn, on the other hand, got to be engaged to the new First Prince's younger brother Ivarr, a development with which he was entirely happy.

Ivarr was in possession of the following virtues, all to be welcomed in a spouse: he was only eighteen months younger than Celyn; he possessed the use of all his limbs; he could hold up his end of a conversation, albeit not as fluently as Celyn himself; and he had a rather pleasant smile. (This latter point would not have appeared as part of Celyn's essential criteria a year ago. It had, however, become more important of late, along with the realization that he was very relieved that his uncle had affianced him to a boy, even if it had been a purely political decision about not producing further heirs, when they might

have to evacuate everyone beyond the Veil of Storms if the Empire did come over the mountains.)

The only problem with Ivarr that Celyn could see so far was that he came with an attachment. The attachment's name was Hrolf, and he wasn't very impressed by Celyn either.

"Do you ever stop talking?" Hrolf demanded, crossing his arms and looking down his rather long nose at Celyn.

"Eloquence," Celyn remarked, trying to ignore the fact that Hrolf, over a year younger than him, *could* look down on him (clearly they grew them big and stupid in Axholme), "is a gift of princes."

"Not any prince I've ever met," said Hrolf.

"And how many princes do you know?" Celyn demanded.

"Sjurd and him," Hrolf said, pointing his thumb at Ivarr, "and he's too busy thinking about things to talk much."

"I'm sure I'll get better with practice," Ivarr said, looking rather worried. "I've only been a prince for a month. Until they chose Sjurd as First Prince, I thought I was going to be a turnip farmer when I grew up."

"Urgh," Celyn said, wrinkling his nose. "Was there nothing better you could grow?"

"I like turnips," Ivarr said, a little more firmly. "They're unfussy, and you can write poems while you're waiting for them to come up."

"Oh," Celyn said in relief. "Well, if you're a poetical turnip farmer, that's perfectly all right."

Ivarr beamed at him, displaying that rather nice smile again. "Do you like poetry?"

"Er," said Celyn. A lie at this point in a lifelong relationship was bound to have unpleasant consequences, but he didn't want a row when they were getting on so splendidly. "Not exactly. Which is to say, not yet, but I'm sure that's just lack of exposure. I mean, I'm bound to find some I like. Eventually."

Ivarr sighed wistfully.

Hrolf snorted and went back to his pet topic. There was a certain grim inevitability to Hrolf's conversation, Celyn had already come to realize, rather like the way a flying ship accelerated towards home when no one was working the rudder. Right now, he was saying, "That's right. Real princes don't waste time with poetry any more than they talk too much. Sjurd says actions speak louder than words, and he should know. He's probably never read a poem in his life. He's a proper prince."

"And I'm not?" demanded Celyn.

Hrolf gave him a look that said clearly not, but he wasn't going to be rude enough to point out the blindingly obvious. "Sjurd's a *fighting* prince."

"I could fight *you*," Celyn offered. Hrolf might be bigger, but Celyn was pretty sure he was meaner.

Hrolf snorted again. "Sjurd fights brigands, and Imperial spies, and misthounds. He wrestled an ogre once, and it almost throttled him." He held out his hands to demonstrate, eyes bright. "But he headbutted it in the balls, then smashed its brainpan on a boulder, and its brains went up his *nose*, and he didn't wash them out for three days, not until he'd killed the whole nest and rescued the children they'd nabbed for their supper. *That's* a real prince."

"Holy Dwynwen protect us," Celyn breathed, covering his own nose with a wince. "That's *vile*. No wonder he doesn't like poems. He probably can't understand any complex ones because he's been hit in the head too many times."

"He is my brother, you know," Ivarr said, a little huffily, and for a moment, trouble threatened.

Then Celyn had the bright idea of offering to show them how the lodestone was rigged to steer the ship, and all notions of proper princely behavior were promptly forgotten.

Llinos was sailing over the foothills on the Axholme side of the ridge, her sails bellying before the wind. Up here, the sun was bright and warm, although the air was cool enough in the shade that both Ivarr and Hrolf shivered a little.

The valleys below were silver with mist, only brown ridges and occasional lines of dark forest rising into sight. Ahead of them, the rough crags of the higher ranges rose in blue-brown folds. The wind was fresh from the northwest, steady but not too strong, and they were making good time across the morning sky. A tour of one of Axholme's lodestone mines was on the agenda for the morning, and then they would be tacking back to the capital at Holmebury for the evening's feasts.

This close to the Axtooth range, where the lodestone was mined, the attraction was so strong that the sailors had only exposed a tiny sliver of the black stone to allow them to counteract the boat's natural tendency towards its home island.

"What happens if we open the lead casing completely?" Ivarr wanted to know.

"Well," Celyn said, gratified that even Hrolf was hanging on his words, and trying to sound knowing, "either the lodestone would rip itself out of the side of the ship, tearing the hull apart, or it would take us with it, and we'd crash into the side of the mountain."

"Brilliant," Hrolf breathed, and Ivarr looked intrigued, his blue eyes widening with excitement.

But Celyn was a son of Ys, and the boats were too precious to relish the thought of one crashing, even if it was a truly spectacular crash. "Better not," he said. "Not after all the fuss they made about writing those marriage contracts."

But there were still gears to investigate, and altitude floats to prod, and the workings of the steerage to be explained at length. And there was good old Captain ap Gwenfor, who had known Celyn since he was a baby and therefore indulged him like one of his own grandchildren, who was delighted to show Celyn's new fiance how to steer a flying ship.

Later, in front of his disapproving elders, Celyn tried to explain how what happened next was simply the final inevitable stage of an unavoidable process. Indeed, he would go on, it could hardly be blamed on him or poor Captain ap

Gwenfor. Any Ysian child knew how to keep a boat steady in the sky by the time they could write their own name. How were they supposed to know that it wasn't some innate ability shared by all boys, even landlocked ones like Ivarr?

At the time, as the ship plunged suddenly towards the ground, he was too busy screaming and hanging onto the side to think of excuses.

It was only a matter of moments before the captain wrestled control back from Ivarr and brought them out of their dive. It was long enough to set everyone on the ship bellowing with panic, though, and send Hrolf staggering to the rail to vomit the moment they were level.

“That’s probably going to land on a very surprised goat in a few minutes’ time,” Celyn said, just to prove his nerves were steady.

Ivarr stared at him in shuddering outrage. “We nearly died, and you’re worried about the goats!”

And then, before Celyn could respond to that, adult retribution appeared. It came in a rather striking form: a lean, dark-haired man in the gray leather favored by the Axholme border guard. His hair was pulled back severely, and his blue eyes were icy with rage, but he was still one of the most handsome men Celyn had ever seen. By the expression on his face, and the uniform, Celyn guessed this was Ivarr’s bodyguard and he wasn’t impressed with his charge.

“What are you moronic little shits doing?” he demanded, and his voice was a surprise too. Even when rough with rage, it had a low musical growl to it that made Celyn’s stomach clench in an interesting way. “I swear it, Hrolf, I will hang you from the prow by your toenails if you fuck this alliance up.”

Well, that was patently unfair, as Hrolf, annoying as he was, hadn’t been involved at all and was, in fact, still heaving over the side. Celyn forgot about how good-looking the man was and said indignantly, “It wasn’t anything to do with Hrolf!”

A low feminine laugh cut in on them, and Celyn looked up to see a woman scramble onto the quarter deck, her skirts scooped out of the way in one hand. He knew her, and liked her, and could almost see why so many of his cousins

thought she was the prettiest woman alive: it was in her wide, laughing mouth, and the way her red hair curled out of the intricate braids that held it off her face, and the forthright way she moved and spoke.

“Was it Ivarr, then?” Princess Mathilde asked. “I didn’t think you knew how to make mischief, sweetheart.”

Ivarr went pink, but set his shoulders and said, “I’m very sorry, Highness.”

“*Ivarr?*” the rude bodyguard said incredulously. “And I thought you were the one person who wouldn’t embarrass me. What the fuck is wrong with you?”

Now that was rather too much, even allowing for the shock of a rough flight. Crossly, Celyn protested, “You can’t talk to him like that! He’s a prince!”

Ivarr sighed miserably and confided, “That doesn’t really mean anything. So is he.”

Celyn stared at the man again, his eyes narrowing. Now he looked properly, he could see the resemblance to Ivarr: their dark brown hair waved back from their foreheads in the same way, and their eyes were the same pale blue, although what looked like sea glass on Ivarr was closer to ice in this man. They had the same slightly pointed ears, but there the resemblance ended. Celyn couldn’t ever imagine sweet-tempered Ivarr looking as ferocious and humorless as this oaf.

“Oh,” he said, trying to fill his voice with all the disdain he’d learned in a short lifetime at court. “You must be the brother.”

Sjurd: Aged 21

Sjurd was too tired to deal with this shit.

His back and shoulders ached with the strain of too many battles and too little rest in between. His calf still throbbed from a misthound’s bite a fortnight ago, the raw pain of its teeth followed by the cold numb wrongness of venom pumping into him. His head felt permanently heavy on his shoulders, and his

jaw constantly ready to lock shut, and always in the back of his mind, steady as a heartbeat, was the knowledge that *the Empire is coming, the Empire is coming*.

He wanted nothing more than a warm body to curl around and a day, just one day, to do nothing but sleep. Instead, he was here, playing diplomat to impress not just the Challoners but a shipload of crazy Ysians as well. He wanted his brother married well and safely, and at least Ys was the final nation before the endless western sea, but he didn't understand these people, with their jawbreaking language, their cryptic and epic poetry, and their heedless pacifism.

Thank Thunder he didn't have to marry one of them. He'd known Mathilde for years, since he'd been just a border commander from a minor branch of the royal family and she had been his equivalent on the Challoner side of the border. He hadn't even thought about the throne back then, so it had been a shock when King Snorri announced he was appointing an heir and all his cousins started voting for him.

He and Mathilde would do well together, though. He didn't really see the need to spend a week sailing around the mountains to prove that the two of them were compatible. They were already friends. Wasn't that enough for their respective governments?

Clearly not, for here they were, floating too high above the ground in a flimsy bit of wood and sailcloth he was convinced would drop out of the sky at any moment. And that was without the help of his idiotic little brother, whom he'd always thought was far too meek and mild to try crashing an airship.

Of course, Ivarr being Ivarr, he'd managed to find a new friend, one of the ship's boys by the grease on his face. From a purely brotherly perspective, Sjurd admired Ivarr's talent for making instant friends from every possible background. He'd love to be that at ease with strangers himself. On a diplomatic mission, however, it had its disadvantages.

"He doesn't look like a proper prince," the brat remarked to Hrolf, squinting at Sjurd. "He's a bit scruffy around the edges."

Hrolf (and, seriously, he knew they had to bring Ivarr, since he was one of the ones getting engaged, but what idiot on his father's homestead had decided to send that muttonhead Hrolf, too?) straightened up, still looking green, and said, "You wouldn't know a proper prince if one punched you in the nose."

"Probably because punching people in the nose isn't princely behavior," the brat retorted, and then smirked at Hrolf. "Although for you, I'd make an exception."

"I'd like to see you try," Hrolf retorted and lunged forward.

Sjurd grabbed him by the collar and stretched out the other hand to stop the brat in his tracks. Holding them apart, he roared, "*Enough!*"

"There's no need to shout in my ear," the brat protested.

"Let me go!" Hrolf bellowed, squirming in Sjurd's hold.

"I *will*," Sjurd growled, in his best command voice, "knock your heads together hard enough to leave you both unconscious for the rest of the trip."

That shut Hrolf up, but the brat still had to say, "You people really are barbarians, aren't you?"

Mathilde stopped laughing long enough to say reproachfully, "I think you started that one, Cel."

With a sinking heart, Sjurd took another look at the brat. Grease-smear and grubby he might be, but his clothes were fine under the muck, the colors deep and the cuffs stiff with embroidery, golden patterns of complex, intertwining knots. He looked like an urchin, his fair hair sticking up in tufts and his ears too big for his face, but he was pink-cheeked and healthy. It was the eyes that gave him away, the same clear pale green as King Pryderi, passed down the royal line of Ys like their high cheekbones and peculiar sense of humor.

Sjurd looked at his brother, who was hanging his head and trying not to meet anyone's eyes. "*This* is your fiance?"

“Sjurd,” Mathilde said, laying a hand on his arm. She was still grinning widely, and her eyes were dancing. “This is your future brother, Prince Celyn ap Iorweth of Ys. Celyn, First Prince Sjurd of Axholme.”

“My commiserations, cousin Mathilde,” Prince Brat said, so mildly that it took Sjurd a moment to catch his meaning.

“If he’s going to be my brother, I’m free to hit him, right?” he asked.

“In the nose!” Hrolf contributed enthusiastically, but went quiet again when Sjurd turned his glare that way.

Prince Brat sniffed. “My brothers don’t hit me.”

“It shows,” Sjurd growled, and watched those green eyes go wide.

“Also,” Mathilde said sensibly, “your brothers are six, Cel. Now, leave the poor captain alone, all of you. Get back onto the main deck.”

“Except you,” Sjurd added to Ivarr. “You can go to your cabin and think about how stupid you are.”

“Sorry,” Ivarr said, looking forlorn. Sjurd hardened his heart. In two more years, the boy would be old enough to join a border garrison. If he still had a head full of clouds, he wouldn’t survive his first encounter with a misthound.

“No mine tour, and you’re on dawn watch tomorrow.”

“Sjurd!” Even as a baby, Ivarr had happily slept well into the morning.

“I’m sure this ship has latrines you could scrub as well,” Sjurd added, just to see the indignation on his brother’s face.

Prince Brat chose that moment to share, “I *really* don’t like him.”

“He grows on you,” Mathilde said.

“Like a fungus?”

Her lips twitched, but she simply said, “I hope you have a change of clothes on board, Celyn. If I were you, I’d change before King Pryderi catches you.”

Prince Brat looked down at his grease-smearred finery and actually blanched. Then he bolted. Ivarr took one more look at Sjurd's face and went after him, the ever-loyal Hrolf on his heels. Sjurd sighed, and turned to offer his apologies to the captain. Really, keeping track of his own family was hard enough. How did anyone expect him to manage a kingdom?

Well, he thought grimly as he followed Mathilde back to the main deck, they probably didn't. King Snorri had a good few decades in him yet, and by the time he passed the Empire would be in spitting distance. His blood kin hadn't chosen him as heir because they thought he'd make a good king. They'd wanted a general.

Mathilde was waiting for him on the main deck. She linked her arm through his with a smile. "He's a good boy, really, young Celyn. He's not had an easy life. His mother was captain of the ship the Empire seized a couple of years back."

"Executed her and the ambassador, didn't they?" Sjurd asked. He remembered the incident, not least because it had finally brought the Ysians into an alliance with the mainland.

"Celyn's like her, from the stories I've heard. True-hearted. He just hasn't learned yet when not to talk."

"You think too well of everyone," Sjurd grumbled, although it was one of the things he liked about her. She saw things clearly enough, but had a gift for forgiving what Sjurd simply found irritating.

She tucked herself more carefully against his side, discreetly taking some of the weight off his bad leg, and he sighed in relief. She might be wearing all her finery today, but she was almost as battle-hardened as he was, and knew exactly how much he was hurting. She was a strong arm in a fight as well, and he'd happily have her at his back in battle. At least their respective kings had been kind enough to match two friends together. He could have been landed with a far less practical princess. He didn't have the time or the patience for a great romance, but they respected each other and would live well together. They would have strong children.

Although, of course, their children would need to be strong to survive when the Empire came. At best, the Empire took royal children as hostages. More often the children were enslaved or simply slaughtered.

“Such a grim face,” Mathilde commented.

Sjurd shrugged. “We live in grim times.”

She sighed a little. “But we cannot change that by dwelling on it. I refuse to live an unhappy life, no matter what is coming. If we face our fate with honor and courage, we have done enough. I will not let them make me sad as well. So, look.” She waved a hand at the view. “Did you ever see something so lovely?”

The morning sun was catching on the mist below, washing it with gold. The swelling sails above them caught the light as well, their white cloth shining brightly. The sky around them was so clear a blue that Sjurd was surprised they could breathe the air without tasting it, and the wind was cool, crisp and fresh on his cheek.

The mountains were a very long way down.

“Just how high up do you think we are?” he asked Mathilde, trying to keep his voice light.

She wasn’t fooled. “You, afraid of heights? I thought you were supposed to be fearless.”

“Heights are *not* a problem,” he protested. He was fine on even the highest mountain. He just didn’t care for having nothing more than a flimsy bit of wood between him and open air.

Mathilde continued to tease him, and he grumbled at her and watched the sails rather than the valleys, but her company and the bright sun were slowly relieving the tension in his shoulders. He felt a long way from the world, and he wondered if this was what made the Ysians pacifists. It was hard to imagine the dank shadows of a morning ambush when you were fluttering along like a mildly purposeful cloud.

Then the ship lurched suddenly beneath them, and he grabbed Mathilde's arm a little tighter than he'd meant to and, to his embarrassment, squeaked, "What was that?"

She didn't call him out on it, bless her kind heart, but just said soothingly, "A contrary wind, perhaps."

Then it happened again, the ship tipping slightly to the side before it righted itself with a hard jerk. Sjurd locked one arm around the rail and the other around Mathilde, and looked around for someone who could tell them what in the name of Thunder was going on.

The brat prince was racing up the deck towards them. Sjurd let go of Mathilde to grab him and demand, "What's happening?"

"Let go of me!" the brat yelled. "The ship's in trouble and I need to help!"

"You're not a sailor," Mathilde said. "Let them do their job."

"In an emergency, everyone helps!" the brat stated indignantly.

Sjurd cut across him. "What do you mean, in trouble?" His voice came out harsher than he'd intended, and he swallowed hard. Dying in battle, fine. Falling out of the sky to be smeared across the rocks below like jellied prince, no, no, no. The ship jerked again, and he dug his fingers into the brat's shoulder, fighting back panic.

"There's no need to leave bruises," the brat complained, as if he wasn't the least bit concerned by their imminent and violent deaths. "The ship's not supposed to do this. She's only three years old, and the virtue shouldn't have gone out of her wood yet."

"Yet?" Sjurd repeated.

"All ships drop in the end," the brat said philosophically. "Such is life."

"This has happened before?" Sjurd demanded. "And you people still let us board this thing?"

That, finally, riled the brat. "*Llinos* is not a thing. She's a lady. And for your information, it takes centuries, and there are plenty of warning signs, and

only an idiot would sail on a ship that was close to her final voyage. Now, let me *go*.”

“Not until you tell me what’s wrong with this ship,” Sjurd demanded, as it bucked again. His stomach rose, and he swallowed hard. Men were clearly not supposed to fly.

It was Mathilde who answered that question, though, probably because she was the only one of the three of them still scanning the valley below. Raising her arm, she pointed into the mist below and yelled, “*Hound!*”

Her voice belled out across the creaking tumult on deck, and Sjurd saw every one of his people and hers go tense, even as the Ysians looked confused.

Following her pointing arm, he saw the shadow in the mist: a dark green smoky haze rising out of the silver veil that hung across the forest, the unmistakable sign of a misthound crouched on the ground below, its bony jaws open and its miasma billowing out.

He turned back to the brat, his head clearing now he knew the cause of all this. “Tell the captain to swing away from that and make landing at the next guard tower.”

“Why?”

“Because that’s a misthound,” Mathilde said grimly, already reaching to twist her loose hair up out of her face into something more suited for battle. “They eat magic.”

Sjurd was already striding towards his cabin, whistling his guard close. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the boy head for the quarterdeck again, Mathilde close on his heels. Good. She could explain it to the Ysians while he decided who to pull from the honor guard to deal with this. Let her explain how the misthounds consumed and held every scrap of magic they encountered, and how the Empire trained them to bring it back to their masters to be siphoned into Imperial caches. There was no free magic in the Empire—no ogres, but no healing simples or flying ships, either. All magic belonged to the Emperor, and was allocated out to his favorites as he decreed. Mathilde

knew as well as he did that the Empire's first move against its conquests was to send the misthounds into their territory to consume any hint of magic. They excused it with mealy-mouthed stories about wild beasts and natural migrations, but Sjurd knew the difference between a wild dog and a trained hound as well as anyone.

When their hounds had sucked the soul from a land, their mage cohorts came next, the Emperor's puppets hanging off the strings of power he fed them. In the wake of their destruction, the legions marched, ready to garrison every town and offer the terrorized people the "mercy" of Imperial law and order.

Every year, he fought more hounds, and still they came slinking over the borders and settling into lonely places to breed more young.

Before long, they were anchoring off the top of a solid stone guard tower, causing much excitement among the resident guards, most of whom came rushing out to gawk at the rare sight of an Ysian ship this far inland. The sailors let down a rope ladder, and Sjurd scrambled down as fast as he dared, calling for the post's commander.

He was not much more than a boy, seventeen at most, but he met Sjurd's greeting with a sharp salute and a steady gaze.

"Misthound," Sjurd said curtly. "League and a half, south-southwest."

The boy's shoulders sagged a little, but he simply said, "I've got five men injured, but we've got horses and weapons, and the other nine are fit to ride."

"What happened?" Mathilde demanded over Sjurd's shoulder, and he saw the moment when the boy looked at her properly and, as most of them did, lost his heart. For the first time, he stuttered, "Er, six hounds in the last week, ma'am. We've sent for reinforcements, but..."

"We'll ride with you," Sjurd said, cutting him off. He trusted Mathilde, but she was still the representative of a foreign government and didn't need to know about the increasing strain on their supply lines.

When he and Mathilde rode out, bows and modified boar spears slung from their saddles, he glanced up at the ship as they rode below its shadow. Ivarr and Hrolf were hanging over the rail, and they both saluted as he rode by, but it was the brat prince who caught his eye. He was watching very solemnly, the sun shining in his pale hair, and he waved awkwardly to Mathilde, a little too late.

He looked afraid, and Sjurd could think of nothing that would comfort him.

CHAPTER II

Sjurd: Aged 23

Three weeks before Sjurd and Mathilde were due to marry, the Empire marched into Challoner. Within three days, troops had secured the capital. On the fourth day, they executed the king, queen and Crown Prince Josselin. Mathilde was already in Axholme for the wedding, along with her younger sisters Aude and Gisele, and Josselin's pregnant wife Rosamund, who had come to be her attendants in the ceremony.

King Snorri had sent a page for them as soon as word reached him, and he stood up as they came into his private study, ushering them to comfortable chairs. It was the most considerate gesture Sjurd had ever seen the cantankerous old bastard make, and he saw Mathilde register it and, for just a moment, falter. Then she lifted her chin, and he could see that she had guessed. She didn't flinch again, but put her arm around shy little Aude and listened gravely.

Rosamund began to weep silently before King Snorri had said three words, one hand over her eyes and the other cupped over the swell of her belly. Gisele put her arms around the older woman and kept listening, her brown eyes wide and unblinking. Aude simply shook her head, again and again.

Mathilde listened to everything Snorri could tell them, and then thanked him. Without another word, she walked out of the room, her steps careful and controlled.

Sjurd went after her, but lost her in the crowds milling through the halls. It was the second day of the month, sacred to Tiw, and so a court day. He and the king should have been in the hall of judgment, hearing petitions from the common people, but the session had been postponed, and now every public corridor and courtyard was milling with disgruntled petitioners, squalling children, badly rolled and stacked legal documents, and, in far too many places, livestock. The crowd that had parted courteously for Mathilde hindered

him, with anxious petitioners tugging at his sleeve or stepping into his path to demand his attention.

He shrugged them aside, swallowing his mood to make polite promises and apologies, and eventually won free of the crowd.

Mathilde was in her room in the guest wing. He'd always thought it was one of the nicer rooms, opening onto a quiet corner of the palace garden. It overlooked the red roofs of the lower city and the wide ribbon of the River Ax, bright with barges carrying lodestone and coal down from the mountains. Today, despite the warm sunshine and open windows, it seemed dull and stuffy.

Sjurd stopped in the doorway. He wanted to offer her some comfort, but she had her back to him, and the line of her spine was as straight and sharp as a sword. He dared not touch her. Instead, he cleared his throat and asked gruffly, "What are you doing?"

"Packing," she said, and crossed the room with quick, sharp steps to rifle through her drawers and pull out a thin brown linen shirt and a pair of worsted hose. "Close the door."

He obliged, hoping she might slow down enough to talk to him if they had some privacy. "You can't just ride home, Tilde. They'll kill you the moment you reach the capital."

"I'm not riding for the capital," she said and pulled her dress over her head, throwing it into the corner.

Sjurd yelped, suddenly confronted with far too many pale curves. "Mathilde!"

She smiled then, but it was a sharp-edged and bitter thing compared to what he was used to from her. "They're breasts, Sjurd, not ogres. There's no need to be afraid."

"You shouldn't surprise a man with those things," he grumbled.

“And they thought it was a good idea to marry you to a woman?” she tossed over her shoulder, dragging on her plain clothes. “Don’t panic. I’m putting them away. Pass me my gambeson, will you?”

“They’ll kill you,” he said again, trying to get her to understand what seemed obvious to him.

She shrugged, pulling her hair back into a tight braid, securing it with a leather cord. “Until Josselin’s baby...” She swallowed. “Until the child is born, I’m the only queen Challoner has. My people need me. Someone has to organize a resistance, and if we can’t force them out now, we never will. You know how this works.”

“I know what they do to resistance leaders, too,” he snapped back, crossing his arms. “Your country needs you alive.”

“Rosamund and the girls will live.” She took another shaky breath. “We have an agreement with Pryderi of Ys to give them asylum. Make sure they get there for me, please.”

“Of course,” he said softly. “I just wish you’d go with them. Or stay here and fight beside me. Don’t take away your people’s last hope.”

“Rosamund and the baby are their hope,” she said wearily. “I’m their sword.”

He stopped arguing after that, and helped her with her armor, as if he were her squire. He sent a page to fetch her sisters to the courtyard, and held her horse while she kissed them goodbye. The day was sliding into afternoon, the sun low and golden on the whitewashed palace walls, and he wondered how the world could look so lovely when it was so full of grieving. Beside him, the horse shifted a little, obviously catching the mood, and he lay a hand on her warm side to soothe her.

“I’ll leave her with the border guard,” Mathilde said softly, coming to stand by her saddle. “I’ll be too conspicuous on horseback, once I cross the border.”

“Taking to the farm roads?”

“And the hill trails. We had plans for this, and there are a few places where people may be rallying. I’ll try to send word once...”

He shook his head at her. “Don’t take any needless risks. Keep moving. Watch for spies. Don’t trust anywhere that’s too quiet.”

“I know,” she said impatiently, and then sighed and slid something off her finger to offer to him. “You should take this back.”

It was the engagement ring he’d given her two years ago, an opalescent black lodestar, polished to a sheen brighter than jet and shimmering with rainbows in the sunlight. He closed his hand against it. “It’s yours.”

“I can’t promise to come back.”

“It’s still yours.”

She kissed his cheek lightly, her eyes bright, and then said quietly, “It’s too unique. I’ll be passing as a country girl.”

He took it then, but fumbled the dagger off his belt to give to her instead. It was a good piece, which had saved his life more than once, and it was completely plain and functional. She fixed it on her belt and then swung into the saddle. Leaning down, she commanded, “Marry someone sweet.”

“That was always the plan,” he told her.

He got a ghost of her true smile. “I believe that’s the most gallant thing I’ve ever heard you say. Stars bless you, Sjurd.”

“Thunder guard you,” he said and stepped back.

She went out of the gate in a soft clatter of hooves, and he watched until she vanished between the houses below. Then he climbed up the steps to the top of the gatehouse, young Aude on his heels, and watched the eastern gate of the city until he saw her pass through, the only rider on the road.

“There,” he said to Aude, pointing, and she squinted down and nodded resolutely.

They watched as Mathilde rode swiftly away along the causeway that crossed the fens, growing smaller and smaller by the second. She was his

closest friend, the only one who understood the demands of being both heir and general, but he hadn't realized how dear she was to him until he watched her ride away.

At last she faded into the mist on the horizon, but even then Aude would not go in. "I'm watching," she said, her voice thin and hard. "I'm watching for my sister."

So Sjurd sat with her as the day faded. The light seemed to hang over the fields, even as the stars began to blaze above them and the lamplighters came out into the streets of the city with their poles and lanterns. By then the night had grown cold, and Aude was shivering beside him. Sjurd put his own cloak around her shoulders and said, although his own heart was breaking, "We should go in."

"I'm still watching."

"It's dark now. We can't see the road." She didn't seem minded to move, so he added, "We can come back in the morning and watch again."

"But by then she'll be gone!" Aude snapped. Her voice cracked on the last word, and then, finally, she wept. He put his arm round her awkwardly, and wiped her tears with the corner of his cloak, for the lack of anything better. When she cried herself into exhaustion, he carried her back inside the palace to the arms of her remaining family.

And then, because his night was far from done, he made his way back to the king to join his war council.

Celyn: Aged 16

Celyn was in a cheerful mood as he flew the sky yacht *Eirlys* towards Holmebury for Mathilde's wedding. He still thought it was a shame she was marrying the oaf, but it was a chance to see her and catch up with Ivarr. Better still, for the first time, he'd been allowed to fly himself here, instead of waiting for one of the dismally slow cargo ships to wallow through the lower sky. *Eirlys* had been a gift from his uncle the king on his last birthday, and he

adored every smooth plank of her, not least because she had once been his mother's.

He swung her low over the river, tilting his sails to ride the strong wind down across the flatlands. The farms in this part of Axholme fascinated him every time he flew over, and he'd never had the chance to draw this close before. He wasn't used to land that just kept going, one little village after another, with vast sweeps of corn rustling in the wind between them, and only the ornate bell towers of their temples to distinguish one from the next. Ivarr had told him that this had all been marshland once, squished between the mountains and the sea, but some canny engineer had found a way to drain it all, with spells, pumps, and embankments. Celyn wanted to know how that worked.

"Why?" Hrolf had demanded. "It won't work on your islands."

Celyn had shot him a long-suffering stare. Sadly, Ivarr had not managed to lose Hrolf as they grew up and even, to Celyn's bewilderment, seemed increasingly fond of the fool. "Sometimes," he had said, speaking very slowly, "people just want to know. Intelligent people, that is."

Unfortunately, Hrolf had gotten used to him, just as he'd had to get used to Hrolf, and sneering at him no longer provoked much of a response.

Bored of cornfields (they did get a little monotonous after the first league or two), Celyn sought out a thermal and rose up again, turning back towards the river. What entertainments might Ivarr have planned for him this time? They had begun to compete a little over the last few months, trying to outdo each other in finding bizarre or hilarious experiences. Celyn was still feeling pretty smug over the wind-powered mechanical band he'd found on Efydd Island, which only played two tunes, on trumpet, cymbals and panpipes, and only if the wind was blowing precisely from the northwest. Ivarr would be taxed to beat that.

Of course, there was always their mutual favorite entertainment in Holmebury—watching the guard train. Being friends with your fiancée, rather than madly in love, was a brilliant plan, Celyn had decided, at about the same

time that he'd worked out that Ivarr was just as fond of beautiful men as he was. And didn't Holmebury have a lot of them, all dark-haired, pale-eyed, and muscular. Very, very muscular.

Celyn sighed a little in happy remembrance and adjusted his stance behind the wheel slightly. He'd not been all that keen when Ivarr first suggested they watch the training sessions. He'd never really understood the point of organized violence. The odd exchange of punches when someone was drunk or angry was one thing, but if you really couldn't stand to be around someone, you could just apply to move to a different island. Fighting for a living seemed rather perverse.

Except the Axholme guard were very keen on training all their men to the highest possible skill level, to the extent that their trainers liked to see every muscle movement, so they could correct any errors quickly. All of which meant, he learned moments after Ivarr finally coaxed him into the training yard, that the Axholme guard trained in nothing more than thigh-length braies. A spectator could almost be blinded by the light reflecting off all those bare chests, broad shoulders, and muscled calves gleaming with sweat.

Ivarr, ever loyal, swore that Hrolf was the most attractive man training. Celyn could, albeit grudgingly, see the appeal (the idiot had grown up very fine in one way, at least). He didn't feel it was quite right to pick favorites, though, not when there was a veritable feast of men laid out before them. Even the oaf was pretty appealing when you saw him like that, utterly focused on the fight, broad shoulders shifting with muscle, and sweat darkening that little trail of hair that led down...

Celyn had to adjust himself again, and he seriously considered setting the boat down on the river's edge so he could enjoy a little private time with his imagination and his right hand. If he kept sailing, though, he should arrive in time for the afternoon weights session. Real sweaty men were definitely better than imaginary ones.

As he coasted down towards the city, though, he immediately saw that something was wrong. The streets were quiet, and there was a long column of

men marching out of the city, towards the mountains. There should have been a bustle of preparation for the wedding, but he couldn't see a single banner or strand of bunting. Instead, he could sense the mood even before he landed, a tight, scurrying tension.

He tied up beside the tower of the Ysian embassy and hurried inside to make his presence known to the ambassador. When he got down to the reception room, Ivarr was waiting with the ambassador. That wasn't unusual. He usually kept watch for incoming ships, if Celyn was due to visit, but the expression on his face was new. He looked grim, and he greeted Celyn with a short nod which made him look more like his brother than the sweet-natured boy Celyn liked.

"The wedding's off," he said. "The Empire has invaded Challoner. Mathilde's gone home."

"To be with her family?"

Ivarr and the ambassador looked away from him, and after a moment Celyn understood. "Oh." It didn't feel real. He'd been told the Imperial threat was imminent for so long that he'd stopped taking it seriously. Suddenly those lines of beautiful soldiers stopped seeming like a special entertainment laid on for his and Ivarr's benefit. Now Mathilde, warm-hearted Mathilde, had gone riding into danger, and there would be no wedding.

"Should I fly home?" he asked.

"No," Ivarr said, a little too fast. "Stay." Then he added, more somberly, "It reassures people, seeing a boat come in from Ys."

"Then of course I'll stay," Celyn said, and looked to the ambassador. "Unless you advise otherwise."

"Your little yacht flies at courier speed, doesn't it, Your Highness? You are safe here, for the time being, but it may be that we need a message boat."

"I am at your service," Celyn said, and bowed to him.

It was a strange and uncomfortable time. He had put aside any thought of sightseeing or ogling soldiers with only a little twinge of regret, but he had

expected there to be something vital and urgent for him to do. Instead, he found that everyone seemed very busy, rushing back and forth and having swift and whispered conversations in corners (they always went quiet as he walked by, turning their heads to watch him go), but nothing actually seemed to be happening. Nobody was willing to tell him what was going on, or even linger for a conversation. He got so sick of polite excuses that it was rather a relief when Sjurd stormed into Ivarr's sitting room, where Hrolf and Celyn had given into boredom enough to start betting on dice while Ivarr was off in some unspecified council. Sjurd took one look at Celyn and snarled, "Oh, for fuck's sake!" Then he slammed straight out again.

"Charming," Celyn commented and rolled the dice again.

"Supposed to be getting married this week," Hrolf said wisely. "Think of what he could have been fucking." Most of Hrolf's conversation these days was about fucking.

Celyn wrinkled his nose. He adored Mathilde, but really? "Urgh. Girl parts."

"Yeah," Hrolf sighed and then, spotting Celyn's facial expression, he added kindly, "Boys are good to fuck, too. Girls are different, not better."

"You just need a big enough hole, don't you?" Celyn remarked and rolled again. "Double six. You owe me another penny."

CHAPTER III

Celyn

No one seemed to know what had happened to Mathilde, or the ambassadors from Ys and Axholme who had been posted to Challoner. There had been constant trade between Axholme and Challoner, and every day representatives of the merchants' families came trailing up the hill to wait outside the palace gate for news.

An Ysian cargo ship had been there too: *Meirionwen*, out of Haearn Island, trading fine cloth and hardy grain for wine. Celyn got used to the sight of old Lord ap Meredydd, the Ysian ambassador, walking up the hill with the merchants' families, often carrying a small child or with one of the younger spouses supporting his elbow. After the third day, Celyn asked him why he didn't just ride or take his coach.

"We are each other's only allies now," ap Meredydd said, smiling at a passing maidservant, who curtsied and smiled back. "A good girl, young Alfdis there. Her mother Jorunn has worked at the embassy for many years. I do like to talk to people here. We are very strange to them, I've learned. If we are embroiled in this same war, it helps the ordinary people to know a little more of us."

Celyn wasn't quite sure he understood, but by now he was desperate for something to do with his days. Sitting in the palace and waiting for news just made him imagine horrible things. "Can I help?"

The ambassador gave him an honest, surprised smile, but said, "Of course, Highness."

After that, he started each day by walking down through the city to the embassy, trailed by a resentful Hrolf, who had been assigned as his guard, much to their mutual indignation. At first, the merchants' families were shy of him, and only ap Meredydd spoke to him directly. But Celyn had always liked to talk, so he chattered away, and by the second day they were beginning to

ask him questions: did Ys really float in the sky? How many islands were there? How big was each island? Where did their rivers go? Was he going to take Prince Ivarr away there when they were married? Did he think Prince Ivarr was handsome? (That one made Hrolf scowl.)

The more he talked to them, the more he worried. The Empire and its threat had always seemed so far away. It had taken his mother from him, and so he had always hated it, but it had always been a monster on the far side of the mountains, a reason never to leave home. Here everyone seemed to see it as an inevitable doom. Until now, he'd imagined Mathilde riding off to be a hero, in some vaguely exciting storybook way. Now he began to fear for her.

Then, very early one morning, before it was quite light, he was roused from his bed by a heavy-eyed page and summoned to the palace walls. King Snorri was already there with Sjurd, and Ivarr and Hrolf came stumbling up behind him. Glancing down into the courtyard, he could see the ambassador dismounting from his horse by the dim torchlight.

The sun was just rising over the mountains to the east, illuminating the top of the ridge like a manuscript limned with gold. The rest of the land was still gray with shadows, only the long lines of the rivers and cuts gleaming faintly. The horizon was hazy, with the morning light blurring what little could be seen, but as Celyn squinted to see what everyone was staring at, he could discern something large moving slowly through the sky.

“Is it a ship?” Sjurd asked him sharply, passing him a spyglass.

Celyn looked through it, but he couldn't pick out much more, just a shadow lumbering out of the dawn. He was a child of Ys, though, and his instincts knew what he was seeing. “Yes, but damaged. I've seen wrecks move like that as they drift back to land.”

“Drift?” Sjurd repeated sharply. “Can you tell if anyone's on board?”

“Not unless you have a considerably more powerful spyglass,” Celyn snapped. “I can't even tell for certain whether she's *Meirionwen*.”

“Let us pray she is,” Lord ap Meredydd said gravely behind him. “Remember that *Prydwen* is still in Imperial hands.”

“My mother’s ship?” Celyn repeated, surprised. Ys had mourned the ship as well as her lost captain and crew, but he had always thought of her as being as dead and gone as his mother, whose ashes the Empire had returned to Ys. The idea that the Empire might dare fly her made his spine crawl.

“It was our belief at the time,” ap Meredydd said, “that the whole attack was motivated by the Empire’s desire to steal one of our ships.”

He hadn’t known that. He had been too devastated at the time to ask any questions. “How would one ship help them?”

“The Empire is vast, and they are desperate to have a means to subdue rebellions and cross oceans and deserts. With enough flying ships, nothing could stop them from devouring the rest of the world. They thought,” ap Meredydd said with a note of disdain, “that *Prydwen* flew because of some spell or mechanism that they could replicate.”

“Doesn’t she?” Sjurd asked. The shape of the ship was becoming a little more distinct now, and she seemed to be on a course for Holmebury.

“If she was drifting, she’d be running further to the south,” Celyn said. “And, no, the virtue’s in the wood, and *derwen* oaks only grow in Ys.”

“If the Empire has learned that,” Sjurd said harshly, “there’s no power on this earth that will keep it from your doors.”

It made Celyn shake, the shudder rolling down from his shoulders. To his surprise, it was Hrolf who moved to nudge him comfortingly and mutter, “Forgot your cloak, didn’t you?”

Celyn shot him a tight-lipped smile in gratitude for the excuse. He was a little more surprised when Hrolf passed across his own cloak, and he realized that he was actually quite glad that Hrolf and Ivarr were there. As the ship drew closer, he narrowed his eyes, trying to compare her silhouette to his memories of both *Meirionwen*, whom he had seen once as she passed Gwydr Island, and *Prydwen*, who had been a second home to him for years before his

mother flew away. She had been a slim, arrogant beauty, built for diplomats and passengers, not cargo.

He was sure for a while before he spoke, but eventually he offered the spyglass back to Sjurd. “That’s *Meirionwen*.”

“You’re sure?”

“Absolutely. She’s too wide in the beam for *Prydwen*.”

“Praise Dwynwen,” ap Meredydd breathed. “Even one ship could devastate a city from above, if it had *Prydwen*’s guns. The Empire likes that kind of victory, where it can rain destruction without risking the safety and reputation of its troops.”

“Let us hope that your ship never returns home, then,” Sjurd said harshly. “The Empire does not need a weapon like that.”

The ship steadily struggled closer throughout the morning. Celyn stayed on the walls even as the others disappeared back inside. Below him, he could see people climbing onto the city walls to point and watch for a few moments. Sjurd had left him the spyglass, and by midmorning he could see why she was wallowing so badly in the air. Her sides were stove in badly in two places, the holes patched with sailcloth, and she only carried one topsail, with her foremast snapped off halfway up.

She continued to lose height steadily, but someone was clearly steering her.

“She won’t make it here,” he said aloud.

He hadn’t realized that Sjurd was behind him until he asked sharply, “She’ll crash?”

Celyn shook his head. “I think the captain will be able to set her down in a field.” He offered the spyglass backwards. “I don’t know the land.”

Sjurd looked and drew his breath through his teeth thoughtfully. “She’s about four leagues out, near Rushey. We can get riders out there in not much more than an hour.”

“I’d like to ride with them.”

“Can you keep up?” Sjurd’s tone was so casually contemptuous that Celyn had to bite his lip.

Forcing his voice to stay light, he said, “Better than Lord ap Meredydd. It is an Ysian ship. They might not want to talk to you. One could hardly blame them.” Possibly he hadn’t managed to bite his temper back well enough.

By that evening, he almost regretted his bravado. Ivarr had taught him to ride, but they had never gone at such a bone-jarring speed as that first ride out to meet *Meirionwen*. Nobody in Ys rode. None of the islands were more than a day’s ride wide, and there wasn’t enough fodder to keep horses. He’d thought he was getting rather good at it, for an Ysian, but Ivarr’s gentle lessons had been no preparation for trying to keep pace with Sjurd and his guard.

Then they had arrived in the little village of Rushey, barely more than a farm, a windmill, a temple, and three houses, and he forgot how much his legs hurt, as he plunged into the middle of a flood of panic. The local people had rushed to the rescue of the stricken ship, and the streets, temple and barn were all full of hurt, frightened people. He gained a new appreciation for Sjurd then, as his arrival and a few sharp commands suddenly created some order from the chaos.

There were three hundred refugees here, families as well as sailors and merchants. The Axholme and Ysian ambassadors were among them, both shaken and full of praise for *Meirionwen*’s captain, who had taken his ship just far enough out of the capital to hide it in the valleys and gather up not just the staff of the Ysian embassy, but all the Axholme citizens they could cram into their emptied hull. They had almost left it too late to escape. The magic had been draining out of the land as they flew down the pass. They had lost altitude twice, tearing their hull open on the jagged rocks, but they had finally broken over the border and taken to the skies again.

“Is there a resistance?” Sjurd asked, his voice intent.

The Axholme ambassador smiled a little, despite her obvious exhaustion. “Yes, and it’s gathering force. They’ve gotten themselves a new leader. She’s top of the Empire’s wanted list already.”

“Good,” Sjurd said, and grinned savagely.

He rode back towards Holmebury not long afterward, but Celyn stayed with the ship and the refugees. It was a sobering realization when it became obvious that none of his people were as familiar with Axholme culture as he was, and he found himself playing diplomat over a thousand petty things.

Meirionwen would not be flying again for a long time, if ever, and he threw himself into the task of organizing a ship from home to come and relieve them. That made him remember that Mathilde’s family had been promised asylum, and he sought them out first thing the next morning to offer them the choice of flying back with him now or waiting for a slower, more comfortable ship.

He felt as old as Lord ap Meredydd by the time he finished speaking to Lady Rosamund. He just wanted to go back to his rooms and sleep, but his shoulders were too tense and his brain too busy to just stop and rest.

Ivarr and Hrolf were waiting for him, both looking as jittery as he felt. Celyn threw himself into a chair opposite them and said, “I wish I was in Ys. I wish we were all in Ys.”

“I wish the Empire didn’t exist,” Ivarr said. “Then it wouldn’t matter where we were.”

“I wish,” Hrolf said, his tone musing, “that we could all talk about something else.”

“Start a conversation, then, genius,” Celyn suggested and laughed when Hrolf simply made an obscene gesture at him. They all sank into an exhausted silence. How did people live with this level of anxiety, Celyn wondered. It made the whole world seem a little numb and distant, and it was so wearying. Did Sjurd feel like this all the time, or had he and all the rest of the border guard just learned to live with it? Celyn wasn’t sure which would be worse—always feeling like this, or having fear become just a normal part of life.

Then a page arrived with a note for Ivarr. He read it, his eyes widening, and stood up. “There’s been a message from Challoner,” he said. “Sjurd wants me in the council.”

“Any news of Mathilde?” Celyn asked.

“Not in the note. I’ll let you know.”

But he didn’t come back. After an hour, Celyn got sick of chess and swept the board to the floor, sending the little wide-eyed warriors tumbling across the rug.

“What, just because you were losing?” Hrolf said.

Celyn rolled to his feet and paced to the window. “Because I’m sick of just sitting here.”

“We could go and get drunk,” Hrolf suggested.

Typical. And stupid, too. “I thought you people had laws to stop anyone our age getting into taverns.”

Hrolf grinned. “I know places that will serve us.”

“And they’re open midmorning, these places?”

Hrolf’s face fell. “Huh. Not so much.”

“You’re an idiot,” Celyn snapped.

“You’re annoying,” Hrolf returned cheerfully. “Want to fuck?”

Celyn gaped at him. “Seriously?”

Hrolf shrugged. “Why not?”

It was rather tempting. Celyn had reached a point in his life where he strongly believed he ought to have fucked someone, and he didn’t really care who. Hrolf might be an idiot, but he was an idiot in a very fine body, and Celyn’s cock twitched in interest.

On the other hand, Ivarr would kill him.

In the interests of future marital harmony, Celyn resorted back to a time-honored form of distraction: enraging Hrolf. “Thanks,” he drawled, “but I’ll pass. I don’t know where you’ve been.”

Then he ran before Hrolf, too, suffered a flashback to their not-so-distant youth and tried to clobber him.

He ended up roaming around the palace gardens. Unfortunately, he hadn’t thought to pick up a book before he fled, not that he would have been able to concentrate. Before long he was beginning to wish he’d taken Hrolf up on his offer. He’d been wondering for a while if Hrolf’s arrogance and slightly bowlegged swagger were affectations, or proof that he really was hung like the proverbial horse.

He tried to stop thinking about it, but then his brain filled up with worry. He wandered through the gardens, switching between vague lust and worry about just how many people he’d be able to fit onto little *Eirlys*, if the Empire did just keep marching. The two moods clashed uncomfortably, settling in his belly in a sickly swirl.

After a while, it occurred to him that no one would be able to find him out here, so he headed back into the main palace. All anyone could tell him was that the king and the princes were still locked away in council. Even Lord ap Meredydd was waiting for them to emerge, so Celyn joined him in the library for a while.

He still couldn’t settle, though, and ended up wandering back into the garden. The weather had turned, bringing in lowering clouds that turned the whole sky a uniform gray. The light was flat, and he couldn’t tell how much time was passing. He ended up on the walls again, looking down on the city and watching the bustle in the streets around the gatehouse.

He sat there for a long time, until his legs cramped and his bladder started to complain. Back inside, in search of a privy and some lunch, he found the halls all seemed deserted. Lord ap Meredydd had vanished from the library, and Hrolf wasn’t in his rooms anymore. After some desultory searching, Celyn

wandered back outside again. At least the air was fresh, and he could walk out some of his nerves.

On his second circuit of the grounds, he passed close under the windows of the archery range and heard the distinctive thunk of an arrow slashing into a target. It was followed by another and another in relentless succession, with barely a pause between them. The noise made the back of his shoulders tense, not least because he didn't think anyone used the indoor range in the summer.

The door was standing open, so he slipped inside quietly to lean against the worn wood of the back wall, the sandy floor muffling his steps.

He didn't think Sjurd would have noticed him if he'd come in decked in bells and ribbons. He was standing in the middle of the range, with a single target set up at the far end, and he was firing at it, arrow after arrow in a fluid, mindless stream. He wasn't aiming, not that Celyn could see, but he wasn't missing either, arrows slamming home, clustering in the central ring until each new hit came with a shrill of splinters.

The bow was the one weapon Celyn could use, although he had only ever hunted with it. He couldn't shoot like that, though, and his breath caught in his throat. It should have been impressive, but it wasn't. The room was too quiet, and Sjurd's breath too harsh. The sound of each new shot slashing through the air set Celyn's teeth on edge. He didn't know what he should do. He didn't think Sjurd would hear him if he tried to speak, and he didn't want to leave him here alone, even to get help. He didn't think Sjurd would want to be seen like this, but someone had to be here. In the end, he just stood, trying not to breathe loudly.

At last, Sjurd ran out of arrows. He kept reaching back into his quiver, his hand closing twice on empty air before he let it drop. Celyn thought it might be over, but then Sjurd moved forward in a great rush, his steps long and hurried, and began to tug the arrows out of the target, his grip hasty and clumsy. He refilled his quiver and walked back to his original place. Taking up his stance again, he reached back, not even looking at the arrow he was nocking into place.

That did make Celyn move, darting forward to remove the arrow before Sjurd could draw back the string.

Sjurd grabbed at it, snarling at him wordlessly.

“The shaft is cracked,” Celyn said, his voice wavering a bit. Sjurd was taller than him, and far more accomplished at violence, and clearly not in his right mind. He was a superb archer, from everything Celyn had seen and heard, but superb archers knew better than to shoot broken arrows. Moving very slowly, Celyn felt his way through Sjurd’s quiver until he found a good arrow. “Here. This one.”

Sjurd took it, and then shrugged his quiver off into Celyn’s hands. He turned back to the target without another word, and after a moment of confusion, Celyn began to sort through the quiver frantically, throwing aside all the cracked and splintered arrows. Sjurd was already reaching for the next one before he was half done, so he just started putting the good ones straight into Sjurd’s hand.

When he ran out again, Sjurd returned to the target. This time he handed the quiver straight to Celyn and waited, tapping his foot silently. Celyn had no intention of leaving now. In silence, because it would have been wrong to speak, he weeded out the broken arrows and handed the quiver back. Again Sjurd began to shoot, and this time the quiet sound of the arrows flying to their violent end made Celyn want to scream to shatter the awful oppressive quiet of the range.

What had happened? Was the Empire coming? Should they already be running for the coast?

Sjurd’s arms began to shake long before he had destroyed all his arrows. He didn’t stop shooting, though more of them went astray, clattering into the back wall.

This time, when the last arrow in his quiver plowed into the legs of the target with a screech, he didn’t walk forward. Instead, his hands fell to his side, and he dropped his bow. After a moment, he stripped off his gloves and dropped them too, his pale, bared hands curling up into loose fists.

He didn't move, but his eyes fell closed.

Feeling very young, Celyn reached out and touched Sjurd's shoulder, keeping his arm extended and his touch light. He felt like he was touching a wounded animal, and at risk of having his hand bitten off, but he couldn't see anyone, even Sjurd the Oaf, hurting that badly and not offer comfort.

Sjurd went tense, but then swung round sharply to lock his hands in Celyn's shirt and drag him close, their cheeks almost touching. Celyn could feel him shaking and, lost for any better idea, patted him awkwardly on the back. Sjurd shook and dropped his head to Celyn's shoulder, his breath rasping out in long, rough gasps which Celyn didn't realize until hours later were the closest this man would allow himself to sobs. Now Celyn forgot that he disliked the man and put his arms around him, rocking and shushing him, as if he was one of Celyn's little brothers, running to him with a grazed knee.

At last, Sjurd went still. When he drew back, releasing Celyn, his blue eyes were flat. Celyn saw the moment when he came back to himself enough to realize who he was leaning on and the following flush of grief and humiliation. Then his mouth twisted and he said, his voice soft and dangerous, "Get out. *Go.*"

Celyn went, running back through the shadowy gardens until he reached the safety of his own rooms.

An hour later, Lord ap Meredydd came to tell him that the Empire had captured Mathilde in the mountains above the capital.

She had been executed two days ago, beheaded on the steps of her own palace.

CHAPTER IV

Celyn: Aged 23

As he flew *Eirlys* over the brown winter fields, fighting to keep her steady before the strong wind that was sweeping off the sea, Celyn reflected grimly on how much the fens had changed since he first crossed them nine years ago on the way to his betrothal. When he had flown across rooftops before, children had come running out to point in surprise. These days, the few people plodding through the streets, their heads down against the wind, barely bothered to look up as his shadow crossed over them.

Every village had an outcrop of new houses now, many quickly and poorly built. They housed refugees from the mountain villages, who had fled down to the flatlands along the ocean's edge. The Empire had not yet crossed the border, crouching in Challoner, now renamed the Eastern Axtooth Province, like a cat choosing its moment to pounce. Wave after wave of misthounds and "brigands" had come creeping in, however, making travel impossible and life unbearable for many of the mountain folk.

Every man and childless woman of fighting age now spent three months of the year on the border. Those, like Hrolf, who had made the army their life, spent most of their time there. Even Ivarr spent half the year on the border, coming home leaner, harder and sadder every time. Sjurd, of course, rarely returned to Holmebury. Celyn could count on his fingers the number of times he had seen the oaf since Mathilde died, and was quite relieved that it had stayed so low. Anyone else in the world, Celyn thought, the familiar burn of indignation rising in his throat and gut, would have started being nice to someone who had comforted them in their hour of need. Not the oaf, though: no, Sjurd seemed to take pleasure in making Celyn's life a misery whenever they met, to the point that even Hrolf was starting to wonder why.

Thinking about Hrolf and Ivarr didn't help his mood. They were family now, both of them, although Hrolf he counted as the kind of distant cousin you avoided at weddings. They had remained a constant in his life when everyone

else had gone: his mother's long-ago death, his father's long decline until he slipped into death as quietly as he had haunted his own life, his little brothers' adoption by an aunt on another island. Even Lord ap Meredydd had finally retired back to his granddaughter's farm in Ys, and King Pryderi had yet to appoint a replacement, instead relying on Celyn to bear any messages he had for the Axholme court. He seemed to have ended up a diplomat by accident, and he still wasn't sure it suited him. There were times when it was so infuriatingly difficult to bite back the sarcasm he wanted to unleash on every naive idiot (hello, cousin Rhiannon) or stubborn self-righteous prat (Sjurd, always bloody Sjurd) who got in the way of perfectly sensible agreements.

The next gust of wind brought a faceful of rain, and he swore, turning his mind back to steering. By the time he was fighting his way across the rooftops of Holmebury, the rain was lashing down, making it hard to steer above the smoking chimneys. Years ago, when the war began, many people had hoisted flags to hang off their roofs, and the ragged remains still hung in sodden rags from the tops of many buildings, adding a flicker of color to the gray slates and damp thatch.

Hrolf was waiting for him on the top of the embassy tower, huddled into a oilcloth coat, his hair flattened to his scalp with the rain. He caught the painter easily, and helped Celyn pull the rain covers over *Eirlys'* decks with nothing more than a shout of, "Brought the weather with you, I see."

"It's sunny in Ynys Llys," Celyn yelled back over the rattle of the rain against the roof.

It wasn't until they got inside, where some wise soul had left a pile of towels, that he could lower his voice enough to ask, "No Ivarr today?"

Hrolf's shoulders sagged a little. "He didn't feel like coming out."

They exchanged looks, neither of them wanting to put anything more into words.

There were days, more and more every month, when Ivarr wasn't really there. Oh, he performed every duty, with perfect and conscientious grace: smiled when he needed to smile, looked grave when gravity was required,

attended councils or drilled with his men. On the bad days, though, there was nothing more. When his duty was done, he simply sat in his rooms with the blinds down, his eyes vague, and his voice quiet, as he said, over and over, that he was fine, just fine, absolutely fine.

“Well,” Celyn said, trying to make his voice bright, “if he won’t come to us, let us go to him. Is there any point, I wonder, in trying to dry off if I’m going to be drenched again walking to the palace?”

“Scared of a bit of rain?” Hrolf inquired, smirking.

“I see you’ve found a way to keep the water off,” Celyn countered, pinching a corner of Hrolf’s cloak between his fingertips with a grimace. “Tell me, do you wear this to bathe in as well? It could explain a lot about your personal odor.”

“Can’t cope with the smell of a real man?” Hrolf asked, and then lunged for Celyn, lifting his arm to shove his armpit in Celyn’s face. “That’s honest sweat, that is.”

Celyn yelped and ducked, and they tussled all the way down to the front hall, the noise so familiar that the embassy staff just paused to let them pass, hiding smiles behind their hands.

Despite Hrolf’s mockery, they took a less direct route to the palace than usual, walking under the wooden awnings of the market district rather than straight along the high street. Here, in the dry space that still smelt faintly of dried apples and leather, the sound of the rain was a little friendlier, a steady drumming above them like the tramp of marching soldiers (which was a sound Celyn had long associated with Axholme). Very few people were out, and dusk arrived quickly, the afternoon dim and dark long before evening should have come.

“Why are you here this time?” Hrolf asked.

Celyn shrugged, and didn’t answer. What Ivarr knew, Hrolf would know minutes later, of course. Some things he still had to discuss with Ivarr first, though, and the mission he’d been sent on this time was one of those things.

When they reached the palace, the suite laid aside for him was cold and dark. That was another difference from past years. Ivarr had always made sure not just to meet him, but to have his rooms ready. Since he had started retreating into his own rooms, however, he seemed to have forgotten the kindness he had once shown to others. Hrolf tried to fill in for him, there and in far too many other places, but he didn't have the same instinct for it, and he forgot things.

“Shit,” he said, rubbing warmth into his arms as they stood in Celyn's icy rooms. “I'll find a servant or two.”

“Thanks,” Celyn said, his heart sinking. He'd been looking forward to a change of clothes and a warm bed. Even if someone started a fire now, it would be morning before the room was warmed through.

“Sleep in my rooms tonight, if these still feel like a tomb. I won't be there, and they're over the kitchen.”

“Nice,” Celyn said, and then eyed him sideways. “Where are you sleeping?”

“Er,” Hrolf said hurriedly, blushing. “Let's find Ivarr.”

Ivarr actually smiled when he saw them, rising from his seat to embrace them both. He should have looked good, with all the extra muscles he had earned in the army, and his hair curling softly back from his ears to frame his lean face and solemn eyes. There was something too sad in his face for Celyn, though, as if he were made of cracked glass.

When he sat down on the chair opposite Ivarr, leaning his elbows on his knees, Hrolf sat beside Ivarr, his arm thrown across the back of the chair, and his fingertips just brushing Ivarr's shoulders. He didn't seem to be aware of how he was sitting, until he caught Celyn's look and blushed again, lifting his chin and narrowing his eyes.

Ah. So that was where he'd be sleeping tonight. Celyn had been wondering how long it would take them. He had known from the start that love matches were the exception to the rule, and it was likely that both he and his husband would discreetly take lovers. Within an hour of meeting Ivarr, he had been

able to predict exactly who Ivarr's lover would be. It was amazing that it had taken the two of them so many years to realize the astoundingly obvious. Even Hrolf wasn't normally quite so dim.

Of course, the timing was a little unfortunate.

At last, when they had exchanged all the usual gossip and news, Ivarr asked, not sounding as interested as he once had, "So, what brings you to Axholme?"

"Early birthday present," Celyn suggested wryly.

"I'm not twenty-one for another two months."

It was Hrolf who understood, his brows suddenly narrowing as he glared at Celyn. Twenty-one was, finally, marriageable age in Axholme.

"There are some concerns in Ys about the strength of the alliance," Celyn said. "A significant demonstration would be beneficial."

"Oh," Ivarr said, understanding finally showing on his face. "Oh."

"Forget sometimes why you keep turning up to annoy us," Hrolf muttered. His hand was tight on Ivarr's shoulder now.

"I'll always come back to annoy you, Hrolf," Celyn promised, putting his hand over his heart and pouting.

Hrolf threw a cushion at him.

He caught it and tucked it behind his own head, before saying more seriously, "Not much has to change. I'm pushing the Crown Council to appoint me in Lord ap Meredydd's place. We'd be here, in that case, with occasional visits to Ys. You'll hardly notice the difference."

Ivarr roused himself to shoot Celyn an irritated stare. "There's no need to patronize me as well."

"Sorry," Celyn said and rose to his feet, forcing himself to be a good friend. "You'll want to talk about it, I'm sure. I won't pass the message on to your king until tomorrow."

“You don’t have to go,” Ivarr said, but his shoulders were already drawing up.

Celyn crossed the room to squeeze both their hands, where they were linked against Ivarr’s thigh. “Yes, I do. I’ll see you in the morning, my friends.”

“What makes you think I’m your friend?” Hrolf grumbled, but he squeezed Celyn’s hand in return.

He couldn’t help feeling a little lonesome as he walked away from Ivarr’s rooms. He’d grown used to them, over time, and he was happy that they had each other, he really was. It was just that it left him lonely again. They’d find a way to ensure that Ivarr could still love Hrolf, but he knew that solution would leave him sleeping alone, and who in the world would be willing to look at him when the political lies would claim he was happily married?

He couldn’t face going to sleep yet, especially if it was in Hrolf’s bed. Instead, he made his way to the library. He had loved the palace library ever since Ivarr first showed it to him. There was nothing like this at home. Building space was so limited that no one was going to put up a building that housed books rather than people. Individual scholars collected according to their interests, and took their students into their homes as apprentices. It was a constant wonder to be able to find histories on one side of a shelf and astronomy on the other side. He could read about anything in here, following his whim from one wall of leather spines and polished shelving to another.

He found a book on the early history of the Empire and curled up into an alcove to read. The rain was pounding down on the windows, but the library was warm and quiet, the enclosed lanterns casting a soft light across the worn tables. He lost himself in the book for a while, but eventually had to put it aside. He could see too much of the roots of their impending doom in the narrative of the rise of the first mage-kings in the furthest east.

It was strange, he thought, gazing around the library vaguely, how many places could feel like home. This was one of the places he valued most in the world, alongside his house on Gwydr and the *derwen* woods above the city of

Llys, where the air was sweet with the scent of starflowers. He was Ysian, and proud of it, but Axholme held an ever greater part of his heart. He no longer felt like he quite belonged in his uncle's court, among the crowd of giddy youths who had never sailed beyond the outer isles, but he would always be an outsider in Axholme. Where in the world did he belong? Would he ever have a place, or a man, who would be a true home for him?

He put the book back on the shelf, because it was making him pensive, and found a volume of wild travelers' tales instead, which purported to describe the lands beyond the Veil of Storms, full of giants and monopods. It amused him, so his mood was brighter by the time his eyelids began to droop.

It was late by then, and the drumming of the rain had stopped, and he was half ready to just curl up in the library and sleep there, cradled by the warm ranks of books. If that story got back to his government, though, it probably wouldn't help his cause, so he dragged himself up and outside, hoping the cold air would wake him up enough to get back to a comfortable bed in one piece. He hoped Hrolf really was with Ivarr, and hadn't forgotten his earlier offer. He might have, grudgingly, acknowledged that they were friends, but that didn't mean he wanted to share a bed with the idiot. Then, to his dismay, he remembered that people here locked their doors more than they did in Ys, and he didn't have Hrolf's key.

The wind was still heaving through the trees, filling the night with eerie sighs and surging motion. He got challenged by guards three times before he had crossed back to the royal wing, which was both good and a reminder that he wasn't at home. Few people in Ys worried that their princes might be assassinated; here in Axholme, the Empire had made numerous attempts at Sjurd, Ivarr and the king. Sjurd, according to Hrolf, who still hero-worshipped him, was only alive because he slept with his sword and had instincts quick enough to strike an assassin down even stark-naked and half-asleep.

At the time, Celyn had made an obscene remark about Sjurd's sword, but the thought of it made him uneasy. The idea of Sjurd, oaf that he was, being slaughtered in his bed like that made his stomach clench. He didn't like the

man, and Sjurd clearly hated him, but someone so bold and fierce deserved a better death.

Back outside the palace wing, he decided to climb onto the terrace that ran along the second floor. If he could glance in the windows as he passed Ivarr's rooms, he should be able to tell if Hrolf was there without seeing any body parts he didn't want to.

There were more guards up here, some of them less obvious than the ones tramping through the grounds below, and he stopped to chat with those he knew, exchanging quick jokes and asking after their families.

The terrace was quieter as he neared Ivarr's rooms, guards on every approach but at just enough distance to give the illusion of privacy. Which, Celyn realized as he got nearer, was probably a very good thing tonight.

It turned out that Ivarr was more of a moaner than a screamer, though he was definitely rising in pitch as Celyn stood there, covering his mouth with his hand to hold in his giggles.

"Oh, yes," Ivarr groaned, his voice slightly muffled in a way that made Celyn envisage him pressed into his pillows. "There, oh, *there*, so fucking good. So big, *oooooh*."

Celyn stuffed the side of his hand into his mouth to stop the laughter. Yes, he would be alone in Hrolf's bed tonight.

It should have been mortifying, but it was all he could do not to break down and roar with laughter. Instead, he stretched his legs into a stride, hoping to get away before they noticed he was there. He'd happily punch anyone who interrupted him at that particular moment, and he wasn't even battle-trained like those two. Even getting confirmation about the rumored size of Hrolf's cock wouldn't be worth the immediately-following encounter with Hrolf's fist.

He'd made it three steps when someone broad-shouldered stepped out in front of him. Celyn's first thought was incredulity: how had an assassin possibly made it past all those guards? Then, belatedly, he went for his dagger.

A hard hand grabbed his wrist, jerking him forward, close enough that he could breathe in the scent of leather, rain and male sweat, and Sjurd growled in his ear, “Don’t bother. If I wanted you dead, you’d be bleeding out by now.”

“Charming,” Celyn drawled. His heart was still pounding, from the shock, of course, not because of the way that Sjurd (urgh, Sjurd) smelled. “Do you welcome all your guests this way?”

“If they’re creeping past my brother’s room in the middle of the night, yes.”

“I wanted to see if they were still awake,” Celyn said irritably, “without walking in on anything I didn’t want to see. I need Hrolf’s key.”

“Why?” Sjurd growled, and Celyn shivered (because he was thinking of the prospect of sleeping in his own cold rooms, naturally).

“Because his rooms are warm, and he clearly won’t be using them, and mine haven’t even been unlocked since I was last here.” Admitting that Ivarr had forgotten he was coming stung, so he lifted his chin and added, “I rather think he’s settled in for the night, don’t you? Rather deeply in, if I’m hearing right.”

Ivarr chose that moment to let out a long, whimpering moan, which was matched by a deep grunt from Hrolf.

Sjurd’s shoulders sagged a little, and he muttered, “Tiw’s piss, Ivarr. One responsibility to meet, that’s all.”

Now that wasn’t fair, and not just because Celyn didn’t like being dismissed as a mere responsibility. He bristled. “It’s not his fault. He’s sick.”

“I know that,” Sjurd snapped impatiently. “Which will mean nothing when the Empire comes. Do you know how they treat that kind of illness across the border?”

“They consider it a punishment from their god,” Celyn said quietly, because he had nightmares about just this. “They bleed the sick on their altars until they recover or die, and then declare the god satisfied.”

Sjurd went still. In a grudging tone, he admitted, “I hadn’t expected you to know.”

“I can read,” Celyn snapped.

“If nothing else of use,” Sjurd muttered. “At least you don’t have an ambassador to turn the insult into a diplomatic incident.”

“Not yet,” Celyn said brightly, and decided not to mention the debates going on at his uncle’s court. “Of course, once they give it to me officially, I’ll bring all my hurt feelings straight to you.”

“You?” Sjurd said, his voice deep with disdain. “The gods do hate us.”

Inside, Hrolf’s grunts started to rise in volume and frequency. Sjurd swore and tightened his grip on Celyn’s wrist, dragging him further along the dark terrace. It wasn’t until he was forced into stumbling to keep up that Celyn realized that some combination of the noise, his nerves and Sjurd’s closeness had done more than send warm shudders through him. He was half-hard.

“Is there a reason you’re trying to dislocate my wrist?” he complained. It wasn’t comfortable trying to keep up with Sjurd’s stride when he was trying to do it bowlegged.

“I’ve stood guard up here before,” Sjurd said. “They’re about to get noisy.”

“They weren’t already?”

“No.”

“Ah, well,” Celyn said. “All joy to them.”

He wasn’t expecting Sjurd to swing him round and slam him into the wall, crowding close to snarl, “What is wrong with you?”

As he was still trying to catch his breath, and the part of his brain that was still working was utterly distracted by the way that Sjurd was pressed against him, all Celyn managed to say, very eloquently, was, “Uh?”

“I watched your ship fly in not four hours ago,” Sjurd told him, voice low and angry, though Celyn couldn’t see what he’d done to annoy the oaf this time. The light was falling through the windows here, and he could see that

Sjurd looked furious. Unfortunately, that wasn't the only thing the dim light showed, and Celyn's traitorous cock wasn't going down. Whereas war had left Ivarr looking broken, it had honed Sjurd into a creature of muscle, power and barely controlled violence. "Since then you have suffered nothing but insult. What manner of a man simply takes that?"

Fucking Sjurd would be like kissing a lightning storm—terrifying, exhilarating, and so very worth the risk.

None of which was helping him get rid of his erection, and Sjurd, he reminded himself, liked women and hated him, and probably would kill him if he got a breath closer and got poked in the thigh. To get rid of him, Celyn summoned up his most irritating tone and remarked, "A man who values his friend's well-being, clearly. Some of us have friends, you see, rather than subordinate officers."

It didn't work. Sjurd only got closer, and Celyn's nobler brain (the one that wasn't seated in his balls) could only wail *don't notice, don't notice*. "And when that friend is your fiance," Sjurd growled, and Celyn fancied he could feel the lines of every individual muscle pressed against his chest, "and he's fucking someone else before you've even set a date, and will keep fucking him throughout your marriage, you still don't care? You'll be lonely for the rest of your life, sleeping in your cold bed while Hrolf makes your husband scream his name."

"Well, actually," Celyn said brightly, because he had to get rid of the man before he ignored what a bastard he was and started humping his leg, "I was hoping they might let me join them from time to time. Hrolf's hung like a horse, you know, and I hear Ivarr could suck the varnish off an arrow shaft. I wouldn't mind being in the middle of that."

Sjurd froze, and Celyn couldn't blame him. He couldn't quite believe he'd said it either. Then Sjurd shifted slightly, his thigh flexing where Celyn's cock was pressed against it.

"Ah," Celyn said, and braced himself for the inevitable punch in the face.

Instead, after another long moment, Sjurd stepped back. When he spoke, his voice was cold and distant. “I’ll ensure that your rooms are ready by the morning, and have someone escort you back to your embassy now. I’m sure they have better lodgings than Hrolf’s used blankets.”

It was late, and Celyn had been annoyed and embarrassed enough for one evening. One look at the set of Sjurd’s shoulders told him he wasn’t being offered a choice, so he bit back his arguments and went meekly enough.

The soldier boy Sjurd ordered to escort him was a good-natured farmer’s son from somewhere up towards the marshes on the northern border, rotated back to the capital to heal up after wounds taken on his fifth border tour. He chattered away as they walked through the streets, flirting with such clumsy sincerity that Celyn had to smile at him. Once they had made it inside the warmth of the embassy, which was built on far cozier lines than the palace, and Celyn had sent someone to make the bed in the little guest room in the tower, young Koll said, “I’d best be back to the barracks, then.”

“Still on duty?” Celyn inquired, sizing him up. His shoulders were wide enough to carry an ox, and he was thick with the kind of muscle that would run to fat if he ever gave up soldiering, but was very fine indeed right now. He had a plain, pleasant face, topped with short dark hair. His eyes were an ordinary blue, but his mouth was wide and smiling. He was no Sjurd but, on the other hand, he was no Sjurd (and, yes, Celyn knew that didn’t make sense, but he was tired and so sick of being alone).

“Done now,” Koll said cheerfully. “Only my bed is waiting for me.”

Celyn sidled closer. “Well, it seems a shame to send you out in the cold again. I’m sure we could find you a bed somewhere.” He ran an inviting hand up Koll’s arm, letting it rest on a firmly muscled bicep, and wet his lips. The little warm knot of arousal that had never quite faded, even after he had been embarrassed in front of Sjurd, was growing again. “But you may have to share.”

Koll's broad face brightened. "It's nice to share." His hand landed on Celyn's ass, and he hummed approval as he squeezed lightly. Then he leaned close enough to say straight into Celyn's ear, "I could share my cock too."

It wasn't subtle, but Celyn didn't need subtle right now. Gleefully, he dropped his hand to press between Koll's legs, feeling the shape of a very nice erection growing there. "By share, I hope you mean that you're going to shove that beautiful thing into my ass and let me ride you until we both pass out."

Koll's eyes widened and his lips parted, his head falling back as his hips pressed forward.

"Yes. Please."

Celyn pointed upstairs. "Bedroom's that way. Shall we?"

Some hours later, he was roused from a limp and pleasant slumber by the stealthy sounds of someone slipping out of bed. He opened his eyes just enough to see the moonlight shining on the pale curve of Koll's ass, and reached out to stroke it lazily. "Going so soon?"

"I should get back to my barracks."

"Stay for another round," Celyn offered. His body was aching gloriously, and he felt a little too used to move, but he was sure he could manage to spread his legs enough to get pounded by that nice fat cock again.

"Can't." There was genuine regret in Koll's voice, and his big hand descended to stroke down Celyn's belly and cup his balls tenderly. "Broken curfew four times already this month, and I'll get caught again if I don't go now."

"Shame," Celyn commented, snuggling down against his pillows and moving lazily against Koll's warm hand. "Another time?"

"Whenever we're both in town," Koll offered easily. "I like your ass, sailor." Then he corrected himself hurriedly, "Er, prince, I mean. Highness."

“Celyn will do.” He sat up and brushed a kiss onto Koll’s cheek. “Go on. I’d hate for you to be punished after such a nice evening.”

After Koll’s steps had faded away, he curled back against his pillows, pulling the blankets up. He felt better than he had in weeks, half the stress of two countries’ worth of political nonsense chased away. Koll’s warmth was still lingering in the bed beside him, and the sheets smelt of musk and sweat. Letting his eyes slide closed, Celyn palmed his cock again. He thought of the hot stretch of Koll moving within him, the strength of broad shoulders beneath his grasping hands, Koll’s hand jerking around his cock, Sjurd shoving him against the wall, his voice sharp with anger.

The last one pushed him over the edge, and he spilled into his hand with a happy sigh.

Then, as the warmth of coming faded, he realized what he’d done. Throwing his arm over his eyes, he tried to persuade himself that it was pure chance, a flicker of memory intruding at an inappropriate moment, no more. He was still arguing with himself when he fell asleep.

CHAPTER V

Sjurd: Aged 30

Sjurd woke up face down on his desk, with some idiot pounding on his door. The hammering noise made him jerk upwards, grabbing at the edge of the desk for balance, and he roared, not quite awake, “Have they crossed the border?”

“No.”

“Then fuck off!” He slumped back over the desk, pillowing his head on his arms again.

“It’s important.” Now he recognized the voice. It had to be Prince Brat, didn’t it?

The realization came with a surge of guilt. He knew how princes ought to treat their guests, even if Ivarr didn’t. Yet he’d still been a complete bastard to the little brat last night. It wasn’t Celyn’s fault that Sjurd looked at him and was carried straight back to the night he learned Mathilde was dead, when he had humiliated himself in front of the boy.

And, of course, there was Ivarr, who terrified him and infuriated him in equal measures. He had seen enough men break on the border to know it was illness and not weakness, but there were times when he just wanted to scream at his brother to appreciate what he had. To see Prince Celyn so easily accept Ivarr’s behavior had infuriated him in ways he couldn’t quite articulate.

“Sjurd, it *is* urgent!”

Sjurd sat up and ran his fingers through his hair. The chain which held Mathilde’s engagement ring had slipped out from under his shirt, and he tucked it away again carefully, squeezing the edges of the little lodestar until it dug into his fingertips and woke him up a little more. His back ached, and his shoulders were uncomfortably cramped. He was too old to sleep in his chair, but walking to his bed never seemed like an efficient use of his time. Maybe

he should have put Prince Brat there, rather than sending him back to the embassy.

His cock twitched, reminding him what a terrible idea that would have been. There had been a moment, just one moment, last night, feeling the brat's arousal, when he'd wanted to do nothing but sink to his knees, tear the brat's hose open and suck that straining cock straight down.

Thunder save him, if he was lusting after *Celyn*, he really needed to find someone to fuck, efficient use of his time or not.

He got up with a grimace, rolling his shoulders out and staggering over to open the window to get some fresh air into the room. He'd actually liked having a study when he first arrived in Holmebury, but that had been before he started spending most of his visits to the capital shut inside it. The walls were covered in maps and troop lists that he saw even when he closed his eyes, and the big polished table in the center might be big enough to lay out a battleplan, but it left no space for a couch big enough to sleep on.

“Sjurd!”

Ignoring the brat's existence wasn't actually going to make him go away, was it?

“A moment,” Sjurd yelled, and poured himself a glass of water from the pitcher on the sill. It tasted flat, but better than the inside of his mouth, and it woke him up a little more, so he almost felt ready to face Celyn. Almost.

The problem was that, if he hadn't been the same brat who had been irritating him for the last decade and was, never forget, engaged to his brother, Sjurd might have been interested. The army was full of men who rushed to obey his every command with awed eyes. When he couldn't bear to go untouched any longer, though, he turned to a different type of man: smart-mouthed lieutenants who argued back, and whose lips curled with sarcasm even under his kiss. He never took more than a night with any of them, though, and never in Holmebury.

And Celyn was not one of them.

“I’m still here. Do I have to pick the lock to get to you, or should I just set fire to the door? Sjurd, Sjurd, Sjurd! I’m still here. Sjurd! Hello in there, Prince of the Mountain Oafs. I’m not going away. Sjurd!”

On second thought, throttling him would be far more satisfying. What had he been thinking? Sjurd strode across the room and flung the door open. “What?”

Celyn jumped a little, but then moved fast, squeezing around Sjurd to get into the study. Sjurd groaned. He was supposed to be a military strategist. He should know better than to allow any opening in his defenses.

“Close the door,” Celyn said quietly, his voice very serious. “I don’t want anyone overhearing.”

Sjurd bit back the urge to order him out again, his heart sinking. What now? He closed the door and turned to face Celyn. “What is it?”

“Ivarr’s gone.”

“Gone where?” Sjurd asked.

Celyn brandished a piece of paper at him. “According to this, somewhere you’ll never find him.”

The implications of that hit like a landslide, and Sjurd staggered, his knees folding under him. Celyn was at his elbow in a moment, holding him up, his voice frantic as he said, “Not like that! I wouldn’t joke about that! Hrolf’s gone, too!”

That got through his panic, as nothing else would have done. Whatever else you said of Hrolf, he had been loyal to Ivarr since they were old enough to walk, and he had a hearty disdain for suicide. Sjurd managed to stand up again, pulling away from Celyn (why did this brat always have to be here to witness his weakest moments?). “Where?”

“I don’t know,” Celyn said. “He had at least enough cunning not to give an exact location. Dwynwen save you, Sjurd, when did you last sleep properly? Will you sit down, please?”

The concern in his voice was irritating enough to straighten Sjurd's spine. "Not when I have to ride after the blithering little fool. What does he say?"

Celyn sighed and read from the letter, his voice dripping with frustration. "It's long. Here. *I can no longer endure living under a death sentence. There is no hope for our future, and I see no point in marrying for political gain when both our countries will soon be annihilated. You are my friend, but I don't love you in the way I love Hrolf. If our time is so limited, we must spend it living a quiet life far from the halls of power. Hrolf and I are going somewhere even Sjurd can't find us, somewhere even the Empire doesn't want. Please don't waste time or resources looking for us.*"

Sjurd considered that in disgust for a moment before he said, "I need a drink."

"It's not even noon," Celyn pointed out.

"So?"

"Fair enough," Celyn said, folding up the letter. "There can't be many places he could have gone."

"North," Sjurd said shortly. He hadn't missed Ivarr's interest in how the fens had been drained and what they had been like before. "He studied the marshes, and once you've lost yourself in there, no one without a local guide can find you. If they've been on the road for six hours or so, they'll cross the border long before we could catch up."

"I could fly over."

"You'd have to search every mile. It could take years."

"We don't have years," Celyn said wearily and propped his own hip against Sjurd's desk with a slight wince. He gave Sjurd a smile that twisted his lips. "I'm afraid I may have precipitated this. I was sent here by the royal council to set a wedding date."

Sjurd had run out of words. He could think of nothing he could say to that. Silently, he went back to his chair, dropping into it and wishing he could turn back time just enough to still be asleep.

“I can keep little incidents like those yesterday to myself,” Celyn said, turning around to face him over the desk. He leaned on it, lists of equipment shortages crumpling under his hands. “There is no possible way to conceal this. Having to cancel this wedding will be seen as a huge political insult.”

“Which means what?” Sjurd asked. “Our situation is too desperate for political games.”

Celyn didn't say anything, but something in the quality of his silence made Sjurd look up. Celyn was looking torn, chewing on his lip as he stared over Sjurd's head. At last, he said, very slowly,

“There are some concerns in Ynys Llys about the alliance.”

“Concerns?” Sjurd repeated flatly. “We're the only two nations left on the continent who aren't part of the Empire. Who else are you people going to ally with? The marsh villages?”

Celyn closed his eyes. “Increasingly, the Empire is seen as a mainland problem.”

“Are you all out of your minds?” Sjurd roared.

“I'm not part of this!” Celyn snapped back. “I spend half my life right here, and Mathilde was my friend too. I know the dangers! I'm spending every moment I have in my own country fighting to make the rest of Ys understand. They could confiscate my ship for revealing what I just told you. Don't you dare accuse me!”

Sjurd sat back a little, surprised by the vehemence in Celyn's tone. He'd never quite taken the brat seriously, smart-mouthed pacifist Ysian that he was. If there was a chance of the alliance failing, he might have to change that. He had been counting on Ysian ships to transport soldiers and supplies when the invasion came. Without them, they would fall as fast as Challoner had. “I thought King Pryderi understood the danger.”

“He does,” Celyn said, and went back to silence, his hands clenching into fists. At last he said, “I'm not the ambassador yet, you know. I have no remit, no permission to share our secrets.”

“What you tell me stays with me and my king. No one else will learn it from us.”

Celyn took a quick, sharp breath. “Well, if I’m already marooned... Pryderi’s dying.”

“What?” Sjurd said. He had not expected that. “Who is his heir? His daughter?”

“My cousin Rhiannon,” Celyn said, grimacing. “She’s three years my junior and has never left Ys. Never wanted to.”

“And there’s the problem?” Sjurd surmised.

“I’ve talked myself hoarse, but she doesn’t want to listen. She’s surrounded by handsome boys courting a crown and telling her what she wants to hear. One miserable cousin predicting the end of the world counts for little with her.”

Could something so petty doom a nation, Sjurd wondered. Perhaps Ivarr had been right to run.

The marshes couldn’t contain the whole of Axholme, though. Someone had to fight for his people’s future. Wearily, he said, “We need to talk to King Snorri.”

Celyn nodded and offered him a hand up. “If you’re still planning on that drink afterward, I might just join you.”

It was an odd feeling, camaraderie with the brat, but Sjurd took his hand. “I might just let you.”

That fellow feeling lasted less than an hour, right up until the moment Snorri told them his solution to their problem.

“You want me to do what?” Sjurd shouted, clenching his hand around Mathilde’s ring. “With him?”

“Marry Sjurd?” Celyn was saying, his voice incredulous. “Me? Him? *Marriage?*”

Snorri sat back, regarding them both through narrowed eyes. “We tell the Ysians that Ivarr has been taken ill and has retired back to your father’s homestead. To show how much we value the alliance, we offer a far more high status match in the form of Sjurd here. You didn’t honestly think you could stay single forever, First Prince?”

Sjurd glared at him. “I’ve changed my mind. I’m going after Ivarr, and I’m going to drag him home by his toenails if I have to.”

“I feel so flattered,” Celyn said, folding his arms across his chest.

Snorri waved his hand dismissively. “If you like, Sjurd, but I’ll just send him home anyway. The alliance clearly needs strengthening, and this is a simple way to do it. You’re a soldier of Axholme, man. Put your personal feelings aside, and do your duty.”

Sjurd couldn’t argue with that, though he could see from Celyn’s expression that he wanted to try. He did end his day by getting drunk, however, and he did it alone.

CHAPTER VI

Sjurd

Six months later, Sjurd had still failed to think of a way to get out of the match. It was all very well marrying a friend and expecting nothing more than convenience. Being tied to the most irritating man he had ever met for the rest of his life was not such a pleasant prospect. He couldn't even get away with telling Celyn to live his life out safely in Ys, not now he'd been confirmed as the ambassador to Axholme (which Sjurd half-suspected was a money-saving exercise on the Ysians' part).

He was still in a thunderous mood two mornings before his betrothal feast, as he climbed out onto the top of the guard tower where he had been based for the spring campaign. Summer had come to the mountains now. The dark green of the firs had been joined by the green fuzz of new grass on all the shelves. Flowers now grew in wild banks where the winter rain had soaked into the soil, rising up in swathes of violet and gold.

Summer might be pretty, but it also brought a wave of new attacks. The misthounds were a constant menace, but at least they only bred once a year, and Sjurd had focused the spring campaign on killing their litters. He was just glad that the whelps looked less like dogs than their parents. Their scales were more marked before they grew their adult fur, and they were cold to the touch, flat-eyed and ugly. If he'd had to order his men to slaughter puppies, morale would have been even worse.

Summer meant more men to fight, supposed brigands who spoke with the accents of the jail houses of the east. Men could be intimidated, though, or tricked. He'd even turned a traitor, whom he had sent back to the lowlands under heavy guard, to be kept away from company until he had proved he was no spy. His story had rung true, though, and made Sjurd glad that his brother was lost somewhere in the mist-wreathed north and, for the first time, relieved that Mathilde was safely dead. Their traitor had been a prisoner of the Empire since birth, the child of a royal hostage held by the Empire before it overran

her kingdom, abandoned to Imperial mercy once she was of no further value. Her son had been born in prison, and had watched his mother die twelve years later, executed for instigating a prison riot which almost freed her and did kill ten guards. The only choice he had ever been given was imprisonment or to serve on the front line of the Empire, where death would come a little sooner.

“Why change your loyalties now?” Sjurd had asked him.

The prisoner had turned sad eyes upon him and said, his flat voice suddenly alive with wonder, “I saw the ships fly over. It gave me hope. It made me think, could I fly away? Could I choose more than how to die?”

Sjurd didn't trust him, but he had thought about him ever since that conversation. How many men like that did the Empire hold, men who did not even know there was something beyond cold hard laws? How could men live with so few choices?

It made being ordered into marriage seem petty in comparison. He would just have to endure it. Of course, that would have been easier if he could have used his original plan and blamed impassable roads to get out of his own betrothal feast. Unfortunately, as a gesture of goodwill, the Ysians had sent a ship to collect him. It was floating into view now, its shadow passing across the roof of the forest as it sank down through the air towards the top of his tower.

They didn't even bother to moor, but just tossed a rope ladder over the side. Sjurd saluted the men at watch on the tower, before he gritted his teeth and began to climb. It took counting off each rung in the ladder, as it twisted in the air, and another dose of pride and willpower after he glanced down and saw the forest spinning far below him.

Once on board, it was a little better, but he was still all too aware that he was on a thin bit of wood a very long way above the ground. He bared his teeth in a forced smile as the captain of the ship welcomed him aboard. Then he claimed tiredness and went and lay down in a cabin where he could at least pretend he was on solid ground.

That didn't help much when the wind swung round an hour out of Holmebury and they bounced their way through the last few miles of the voyage. By the time they made landfall, Sjurd was feeling sick. The last thing he wanted was to be ambushed by tailors and fitted for betrothal clothes.

It was always hard coming back to the city after a long stint on the border, and this was worse than usual. The whole city seemed to be bustling, with bunting in the streets and, as the evening set in, parties spilling across the palace lawns. There was a frenetic edge to it, though, with everyone casting occasional glances east and half the partygoers wearing black ribbons on their sleeves for friends or family lost on the border. It reminded him of his previous engagement, which only brought back his airsickness in full force, and he eventually retreated back to his rooms. He locked himself in, shoving a chair beneath the door handle in case any officious idiot had managed to get their hands on a key, and went to sleep.

That strategy won him a good night's sleep, right until the moment the king's valet, who had been assigned to prepare him for the feast, enlisted the help of a few enterprising soldiers and climbed through the window to wake him up (with a feather duster on the end of a pole, because everybody knew Sjurd slept with his sword and woke up grumpy).

He let them dress him up, because that level of enterprise deserved some reward, and made his way gloomily to the reception King Snorri was hosting in honor of him and Celyn.

It wasn't until he got there that he realized he hadn't actually seen any of the Ysian delegation yet, and that might have been an oversight. It meant that he got trapped in conversation with Princess Rhiannon and three of her posturing suitors for the best part of an hour. Rhiannon, to his surprise, wasn't stupid, but she kept glancing around the hall nervously, as if she was expecting fights to break out at any moment. She was a pretty girl, in a willowy, pale-haired way, but he found her constant jitters wearying. It was a relief when Mathilde's sisters appeared out of the crowd, and Rhiannon's sudden smile showed she welcomed them too.

Well, that was a diplomatic triumph Sjurd himself could take credit for. He had continued to write to the girls even after they went to Ys. When, a few months ago, Aude had complained of being bored on the little island where they had set up their new home, he had remembered what Celyn had said about his cousin. If anyone could persuade Rhiannon to take the Imperial threat seriously, it would be those two, and they would be far less bored in the rush and bustle of a royal palace, even one as cozy as the Ysian court.

He didn't see Celyn himself until they made it up to the high table for the betrothal feast. He was thoroughly irritated to see that Celyn didn't look anywhere near as flustered and bad-tempered as Sjurd felt. He personally hated these affairs, having to think of a thousand slightly different bits of small talk to keep everyone happy. He should have expected that Celyn, who didn't seem to know how to shut up, would be enjoying himself, chattering away happily to one of Sjurd's elderly aunts as he helped her to her place.

He settled her into her seat and then bounced up toward the high table, the smile on his face only fading when he saw Sjurd glaring at him.

"So," Celyn said brightly, "I hear that you used to pull onions out of the garden and try to eat them raw. I hope your breath has improved since."

"I was *three*," Sjurd protested, but Celyn had flitted away cheerfully to greet some southern earls Sjurd hadn't even realized were here. Just how much time had the brat spent in their court? He seemed to know people Sjurd himself had never met.

Dropping into his seat of honor at the high table, he muttered to King Snorri, who was sitting beside him, "Why are we doing all this for a mere betrothal? Won't we have to pay for it all again for the actual wedding?"

"The wedding's not until next year," Snorri reminded him. He already had a full glass of wine, and was eying the doors to the kitchens with the happy anticipation of a lifelong glutton. "We need the political capital now. Smile, Sjurd, or the Ysian chit might think you don't fancy her cousin."

"Perhaps because," Sjurd pointed out, because he'd always felt free to be sarcastic with Snorri, "I don't fancy her cousin."

“With the way she’s got her eye on you, better not advertise that.”

Sjurd hastily plastered a smile onto his face. He had nothing to prejudice him against Princess Rhiannon, save that she was young and had the air of someone who expected her suitors to dance attendance. At least Celyn was busy enough with his own life not to care about Sjurd’s manners.

As they were served with their first course, though, Celyn did lean across to murmur, “Why are you making that face at me? Is it supposed to scare me off?”

“I’m not that lucky,” Sjurd muttered back.

Celyn pressed a hand to his heart. “You say such sweet things.”

Sjurd felt a smile itching at the corner of his mouth, but bit it back. “Sickening, isn’t it?”

He got a sharp-edged grin in return. “Why, are you saying I make you sick? I’m wounded.”

“Celyn!” Princess Rhiannon protested. “That wasn’t what Prince Sjurd meant. You mustn’t be unfair.”

“Oh, I do apologize,” Celyn sighed and patted Sjurd’s hand. “Just a tease, cousin Rhiannon. I know Sjurd adores me. Don’t you, dearest?”

“Excessively,” Sjurd said flatly, and stabbed his fork hard into a innocent slice of roast quail.

“He thinks I have pretty eyes,” Celyn confided in his cousin, not bothering to lower his voice. “You wouldn’t think it to look at him, but he has the soul of a poet.”

Rhiannon looked a little unconvinced, but Snorri was chortling into his wine, so Sjurd narrowed his eyes and said, “Our national verse is the limerick. I have composed several with Celyn in mind. I’m sure he would be honored to recite some for you, Highness.”

“Oh, do, Celyn,” Rhiannon said. “I’m sure you have them memorized.”

Sjurd blinked at that, and had to cough back a laugh of his own when she winked at him. Gravely, he said, “You remember. It begins *There was a young prince from Ys, who didn’t know which way to-*”

“Oh, look,” Celyn said hurriedly. “Minstrels!” Sure enough, a whole troupe was filing in with instruments in hand, ready to inflict some entertainment on the gathered guests.

“Do they sing limericks too?” Rhiannon asked demurely.

The evening went downhill from there, though there were moments when Sjurd quite enjoyed seeing just how far he could push the innuendo before Snorri began to go scarlet (served the old bastard right for setting him up like this) or Rhiannon’s sly amusement vanished under hauteur. He’d always known that Celyn was a brat, but he’d forgotten how quick-witted he was, and how swiftly he could turn an insult to his own advantage. Sjurd gave almost as good as he got, however, and gloated silently over how surprised Celyn was to have to scramble for advantage in a battle of wits.

After ten courses which left him genuinely queasy (they didn’t eat this richly on the border), Snorri rose to make his speech, announcing and approving the betrothal. Sjurd’s mood plummeted rapidly. He supposed there were only so many things that could be said in a betrothal speech, and Snorri had already given one for him nine years ago. It was increasingly apparent, though, that the king had chosen to just recycle the last one by changing the name and gender of Sjurd’s fiancée. It made him think of Mathilde and how pleasant that feast had been, no barbed compliments but a simple, quiet conversation about the military situation, and a shared moment of embarrassment when everyone applauded them. He still missed her, with a quiet ache in his heart that was made bitter with guilt. She had been his dearest friend, and he had loved her, but not as she deserved. It seemed so cruel that she should have gone to her death without a true lover to mourn her, and it made him feel a little sick every time someone offered him sympathy, as if he was deliberately deceiving them.

Snorri decided to finish his speech with a new flourish, clearly to remind Sjurd why it was a bad idea to antagonize his king. Folding his hands over his belly, Snorri announced, “And now, to seal their engagement, our princes will exchange a kiss.”

Sjurd’s only comfort was that Celyn looked as horrified as he felt. The brat had been nibbling honeycakes as Snorri’s speech went on and on, and he still had crumbs stuck to the side of his mouth and a slight glaze of honey on his lower lip. His cheeks were flushed, from the wine and the heat of the room, and Sjurd did not want to kiss him, not even to discover if he tasted of honey. No, not at all.

“Stand up now, good princes,” Snorri boomed cheerfully. “Take each other’s hands. This is a pledge of loyalty, so look up. Let your eyes meet.”

Sjurd had never kissed anyone who looked quite that murderous, and he could sympathize.

“That’s right,” Snorri continued, quietly enough now that only the two of them could hear.

“Make it look good. Plenty of tongue.”

Regicide had never been so tempting.

Celyn had clearly had enough because he leaned forward before Snorri could say another word, and pressed his lips to Sjurd’s. They did taste of honey, pressing warm and soft against his mouth. Then, with a little breath of relief, Celyn pulled back, leaving Sjurd standing there. He felt a little foolish and, bizarrely, a little disappointed. Somehow, he expected more out of the kiss, which was strange because he hadn’t realized that he had any expectations of Celyn at all.

The crowd was applauding (and a few of the tipsier ones were whistling). Celyn was sitting down again, turning to say something quiet to Rhiannon. Sjurd needed to sit down too, but couldn’t quite pull his thoughts together enough to manage it. Instead, he looked out at the hall, where all the merry faces and bright dresses merged under the flickering torchlight into one bright blur. It was a movement by the door that brought everything back into focus,

and he felt the laughter he had carried all evening go cold as a soldier in the livery of the Royal Signalmen forced his way through the mass of guests and entertainers, his face grim.

Silence fell in his wake, every one of his own people knowing the implication, and the Ysians catching the mood from them.

“Sovereign,” the soldier said, kneeling briefly before the dais. “Word from the border. An incursion, sire. Three hundred brigands in the pass.”

Some of the fear went out of Sjurð’s heart. Three hundred was bad, and would test their strength, but it wasn’t the invasion. Not quite. Not yet. Swinging round, he addressed Rhiannon, hoping she wouldn’t refuse him before this crowd, “Highness and cousin, my country has need of me. Will your ship carry me, and some further members of my guard, back to the border?”

She didn’t like the idea, but she had little choice if she was not to offer a public insult. Instead, she bowed her head and said coolly, “Dwynwen watch over you, First Prince, and keep you safe from harm. You may instruct the captain of the *Gwennol* to take you wherever you wish.”

He bowed to her. “My country thanks you, Lady. Excuse me, please.”

Celyn was rising to his feet. “I’ll come with you.”

“And do what?” Sjurð snapped, and was surprised by the way Celyn flinched back.

It wasn’t until the ship was skimming north, its cargo decks packed with reinforcements, that he remembered that Celyn had always traded insults just as fluently with Hrolf and Ivarr. It could, after all, have been an offer of friendship.

Sjurð hadn’t thought of the war once while he had been bickering with Celyn.

For a moment, he stood by the rail, feeling the night air eddy around him, and watched the flicker of their sails reflected as they passed over the moonlit drains and ditches below. Then, because this was no time to linger over

regrets, he made his way back to his cabin, where he rolled himself into his cloak and tried to get some sleep before the battle began.

Celyn, aged 24

The actual wedding took place a year later, and was a quieter affair. It had been a hard year for both nations. The spring had come late—fouled, Sjurð claimed and Celyn believed, by Imperial weather mages across the border. The summer was still cold, and the crops were slow to grow. It would be a race to finish the harvest before the first frost.

The spring had also brought the death of King Pryderi of Ys, the rot in his lungs hastened by the hard winter. When the spring solstice brought them only further snow, he had simply turned his head to the wall and closed his eyes. Celyn had stood with Rhiannon beside her father's pyre, and watched her grow older and harder as the fire burned. He had been the one to fly her out to the Veil of Storms to scatter her father's ashes into the wind, but after that he had been cut out of her councils. She needed him, she said, to be the voice of Ys in Axholme.

She did not attend his first wedding, although his aunt came and his brothers, whom he had not seen in years. He showed them around the city, even smuggling them into Hrolf's favorite tavern for old times' sake, and they laughed together in their cups, hearty strangers he could be friends with, but not kin, not in his heart.

He married Sjurð for the first time under the open sky, in a field outside the city. They both stood in green corn to their waists, the farmer and his wife watching with anxious pride as the priest of Freyja, Axholme's fertility goddess, lectured them about the need to be generous in love. The wind had risen, making the field sigh and rustle around them so loudly that it almost drowned out the priest's voice. The clouds above were ripped out of the low gray blanket they had formed to go racing across the sky like ships in full sail. Their passing cast waves of light and shadow across the field as they crossed

the sun, and Celyn went from shivering to sweating every few moments, aware of how clammy his hands felt in Sjurd's.

There had been a sealed note on his windowsill that morning, which contained a pressed yellow flower and, in a square blocky hand he instantly recognized, the words, *Be kind to one another. Love helps. I & H.*

He had asked one of the palace gardeners to identify the plant and been told, in a disdainful voice, that it was a turnip flower. He had folded it away again safely, to show Sjurd later. It might be better, in the end, to have Ivarr as his brother. He could live with that quite happily, if Ivarr and Hrolf ever returned.

Although if Ivarr thought there was any chance that Celyn might ever love Sjurd, blissful matrimony had obviously rotted his brain. Or possibly it was some kind of concussion brought on by too much vigorous fucking.

Sjurd's hands tightened around his, and Celyn brought his mind back to the present. The priest was finally drawing close to the end of his speech, so Celyn started paying attention again, staring at Sjurd. He wondered if he was supposed look at him differently now they were almost tied together for good. Would Sjurd suddenly start shining with some golden aura of husbandliness? Celyn was skeptical. To his eyes, Sjurd just looked like Sjurd. There was a new scar on his cheek, where a misthound had gotten too close during the spring thaw, and he wasn't wearing any weapons, but those were superficial changes. He was still handsome in a faintly terrifying way; still looked tired, tense and dangerous.

Still looked lonely.

Then the priest was declaring them bound before the gods, and Sjurd was stepping forward to meet him. Celyn had been rehearsed on this bit, so he took his own step forward and kissed Sjurd very chastely, their lips pressing together cautiously.

The crowd went quiet, a sudden gust of wind swinging round them, and Celyn shuddered slightly and breathed out against Sjurd's lips, feeling their hands lock together awkwardly.

Then the priest dumped a handful of damp soil over their heads, followed by a tankard of ale, and he and Sjurd parted, spluttering, as the crowd burst into a noisy roar of delight.

“Barbaric,” Celyn muttered, scraping a bit of mud out of his ear. His brothers found it hilarious, holding each other up in the front row of the crowd, as they cried with laughter.

“At least this one we only have to do once,” Sjurd snapped.

Celyn sighed. “True.” He hadn’t been there to see Sjurd’s reaction when he found out that a royal marriage wasn’t valid in Ys unless a ceremony had been performed on all the islands, but his sources in the palace had reported it back to him with much hilarity. He wasn’t much looking forward to it himself. It would have been all very well with Ivarr, who was interested in new places and could be entertained with sightseeing, but what in the world was he supposed to do with Sjurd for a month and a half of traveling? At least the Empire had eased off its stealthy pressure on the border, distracted, their spies suggested, by a succession of uprisings in their eastern provinces.

They were invited back into the farm’s kitchen to wipe the mud off their faces. The farmer’s shy young wife brought them a basin and what were clearly her best towels. Celyn thanked her with his best smile, wondering aloud, “What was that about?”

“It’s for fertility, highness,” she said and then blushed, retreating a step or two.

Celyn winked at her. “Even between men? That’s something I don’t need in this marriage. It would spoil my figure.”

She laughed, and Sjurd said irritably from the other side of the kitchen, “Are you done, brat? We’ve got miles to go yet.”

“Aren’t you staying for the feast?” the farmer’s wife asked. She had a round face and blue eyes which reminded him of poor Koll, dead in a misthound’s nest eleven months ago.

He gentled his voice, to compensate for Sjurd's bad manners, and said, "This is just our first wedding. My cousin is waiting for us in Ys, so we can be married there, too."

"I wish you happy, sirs," she said, and then some palace flunky was at the door to tell them their coach was waiting ("I could ride," Sjurd muttered when he saw the open, beribboned thing, his scowl not improved in the least by the lack of mud).

The trip back to Holmebury took two hours longer than it should have done, mostly because the people of Axholme flocked to the sides of the road to cheer their prince by. Sjurd endured it with a fixed smile, but Celyn started to enjoy it after the first mile or two. It was nice to see people happy for once, and he liked the flowers they were throwing, not least because Sjurd looked far less intimidating with rose petals in his hair. He waved to them enthusiastically, trying to show that Ysians were perfectly nice people and well worth defending even in a hopeless war.

"Will you sit still," Sjurd snapped eventually. "You'll upset the coach."

"You're the only person I've ever met who dislikes me more on acquaintance," Celyn remarked, waving extra hard at the next clump of people, not least because the farmer was a very handsome lad.

"You surprise me," Sjurd muttered.

"Now that," Celyn said, not without admiration, "was just plain nasty. Be careful, or all these nice people will start to suspect that this marriage is just a cynical political ploy, and then I'll have to come over there and stick my tongue down your throat to convince them otherwise, which neither of us will enjoy."

Sjurd looked faintly sick at the idea, but he also stopped making snide comments, so Celyn counted that as a victory. Once they were aboard ship (the royal barge *Gwennol*, also covered in streamers and chains of flowers, much to her sailors' annoyance), Sjurd disappeared below deck and left Celyn to enjoy his brothers' company. It was a nice day for sailing, with a fresh merry wind,

and Celyn's heart rose as they soared away from Holmebury. Now he spent most of his time on official duties in Axholme, he found he missed Ys more, with a little ache beneath his heart when the wind blew crisply out of the west, or he caught a glimpse of blossom falling through the air from his study window.

As they neared the coast, where Axholme's fens slid slowly into low mud flats and sandbanks, treacherous at any tide, the first gulls went squealing overhead, alighting on the yardarms to ride the ship towards the fishing grounds below Ys. He could taste the salt on the wind, and leaned on the rail to squint west, where he could see the gray-brown shadows of the outer isles floating in the sky a league offshore. Big Haearn hung low, its red-roofed village showing along its coast. There would be ladders hanging down towards the fishing ground, and the seaboats would be out, waiting for dusk to return home and let their catch up on the great pulleys that Haearn was famed for. Higher in the sky, and a little to the north, was Callestr, crowned by a watchtower rising out of its white-flowering *derwen* forest; then Metheglin and Blodyn, where they celebrated the birth of summer by dancing through the woods.

Almost hidden to the south was his own small Gwydr, tucked into the shadow of Enfys, where the village was built on the great arch which joined the two forested peninsulas.

"Can you even fit a ship between them?" Sjurd asked, making Celyn jump. He had been so busy feasting on the sight of home that he hadn't been paying attention to his surroundings.

"The distance is deceptive," he explained. "There's a mile between them at least. Look, there's the ferry crossing from Callestr to Blodyn!" He pointed at the little white-sailed boat floating across the strait at a leisurely speed.

"Thunder strike me," Sjurd groaned, and Celyn looked round to see him blanch a little. "I thought that was a bird."

“She’ll carry forty people as long as they tuck their elbows in,” he said cheerfully. “A few more if they’re willing to rope onto the sides. You should see how she wallows when everyone’s heading for the festival on Blodyn.”

“As long as they’re willing to *what?*” Sjurd said.

“Tie on,” Celyn said. Surely it was obvious? “The crew rig some extra nets along the side, and people tuck themselves in. As long as you balance the sides properly, it’s safe enough. Uncomfortable, of course, but it’s cheap. I know some lads who’ve seen the whole of Ys like that, before they settled onto an island, working a little here and—”

Sjurd had been spluttering for a while, and here he finally regained the power of speech enough to say, “You people are insane!”

“Technically,” Celyn said, raising his voice as Sjurd backed away. “You’ve just married into the nation, which makes you one of us, too.”

But Sjurd had disappeared inside, and didn’t even re-emerge when they began to trace their way between the inner isles, past flowering cliffs and waterfalls that tumbled into the great reservoir channels which hung below the larger isles. White-painted houses were scattered along the cliffs, and people came out to watch them go by, waving in delight. Passing under the shadow of Caerwyn, they were surprised by a sudden rain of flower petals from small boats above, which caught in the curve of the sails and blew against the cabin doors in bright heaps.

Celyn was touched by it. He hadn’t thought many of his people knew who he was. Yet they were celebrating his wedding. It made him all the more certain that the more reactionary factions at court were wrong. Ys and its people were quite capable of reaching out to Axholme. At least Rhiannon’s tone had softened since she took the throne.

They made landfall in Ynys Llys late in the afternoon. Rhiannon and the court were waiting for them on the quay, and there were more flowers and bunting, bright against the white-arched buildings of the capital. The city seemed very small after a few months in the broad tangle of streets that was

Holmebury. It felt good to be able to look up, though, and see the mountain rising over the roofs, its slopes green and white with *derwen* forests.

Every bell in the city was ringing by the time the sailors ran the gangplank out, and there was more music and a crowd to welcome them on the quay. Rhiannon was there to take his hands as he stepped back onto home ground, her hair blowing loose in the wind and the crown heavy on her brow. She kissed his cheek in greeting, and then turned to offer Sjurd her hands.

“Ys welcomes you, First Prince,” she said, pitching her voice to carry as the fiddles went quiet. “Long may our countries hold each other as dearly as you hold my cousin in your heart.”

A little more dearly than that, Celyn thought dryly, but then they were all on the move, proceeded by pipers with droning *pibgorns* announcing their arrival. They were welcomed with roars of cheering from the crowd, probably more to drown out the pipes than for any other reason.

“We walk from here?” Sjurd asked, looking around with more uncertainty than Celyn had ever seen on him.

“Only as far as the palace,” Celyn said. “Not really the right sort of country for a coach and horses.”

They’d just made it to the bottom of the Great Stair, which wound back and forth through the city. Sjurd cast a look at the ribbon of steps in front of him and then remarked, “I can see that.”

There were more crowds lining the Stair, and leaning out of windows above. Celyn had never seen so many people in the streets of Llys, and he was a little surprised the island wasn’t sinking. He said as much to Sjurd, who demanded, “They can do that?”

“Oh, yes,” Celyn lied blithely. “Terrible the court cases we have when someone puts on too much weight, and giving birth to twins is positively antisocial. Sometimes all that’s keeping our feet out of the sea is sending a few unlovable aunts off to visit friends on another isle. I had one great-aunt who

was constantly traveling for that very reason. She got stranded on board ship one winter, waiting for—”

“*Celyn.*”

He took the hint and shut up, and tried to ignore that sudden little quiver that had gone up his spine at his name being growled in quite that tone. He really did need to take another lover sometime soon, although how he was supposed to find someone this month, he did not know. It was going to be a trial, for so many reasons.

Once they finally made it to the palace, the ceremony was much simpler than the one on Axholme and involved no mud whatsoever. They simply knelt before the dais while old Mother Heddwen, the priestess of Dwynwen who had blessed his birth and married his parents, quavered a blessing on them, her wrinkled hands trembling where she rested them upon their heads. He had to kiss Sjurd again, but it was as swift and chaste as the last one.

Then, of course, there was a feast, the proper Ysian kind where it was unlucky to stop the wine and mead moving, and someone always ended up climbing on the table to sing epics laced with dubious innuendo. By halfway through, Sjurd had stopped looking horrified and just wore a look of weary resignation, which Celyn found a little more offensive than outright disgust. He'd never made that face at any Axholme feasts, had he? It was about time Sjurd experienced how strange it was to be confronted with someone else's customs.

Rhiannon leaned over and said quietly, “I think Uncle Rhodri is about to start the trouser song...”

“Already?” Celyn protested in dismay. On second thought, there were some traditions that no stranger needed to witness.

She shrugged with a faint wince. “He started drinking at noon. If I were you, I'd slip away now when everyone's distracted. If you wait much longer, you'll have an escort to the door.”

“Do you know where they've put us?” Celyn asked quickly.

“Higher Dawn, I’m afraid.”

“Fine by me,” he said. “We need to be in the air early.” From the back of the room, there was a sudden roar of cheering, and a distinctive wild-haired figure started trying to climb onto the table, propped up from below by several of his rowdier cousins. He turned to Sjurd hurriedly. “Time to leave.”

The halls of the palace were quieter, empty and echoing as they walked away from the hall. Sjurd didn’t say anything, his footfalls soft as they crossed in and out of the moonlight spilling in through the high windows. To fill the silence, Celyn said, “Poor Uncle Rhodri is always taken badly by the drink. He’s a judge when he’s sober, you know, and well respected. He just cannot resist a glass of mead and a chance to pull his trousers down.”

“I’m wondering what I’ve married into,” Sjurd muttered.

“Oh, please,” Celyn said with a snort. “Every family has one.”

“Usually we keep them out of royal occasions.”

“How poor-spirited,” Celyn said, a little snippily. He was already getting tired of this attitude. They were doing their countries a service, after all. They didn’t have to be utterly miserable about it.

He could hear the faint noise of parties all over the city. He wished he could be at one of those, instead of walking down these cold halls with this distant man. He shook himself slightly, trying to throw off the mood, and led Sjurd up through the palace without saying anything else. As they climbed, the sounds of revelry faded away, and Celyn could hear the gulls sleeping outside the windows instead, cooing softly in their sleep.

Their room was at the top of Dawn Tower, facing back towards Axholme, though there were too many islands between here and there to glimpse the mainland. This high, the room caught the wind, even with the thick glassed windows, and someone had been considerate enough of Sjurd’s lowland upbringing to light a fire and set a lamp by the bed. It made the room too warm for Celyn’s taste, but he just went to the bed and pulled back the sheets.

“We have to share?” Sjurd asked. There was something a little rough in his voice, and when Celyn glanced at him, he was standing very still.

“We are expected to consummate the marriage on every island as well,” he pointed out sharply. “Do you ever listen to any non-military briefings?”

Sjurd’s throat worked silently for a moment. “You and me?”

“No, the other three people in our marriage.” Celyn sighed, closing his eyes for a moment, and then forced himself to be nice. “Don’t look like that. It’s for appearances. Here in Llys, nobody will care if you sleep on the floor instead, although the bed is far more comfortable. Out in the islands, we might have to rumple the sheets a little before we leave. I’m certainly not going to molest you in your sleep.”

Sjurd’s eyes narrowed. “I’d like to see you try.”

Celyn decided to ignore that. “So, as long as you don’t snore, we’re fine. And now, I’m tired, and I’d like to sleep. You can stand there all night if you like, but I’m getting into this bed.”

He turned his back on Sjurd, but couldn’t quite ignore the weight of his presence in the room. Kicking his shoes off was a good distraction, but his fingers went clumsy on his shirt buttons. He wasn’t going to sleep wearing this much heavy embroidery, but he was suddenly very conscious that he was a diplomat and occasional scholar, not a soldier. He’d seen Sjurd’s chest, and he was just a halfweight of pale and scrawny in comparison.

He reminded himself that he didn’t care what Sjurd thought of him and shrugged his shirt off. Climbing into the bed without looking round, he grabbed an armful of pillows and curled up, pushing the blankets down to his waist so he wouldn’t overheat.

He was almost asleep before Sjurd blew the lamp out, casting them into darkness. The bed creaked behind him, and he suddenly came awake, aware of the warm bulk of Sjurd just behind him, not touching him but irrevocably there.

Neither of them spoke, but it was a long time before he heard Sjurd's breath slow. Only then could he manage to relax into sleep.

CHAPTER VII

Celyn

He woke up warm, the sun shining into his eyes with the full golden glory of a summer dawn. Ordinarily, he would have looked straight out at the view, one of the best on the island, and started his day with wonder. Today, however, something far more pressing and novel had captured his attention.

Or perhaps, more accurately, had captured him. There was a solid arm over his waist, and a hand curled loosely against his chest. Sjurd's leg was draped laxly over his hip, pushing him down against the bed, and he could feel damp snuffling breaths against the sensitive nape of his neck. He'd never quite believed that Sjurd *could* relax, even in his sleep, but right now he was wrapped bonelessly around Celyn's back, warm, limp, and just a little too sweaty for comfort. In fact, Celyn thought, a faint twinge of panicky disbelief curling in his stomach, you could even say he was (Dwynwen save them) snuggling.

It was rather sweet.

That thought, more than anything else, made him move. Getting tender over someone whose attitude to him varied from grudging tolerance to outright dislike was stupid. That way lay misery, and the world was depressing enough as it was.

He untangled himself very carefully, trying to shift Sjurd's weight without waking him, and eventually slid inelegantly out of the side of the bed. Someone had left them a basin of water, with floating mint leaves to keep it fresh, and he went over to splash the sleep from his eyes. His packs were here, too, so he pulled out a thin long-sleeved shirt that would offer some protection from the sun and wind.

He could smell bread baking, the scent drifting up from the courtyard below, where the ovens bulged out of the walls. It drew him to the window, one sleeve still unlaced, and he rested his hip against the sill to breathe in the morning breeze. The sky was hazy but showed so blue through the low mist

that he knew it would be clear later, and the vague shapes of the surrounding isles floating above them were slowly revealing their small beauties as the sun climbed in the sky.

It was one of those moments between moments, when the whole world seemed to be still and at peace around him. He listened to the quiet rise and fall of Sjurð's breathing and felt his own shoulders relax, as the weight of months in Axholme, always glancing east, slid softly away.

He was home at last, and it gave him the luxury of knowing what the day would hold. There would be breakfast waiting in the refectory soon, warm bread and freshly churned butter, sweetened with honey and the final jars of last year's bramble jelly. Out in the city, the pulleymen would be lowering buckets into the sea to draw up saltwater to clean the traces of yesterday's celebrations from the streets and steps, saving any chance-caught fish to fry for their own lunch.

But time kept turning, even when you were happy, and soon the sounds of the morning grew louder: shutters slamming back from the windows below; a kitchen boy running out to empty the slops, whistling as bright and heedless as a lark; the voices of the chambermaids greeting each other in the corridor, young and sweet and giggling; Sjurð mumbling sleepily and then sitting up, the bed creaking.

Celyn closed his eyes.

He listened to Sjurð wash and dress with a certain vague detachment. He was tempted to make some snide comment about cuddling, but in the end he said nothing, even when Sjurð came to stand at his shoulder.

He did open his eyes at Sjurð's sudden intake of breath. Sjurð was leaning forward now, one hand braced on the sill and his eyes wide. He looked very young, his face slack with amazement.

Celyn tried to imagine how it would feel to see the Falls of Rhaeadr and dawn over the inner isles for the first time. The mist had cleared enough that he could see between the near isles to the peaks of Anterth and Ochain beyond, floating serenely in the quiet light of morning. To the west, Rhaeadr towered

above them, high in the sky and dark with woods. Its river flowed out of the forested headland to spill over the edge of the isle, descending in sweeps of gleaming water to crash into the great lake on Ynys Llys far below, filling the air between the isles with shining spray and rainbows dancing in the mist.

“The water...” Sjurd started, but then stopped, shaking his head.

“Fresh,” Celyn told him. “The reservoir here supplies both islands. We call the great falls, that leave the coasts like that, the tears of Dwynwen.”

“Why would she cry for that?” Sjurd’s temper seemed to have vanished somewhere, washed away by the view, perhaps.

“Fresh water is precious,” Celyn said quietly. “The smaller falls we can redirect into pipes and cisterns. The big ones just tear through any channels during the winter storms. To see something so precious lost to the salt seas is worth a tear or two, I think.”

Sjurd shook his head again. “How far are we from Holmebury?”

“As the ship flies? Thirty leagues, no more.”

“Half the world, more like,” Sjurd said.

Celyn thought about what the Empire would do, if it ever made it to the islands. Even a sea-going ship might get close enough for the legions to overwhelm one of the low isles, and then they’d ravage their way from island to island, reaping the forests and dooming every soul and lovely thing that lived in Ys. Harshly, he said, “I wish it was that far.”

Sjurd went still. After a moment, he stepped back from the window and said, his voice tired again, “Where do we go today?”

“I’m certain that I sent you our itinerary,” Celyn snapped, his good mood fraying. “Did you even look at it?”

Sjurd snorted. “Lots of islands, none of which I can pronounce. Time-wasting heap of diplomatic crap.”

“It might be crap, in your view,” Celyn said sweetly. “If you want to know where we’re going, however, read it. I’m for breakfast. You need to be at the quay by the third bell of morning. I’m sure someone will give you directions.”

He started to stalk out, but Sjurd caught his arm, spinning him around. For a moment, they just glared at each other, and Celyn found himself wondering where the man who curled close in his sleep was hidden within this all too familiar oaf. Then Sjurd said, his tone grudging, "I'll read your itinerary over breakfast. For now, brief me as we walk. Please."

"Up to Rhaeadr," Celyn said, heading out of the door and trusting Sjurd to keep up. "It's a longer flight than you'd think, since we have to circle the isle to avoid getting wrecked in the water stream. The wedding there is in the temple in Kingport, up above the falls. We'll leave there early tomorrow, and fly on to Gwylan for the next ceremony. The palace here, and your embassy, have copies of the itinerary and pigeons ready to pass on any message from Holmebury to the local message stations."

"And you organized this?" Sjurd asked.

"We all serve our people," Celyn snapped. "Yes, I planned this."

They were halfway down the hall before Sjurd said grudgingly, "Thank you."

Celyn sniffed and pretended he was still offended, because the oaf needed to learn, but that did mollify him a bit.

Their quiet truce lasted right until the moment Celyn climbed aboard *Eirlys*. He'd missed his pretty girl over the last few weeks, while he had been forced onto official transport, and she had been sitting lonesome at the end of the long piers that jutted out of the lower harbor of Ynys Llys, below the dock where the tall ships lingered. He patted the side of the little yacht fondly, and glanced back to see what was taking Sjurd so long.

His new husband was still standing on the pier, his hand locked around the nearest bollard. He was regarding *Eirlys* with absolute loathing.

"You physically can't walk to Rhaeadr," Celyn called. "The sooner you get on board, the sooner we can get there and be done with this for another day."

Sjurd still didn't move.

“What is your problem?” Celyn demanded, swinging back onto the dock to grab Sjurd’s pack and toss it onboard.

“What is *that*?” Sjurd replied, pointing his free hand at the boat.

Celyn stiffened. Nobody got to talk about his pretty girl like that. “*She* is called *Eirlys*, and she’ll be carrying us the length of Ys. If you ever step on board, that is.”

“I was told we’d be traveling by ship.”

“She is a ship,” Celyn protested. “She’s just little.”

“That,” Sjurd growled, “is not a ship. That’s a coracle.”

Celyn drew in an indignant breath, patting poor *Eirlys* on the wheel again. “She certainly is not. If nothing else, coracles can’t fly.” Then, because he was beginning to guess why Sjurd had hidden below decks on the voyage in, he added, “Do you really want to do this with an escort of bored and randy sailors?”

Sjurd frowned, and his fingers loosened a little on the bollard. “I’d like to survive the experience.”

“This lady’s a century old and hasn’t floundered yet. I’ve flown her through open skies, which is much more dangerous than hopping between the islands.”

“She’s an *antique*?”

“We build our ships to last,” Celyn said impatiently. “We don’t chop *derwen* wood, so every boat is made of windfall and trees too old to flower. It takes decades to save up for a tall ship. Even a little yacht like this takes years.”

“Where’s the crew?”

“Right here,” Celyn said, which made Sjurd freeze again. Carefully, he added, “I’m as good a sailor as you are a soldier.”

Sjurd snorted at that, arrogant even when scared. Celyn hadn’t come across many people who were afraid to fly, but he’d have put money on it that most of them weren’t quite so hostile about it. Abandoning kindness, which never

seemed to work on Sjurd anyway, he added insouciantly, “Of course, if you’re too cowardly, I can always drug you and carry you in the cargo net.”

“Cowardly?” Sjurd repeated and came on board in two strides. *Eirlys* shook under the force of his landing, and he froze, going pale again.

Celyn grinned at him, just to be annoying, and pointed to the back of the cockpit. “Sit there and keep out of my way. If you feel the need to be sick, lean over the side and check for low-flying boats before you heave. Casting off now.”

And they were away, and he could ignore Sjurd to focus on tilting the sails and riding the wind out to catch the breeze back in over the city, where the warm air lifted their sails and they began to climb towards the higher skies.

The wedding on Rhaeadr was a quieter affair than the first two. Only the local mayor and his family attended, and the party afterward was set in the town square, watching the town band play and nibbling on flat cakes and little spiced meat pies. A great *derwen* tree stood in the center of the square, and little girls danced in circles around it as part of the entertainments, their red capes and full skirts belling out as they hopped and turned. As dusk settled over the island, the band began to play the old tune of *Gwenllian’s Lament*, and everyone stilled to listen. As the sad music floated across the square, the starflowers blossoming on the *derwen* tree began to open, scenting the air and glowing with a soft, milky light, as bright as the moon.

It made Celyn crave a little romance, and a shoulder to lean against, but all he had was Sjurd sitting unsmiling beside him.

Their accommodation that night was in the mayor’s guest room, in an old-fashioned box bed with painted wooden sides. Even this high, the night was warm, so Celyn pulled the panels back before climbing in. It was tighter than the one from the night before, and he could feel Sjurd’s shoulder brushing his even before they went to sleep.

In the morning, Sjurd was pressed against his back again, his face tucked into the curve of Celyn’s shoulder. In the enclosed space, it was definitely too

warm and stuffy for this, so Celyn did his best to squirm out despite the high sides of the bed and the dead weight of a very muscular soldier draped all along his side (and now he'd thought that, getting out was all the more important, because thinking about naked soldiers and their muscles whilst in bed with Sjurd was not a wise idea).

He was less successful than he'd been the previous day, and Sjurd roused enough to growl, "Stop wriggling, lieutenant."

And, before Celyn had time to consider the implications of that, he found himself flat on his back and enveloped by Sjurd, that strong body settling on top of his, knees pushing his thighs apart until Sjurd could slump down onto him, his arm curling around the top of Celyn's head, and his own head on Celyn's shoulder.

Celyn couldn't breathe properly and didn't care. His thoughts fell apart, shattered by the sudden pounding of his heart and the rush of blood to his cock. There was something so good about the weight of a man pressing him down, and he didn't care right now how much of a git Sjurd was, because he felt so very wonderful.

Then Sjurd shifted again, pushing himself up on his arms, and blinked down at Celyn, his eyes hazy with sleep. Celyn saw the moment when recognition dawned, and couldn't help himself. In the most cheerful tone he could summon, he said, "Good morning, Sjurd." And then he smiled.

Sjurd's eyes went blank. Then he groaned and rolled off Celyn to crash down on the other side of the bed, dragging the blankets back over his head. Celyn hurriedly made his escape, staggering down the landing to the washroom they had been given, where he locked himself in and hurriedly jerked himself off, thinking of everything he could that wasn't Sjurd: blond hair and dimples, and eyes that were brown, not the steel-bright blue of a winter sky; shoulders that were lean and slim, not broad and strong; slender thighs, ones that didn't flex with hard muscle against one's swelling cock.

He came with his hand over his eyes, cursing himself even as it surged through him. Such a bad, bad idea, this. How was he supposed to survive over a month of it?

By the end of the afternoon, however, he disliked Sjurd as much as he had when he was fifteen. At breakfast with the mayor, they were offered a tour of the sacred caves behind the waterfall. Celyn accepted, of course, because this was exactly the kind of opportunity that a marriage tour had to offer. He noticed Sjurd scowl, but discounted it (when didn't Sjurd scowl?).

But Sjurd's mood stayed surly all through the afternoon, even when they emerged out of the shrine to look down on the city on Ynys Llys far below, through the streaming water of the Falls of Rhaeadr. The mayor and his friends were beginning to look hurt and offended, so Celyn had to work twice as hard to be charming. By the time they finally boarded the *Eirlys*, his head was pounding.

Sjurd squashed himself into the corner of the cockpit, looking even grumpier than before. "Nice to know they value our time."

"Far more than you value theirs," Celyn snapped. "Did someone forget to teach you your manners?"

Sjurd glared at him. "Manners never won any wars."

"Lack of them lost a few," Celyn retorted, and then made an effort to pull his temper in. "If you can't be civil, don't speak to me at all. If you're lucky, I won't fly loops on the way downwind."

That shut Sjurd up, but didn't do anything to improve his mood. He scowled through the ceremony on Gwylan, growling his responses and bestowing a stiff, perfunctory kiss on Celyn. He spent the feast nursing a single cup of ale and glaring over the heads of the crowd, thoroughly disconcerting the locals. He only joined the conversation when somebody mentioned the Empire, and managed to give the poor mayor's daughter, who was trying to show off her political acumen, a description of the front that was so clinically terrifying that the poor girl pushed her plate aside and stopped eating.

By the time they retired, Celyn was sick enough of the man's rudeness that he simply turned his back and pretended Sjurd didn't exist.

He wasn't entirely surprised to wake up the next morning with Sjurd pressed against his back, but was still cross enough to roll straight out of bed and go down to a solitary breakfast (because trying to stab his new husband through the throat with the butter knife would not have convinced anyone that the match was secure).

The situation didn't improve. The people of Ys flocked out to make them merry, in isle after isle, and Sjurd met them with disdain, shrugging aside effusive greetings and trudging around local sights that had been lovingly decorated for their visit. The staff in the courier stations, on the other hand, saw his best manners, as he strode straight there once they had made landfall on each island, charming every one of them into agreeing that they would come running for him at once, surely, Highness, if a message should come from Axholme (which was more consideration than Celyn had ever got from such a notoriously surly profession). Which all meant, of course, that it wasn't some natural deficiency to blame for Sjurd's behavior. He was just plain rude.

Celyn made excuses to the locals, playing up the emotional cost of war and what Axholme was sacrificing to keep Ys safe. He knew that much of what he said was true, even if he was polishing it for the benefit of their hosts, which kept him quiet about Sjurd's behavior for longer than he might have been otherwise.

Then they landed on the pretty headland at Briallen, where the sides of cliffs were bright with primroses and the rocky base of the island vivid with green moss. They were met by the mayor and Dwynwen's priestess, and their six merry red-haired daughters, the tallest just old enough to stare at Sjurd and giggle, while the youngest still needed to clench a fist in her older sister's skirts to keep her balance as she toddled. They were all in white for the wedding, with flowers in their hair. It was a pretty sight, and Celyn, who often stayed here if he was flying into the capital from the south, hurried forward to greet them. He accepted a kiss of congratulations from the girls' mother, and then held out his arms to little Eilir, the second youngest, who was a favorite of his.

She launched herself up with a cry of, "You were supposed to marry me!"

Celyn laughed and spun her around. “You’re still my prettiest girl. Too pretty for me, but look what a handsome husband they gave me instead.”

She wrinkled her nose at Sjurd and reached up to straighten her wreath with a little sniff. “He looks mean.”

“He’s a brave soldier,” Celyn told her, lowering his voice and widening his eyes. “He fights monsters, and keeps all the little girls in Axholme safe from ogres.”

Eilir gave him a skeptical glance, her mouth pursed. “Can he get rid of spiders?”

“I don’t know,” Celyn admitted, laughing. “Shall we ask him? Sjurd, want to meet my favorite girl?”

“I don’t like children,” Sjurd said and walked away.

Eilir’s eyes went round, and she looked up at Celyn uncertainly. Behind them, the rest of the family were quiet.

“Excuse me,” Celyn said to them, passing Eilir back to her father, and took off after Sjurd.

He had only gone as far as the cliff edge, scowling down over the bright summer sea and the Isle of Sirig spreading out below them, nets hanging from the ends of her fields to skim the waves. He looked as out of place here as Celyn would have felt on a battlefield. Who in the world got angry at a sunny day and was rude to a small child, especially when so much rested on their reputation?

“What is wrong with you?” Celyn said to his back, frustration making his voice sharper and louder than usual. “If you’ve gone battle sick like Ivarr did, I needed to know that before we planned a wedding.”

“I’m not battle sick.” Sjurd turned to face him. “It just makes me angry. All this wasted time and nonsense, when the border is crumbling further every fucking day.”

“Which is why we’re here,” Celyn snapped. “You know more than anyone why your people need this alliance. I don’t understand why you’re so determined to destroy it.”

“*Nothing* I’m doing here is helping my people! My people are dying, while I play at being a diplomat!”

Celyn stared at him. Either Sjurd was stupid (which he was reasonably sure was not the case) or he really didn’t know about the treaty (which was irritating, given how much work he, old Lord ap Meredydd and King Snorri had poured into it). “Sjurd, don’t you know what’s going to happen to your people if the border fails?”

CHAPTER VIII

Sjurd

It was the worst thing the brat could have asked, and for a moment Sjurd couldn't even see the flower-strewn headlands. All he could imagine was the farms of Axholme broken and burned, slain farmers bleeding into the soil that had sustained them, as their children were led into slavery.

He was beginning to hate Ys, with a twisting bitterness that he knew the country didn't deserve. It was just so fucking peaceful and pretty, all these forests, innocent dances, and warm welcomes. Didn't they realize that the world was ending less than seventy leagues away? Didn't they know they were doomed? Every ancient temple or quirky bit of scenery they had to tour around made him feel queasy. And then Celyn had turned around to him with that bright smile, his arms full of a giggling red-haired child, and he had thought, *Mathilde's daughters would have looked like that.*

The contrast had stabbed deeper than a misthound's bite.

Celyn was close to him now, his hand warm on Sjurd's arm, and Sjurd despaired, because he hadn't even seen the brat move. How was he supposed to keep fighting when even his instincts were failing him?

"Sjurd," Celyn said, and there was something very careful and gentle in his voice, something he resented fiercely coming from Prince Brat. "Every island in Ys is preparing for refugees. We'll take your people in."

He blinked at Celyn, the bloody vision fading so he could see the sun shining down on the *derwen* trees again. Celyn's eyes were wide and serious, as green as old glass, and he was still talking, changing the world a little bit so that it wasn't quite made of despair any more. "We're a smaller nation, of course, but we started sowing *derwen* oaks on new rock the year the Empire killed my mother, and those new islands are almost clearing the water now. Another decade, and they'll be high enough in the air to carry houses and

people. If we put people on all our ships as well, we can relocate maybe seventy per cent of your people. I know it's not quite good enough..."

"It's good," Sjurd said, his voice going dry and rough in his throat. He covered Celyn's hand where it lay on his arm, squeezing it convulsively. "It's very good." It hurt to think of his people floating away to become Ysians, but it was better than death or slavery.

"I didn't realize King Snorri hadn't told you," Celyn said, squeezing his hand back. "The treaty isn't quite signed yet, but it's just a matter of small details."

"He handed me the border," Sjurd said. He wanted to sit down and think about this, preferably with Celyn within shouting distance, but he was aware of the Ysian family waiting for them, the littlest girls beginning to look tired and whiny. "Everything else I got briefing notes on. I, ah, may not have read them all."

"Now I'll know to brief you in person," Celyn said, sounding amused and a little superior. It should have annoyed Sjurd, but he realized, with a touch of chagrin, that he was getting used to the brat. Let him be smug about this. It was a miracle, and Sjurd wasn't going to bite it to see if it was hollow. "So, now you know, you should also consider the practicalities. Most people in Ys have never met anyone from Axholme. As far as they know, all your people are just like you."

"So I should mend my manners," Sjurd said, wincing. Why hadn't someone explained this before?

"I'm afraid so," Celyn said, his smile going sharp. "I know politeness doesn't come naturally..."

"Fuck you," Sjurd said amicably.

Celyn went a little pink and snickered. "Actually, on that subject..."

"Tiw save me."

"I'm not saying that my people wouldn't understand the meaning of a diplomatic marriage, but we need to win them over on a more emotional level.

If you could bring yourself to fake it, just a little, it wouldn't hurt anyone's reputation."

Sjurd raised an eyebrow. "Your people are more likely to accept mine if they think the two of us are all lilies and lilacs?"

"My people are romantics," Celyn said, in a far gloomier tone than that statement deserved. "It will make the bond between our kingdoms more real to them."

"Fine," Sjurd said, sighing. "Let's go, then." Then, even as he was about to stride away, he reconsidered and tightened his grip on Celyn's hand, towing him along as well. It probably wasn't the most romantic of gestures, especially when Celyn started complaining that Sjurd was about to dislocate his arm, but it was a start. He even went so far as to kneel down in front of Celyn's small friend (and how fitting was it that the brat liked brats? He should make sure to comment on like preferring like later, when there were no eavesdroppers) and saying, "Where are these spiders you want me to slay, Lady?"

"In the roof," she said, and held out her hands. "And they're this big!"

Behind her, one of her older sisters rolled her eyes and pinched her fingers together to suggest a much smaller pest. Sjurd ignored them to say, "Fearsome beasts. Perhaps, if you show me their lair later, I could scare a few away."

She pondered that, rocking back on her heels and chewing the ends of her hair. "What's your name?"

"Sjurd."

"I'm Eilir, and I'm four, and I *suppose* you could fight my spiders, if you really want to. But no killing. That's bad."

"No killing," Sjurd agreed, and let her continue to dictate terms all the way into the village.

This wedding made him burn with resentment a little less than the previous ones, although Celyn's self-satisfied expression began to wear on his nerves as the ceremony went on. Revenge, however, was easy. *Fake it*, Celyn had said.

So this time, Sjurd didn't just press a dry kiss against his new husband's lips. This time, he made the kiss long and slow, wrapping his arms around Celyn to pull him close. He felt Celyn's whole body stiffen in protest. He continued the kiss right until the tension began to slide out of Celyn's body.

Then he pinched Celyn on the ass, making him jump and yelp.

"Overexcited," Sjurd said in apology to the gathered villagers and basked in Celyn's glare throughout that day's wedding feast.

That night, staying in the mayor's house, he was indeed summoned to deal with spiders in the girls' room. Eilir watched fiercely as he disposed of three impressively hairy and scuttling specimens out of the window, her little feet swinging where she sat on the side of the bed. When he was done, she nodded firmly and said, "Thank you. Now go to bed!" It was said so sternly, and with such a note of adult exasperation, that Sjurd had to bite back a chuckle. He wondered how often she heard that from her elders.

He was still smiling when he got back to their room, a warm little space tucked away under the eaves. Celyn was still awake, sitting up in bed and reading by lantern light, papers scattered around him. He had clearly run his hands through his hair at some point, because there was a tuft standing up from the crown of his head, and he was wearing little square reading glasses. For a second, Sjurd felt like he was looking at one of those optical puzzles, the type where one look showed an old woman and the next a lady of fashion: one way, here was a lie, the brat prince he had been forced to marry getting on with his own life; the other way, it was oddly domestic, his husband waiting up for him at the end of a long day. In the lamplight, Celyn's light hair could have been white, and for a moment Sjurd considered being eighty, two cantankerous old men who had learned to live around each other.

Then he dismissed the idea. Neither of them would see old age. He wouldn't evacuate with his people, not when they still needed men on the border, and the evacuation would only slow the descent on Ys, not prevent it entirely. Quietly, he stripped off his shirt and shoes, while Celyn moved his papers aside to make space for him. It was a strange thing, sharing such

intimate space with no sexual expectations. He couldn't think of a time when he'd had someone to talk to in bed, not since he was a boy on his father's mountain homestead, tumbled in with all the other children for warmth. Even when he brought some clever-tongued soldier to his bed, it was just for fucking, and none ever stayed to sleep, let alone make conversation. And, of course, for the last few months he had been too tired even for that.

He'd had a vague dream once, an idea that one day he would have someone to sleep beside and a shoulder to rest his head on. He'd given up on it, and yet here was Celyn instead, and he couldn't quite make sense of the world any more.

"Eilir likes you," Celyn said, leaning down to stack his papers beside the bed. His back was long and pale, and Sjurd bit back an urge to run his finger down the hollow of his spine, just to check if that unblemished skin could possibly be real. Oh, he was tired. He hadn't slept like this in months, so freely and greedily. People had so many poetic names for Ys, but they should really call it the Land of Good Sleep.

"Sjurd?" Celyn sounded amused (not fond, not possibly fond).

He recalled himself. "She's sweet."

"She is," Celyn agreed (and, oh, the fondness was for little Eilir, of course). "I'm sorry."

"For what?" He propped himself up on one hand to keep his head from the pillow.

"If you wanted children."

Sjurd thought about it, keeping his eyes from drifting shut. "I might have done. In another time, you know. This world... I wouldn't bring a child into it."

"That's sad," Celyn said softly.

"You disagree?"

Celyn was quiet for a while. Then he said, very softly, "No."

“So, then,” Sjurd said firmly, and let his eyes fall closed. He felt Celyn lean over to blow out the light and then settle back against the mattress. Sjurd mumbled at him, something that was meant to be thanks or goodnight, but didn’t quite work.

As he sank into sleep, he rolled a little, trying to get comfortable. He was cold, toes curling and nipples pebbling. Ysian nights were just too chilly. Crossly, he sought out warmth, curling up against Celyn. An arm over his waist, his toes inveigled between Celyn’s calves, and he was fine. Everything was fine. He could sleep.

He woke up warm, comfortable and hard, his cock pressing between Celyn’s ass cheeks.

It felt good, even through two sets of clothing, and he groaned in appreciation. He hadn’t woken up like this in a long time, and his whole body was coming alive with it, his nipples tight, his skin prickling and his lips tingling. He tightened his arms around Celyn, breathing in the morning tang of a sleeping man, and thought lazily, *I want to fuck now.*

Celyn stirred, his body moving against Sjurd’s in a way which only heated him more. Then he froze before he snickered and said, “Good morning, soldier.”

Sjurd still wanted to fuck, just maybe someone or something other than Celyn. Too lust-warmed to argue, he just said, “Good morning, Celyn. Get out of bed.”

“Why?” Celyn grumbled.

Sjurd couldn’t stop himself from rolling his hips, even though he knew he was right at the limit of honorable behavior. “Unless you’re offering to help, that is.”

“Er,” Celyn said, sounding a little breathless and startled. “No.” He squirmed out of bed, which was an extra and unnecessary provocation, and the moment he was gone Sjurd rolled onto his back, pushing down the blankets

with a sigh of anticipation. Then he realized Celyn was still staring at him, standing beside the bed with his lips parted and his cheeks pink.

“What?” Sjurd growled at him.

“Nothing.”

“Then go away!”

Celyn went, and Sjurd settled back against the warm muddle of pillows and blankets to finally push his braies down and get his hand around his cock. He was in no rush, but set out to savor it, stroking himself slowly, losing himself in the moment—the spill of morning sunshine that crept through the shutters, the warm bed, and the heat that gathered under his skin and in his balls. Images from the last few days skittered through his mind, their edges blurring as his pleasure built: waterfalls tumbling from the sky, starflowers opening at dusk, Celyn’s indignant face when the mud hit his head, the bright skirts of dancers swirling across the square, Celyn laughing, the stars over Ys, so bright and close, Celyn.

He came in a slow hot rush, dropping back against the pillows as his head swam. He could have stayed there forever, but he made himself get up and wash, opening the door a crack to let Celyn know he could come back in. He couldn’t help whistling to himself as he dried his hair, his whole body still feeling relaxed.

Celyn, for once, kept his mouth shut as he came back in, although he did smirk quite a lot when he saw the state of the bed. Sjurd, feeling gracious, ignored him.

His good mood lasted through the morning, sitting by the village green watching the children dance patterns around a maypole and clapping them even when they got their ribbons tangled. The front seemed a little further away this morning, rather than a constant storm cloud on the horizon, and it was easier to talk to the locals when he could tell himself it was duty as well as pleasure. He was still cheerful as they made their way back to the landing, much to Celyn’s amusement.

“If a few minutes with your hand makes this much difference to your mood,” he commented, “you should definitely have sex more often. We could put out a call for volunteers who want to do their duty for their country.”

Sjurd snorted. “I don’t need to evoke duty to get a man into my bed.”

Celyn blinked at him for a moment, his mouth half-open. Then he visibly rallied to say, “Well, it took an arranged marriage to get me there, and I haven’t seen anyone else sharing our pillows, so forgive me for being mistaken.”

“I wouldn’t want you to scare them off,” Sjurd retorted.

“A hit,” Celyn laughed, clutching his chest. “Is setting sail going to destroy your mood entirely, or is this new personality of yours going to last? I mean, if you want a little private time behind a hedge before I cast off, I’m sure...”

“Shut up, Celyn,” Sjurd said.

He still didn’t like flying, all that empty air below an inch of planking, but he distracted himself by saying to Celyn, as they rode the wind down towards the next island, which sat just above the waves, “I shouldn’t be the only one.”

“What’s that?”

“I shouldn’t be the only one of my people to come here,” Sjurd elaborated. “Is there an evacuation plan, do you know, for who goes where?”

“I don’t think anyone’s started thinking about it yet.”

“It should be by county. Link our counties to your islands, and send soldiers from those counties here on leave, if they want. With their families, of course, so they can build a connection before the evacuation.”

Celyn twisted round, his face bright with interest. “That’s a *good* idea.”

“No need to sound so surprised,” Sjurd grumbled. “If I can sleep properly here, it should help my men too. Make them more efficient at the front.”

“Efficient,” Celyn repeated, grimacing.

“Efficient, rested soldiers are less likely to be dead soldiers.”

“I’m glad you’re here, then,” Celyn said and then, having clearly surprised himself, turned around to concentrate on his steering, the back of his neck flushed.

The air tasted different on the new isle, salty and damp. The sun was warmer here, too, though the islands above and to the west cast long shadows as the day faded. It was strange to see the islands from below, the moss, pipes and cisterns that covered their bases dim and shadowed. He found himself looking up all the time, scanning for new details as the sun moved round.

“Wait,” Celyn told him, leading him down the side of a bowl in the rock which housed the temple. They were married there, for the ninth time, and then escorted up into a bare meadow where striped tents had been set up along the east fence to serve the gathered villagers with sweet tea and currant cakes. They were granted seats in the center of the meadow, and from there they watched the sunset. As the sun sank towards the horizon, it began to light the underside of the islands, washing them with gold so that every curl of moss and gleaming brass pipe glowed.

Their hosts that night were a local merchant and his husband, an artist who had wandered here on the ropes twenty years ago and never left. They had a little guest cottage in the *derwen* grove at the back of their property, so close to the coast that they could hear the sea sighing under the island. Starflower petals were floating past the windows as their hosts bid them goodnight, and Sjurd sat on the sill for a while, just watching. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d been free just to sit and breathe in the night.

“We should close the shutters before the moths get in,” Celyn said.

“If we must,” Sjurd said and took a last look at the glowing petals tumbling on the wind, and the long road of moonlight shining across the sea. Then he pulled the wooden shutters closed and turned to face Celyn.

He was standing by the bed, looking entertained. “Look what our hosts left us.” And he held up a little lidded jar. “Smells like almond oil. Nice.”

Did he even know what it was for, Sjurd wondered, suddenly and frantically. He had no idea if Celyn was a virgin or not, or if all his banter was just for show. Had he ever had a man slide into him, pressing him open with slow strength until he writhed and whimpered?

And then, to his dismay, he was imagining it.

“Like this,” he’d say, pressed close against Celyn’s bare back. They’d be naked, with Celyn curled into his lap. Sjurd would stroke Celyn’s cock, feeling it spring to full hardness under his touch.

“Well, I know how to do that,” Celyn would say, because he was still a brat, even when naked and breathless.

“But have you ever done this?” Sjurd would murmur, nibbling the curve of his ear. Then he would pour oil into his palm and reach for Celyn again, breathing in the little noises Celyn made at the new sensation. He’d be hot in Sjurd’s hand, hard and straining, and then Sjurd would say, “That’s not the only place it feels good,” and, “Spread your legs.” And soon he’d have Celyn impaled on his fingers, incredulous and sobbing out his name.

“Better make sure we leave a bit of that smeared on the sheets, or they’ll never believe it,” Celyn commented, shattering Sjurd’s fantasy. “Seems a shame to waste it, though. Looks like the good stuff. Want to toss a coin for it?”

“Uh,” Sjurd said. His mouth was dry and his cock was rising. So Celyn wasn’t a complete innocent. Could he be the opposite? And, of course, that thought tumbled him straight back into fantasy, this time of Celyn’s breath harsh in his ear, and slim hands holding his wrists down as Celyn fucked into him hard and fast.

“Sjurd? You sleeping tonight or not?”

“I... er...” He was actually stuttering, which was embarrassing. Driving his nails into his thigh to snap his brain back to where it should be, he managed to say, “I’ll sit up a little longer. Don’t wait for me.”

Then he fled to the little sitting room that filled the other half of the cottage, where he rammed his back against the wall, shoved his wrist in his mouth and stroked himself to completion fast, thinking of Celyn's sly pink mouth and the curve of his ass.

Then, his legs still shaking, he staggered to the nearest overstuffed chair and sank down to clutch his hands in his hair.

This was not good.

CHAPTER IX

Celyn

As they flew onward, Sjurd's behavior became increasingly odd. There were entire days where he was civil to Celyn, which would then be interrupted by a sudden return of the old scowling Sjurd. Then there were their wedding kisses. There were no more cold presses of lips. Instead, Sjurd made an extravagant show of each one, and then ended it with pinching his ass, biting Celyn's lip or ruffling his hair on end. It was infuriating, but every time Celyn's heart beat a little faster in anticipation.

Sjurd was also, finally, taking an interest in the places they stopped, talking to the locals with a serious focus that Celyn couldn't summon. He was good at making people smile, but they asked Sjurd for advice, which was just bizarre to Celyn's mind. What did Sjurd know about island life?

More and more by the day, it seemed. He startled the words right out of Celyn on Caerwyn, when he listened to a frustrated farmer spill out the troubles he was having with wandering cattle and recalled something they had seen on Sirig which might help solve the problem. He was good at names, too, and surprisingly gentle with the inevitable flock of starry-eyed girls and youths who trailed after a handsome mainlander on every island.

He still went to the courier stations first, of course, but all the news out of the east suggested that the Empire was still entangled in subduing rebellions. Celyn couldn't help feeling sorry for those distant lands fighting for their freedom, but he was also relieved that they were distracting the Empire from Axholme and Ys.

The route Celyn had planned for them took them in a spiral outward from Ynys Llys. As they began to visit the outer isles, the flight times between the islands got longer. He hadn't really thought ahead to anticipate it, but now they were in the air for hour after hour, they had to talk to one another, about all the subjects you strayed onto when you had nothing to do but talk—the weather, places they'd been, their childhoods and families, even daft, bottom-

of-the-sixth-pint conversations about the existence of the gods and the nature of reality (Sjurd was a determined conservative on every topic, so Celyn opted for the most eccentric perspective he could come up with, just to see Sjurd's blood rise). He actually had a sense of humor, which was a surprise. It was as dry and sardonic as Ivarr's but with an extra edge that Celyn appreciated. He'd never been good with sweet people, Ivarr (possibly) excepted.

What all this meant, he slowly came to realize, was that he actually liked the oaf.

It was an uncomfortable revelation. He'd spent a third of his life cheerfully despising Sjurd, and now he felt like it was an intrinsic part of his own identity. It really wasn't fair of the man to actually be a likable human being.

Then, of course, there was the cuddling. He was still waking up every morning wrapped up in Sjurd's arms. After the third time Sjurd had kicked him out of bed, Celyn had pointed out, perhaps a little acidly, that he got morning wood too, and it would be far more fair to establish a schedule. Sjurd had gone so scarlet that Celyn had actually wondered whether he should call for help, but now they took turns to stay in bed. Celyn had to admit, if only to himself, that he had occasionally gone no further than the other side of the door. It wasn't his fault he was condemned to share a bed with such a powerfully attractive man, especially one with a cock the size of the one that was often pressing against his hip when he woke, and it really wasn't fair to expect him not to notice. Anyway, the cuddling was rather sweet. It was hard to dislike someone who wanted to snuggle you in their sleep.

Ivarr would be laughing at his frustration, and he supposed, if you considered the alternatives, there really wasn't much wrong with actually liking the very attractive man you happened to be married to. Even if he was Sjurd.

On the flight between Caerwyn and Gorchudd, Sjurd had asked to learn how to fly. He still clearly hated his time on board ship, swallowing hard before he stood up in the cockpit every time, but he seemed determined to learn. It was rather (oh, Dwynwen save him) admirable.

It was also surprisingly difficult. The wheel did not seem to answer to Sjurd's hand as cleanly as it did when Celyn steered. Even when Celyn stood behind him and covered his hands to steer for him, *Eirlys* was slow to respond.

It was on windswept Awel, where their sleep was disturbed by the wailing of the gale around the corners of the watchtower they were staying in, that Celyn worked it out. He had woken first, for once, and turned around in Sjurd's arms to look at him. Sjurd had sighed in his sleep at the movement and gathered Celyn close, his arms locking tight. With their chests pressed together, and Sjurd's chest hair tickling his nipples up to sensitive peaks, Celyn could feel the cold press of the amulet Sjurd always wore against his heart.

He worked it free, because it was far too cold and spiky for comfort, and looked at it properly for the first time. It was a ring, bearing a star-shaped and faceted stone that gleamed with a rainbow sheen that was somewhere between iron and opal.

"What is this?" he asked, when Sjurd finally opened his eyes.

Sjurd hitched a leg over Celyn's hip and pressed his face forward to nibble his shoulder. "Lodestar. You're warm."

"I'm not your bedwarming lieutenant," Celyn reminded him, because he'd learned Sjurd took a while to wake up and remember where he was. A shame, really, because that move had left his cock pressed right against Celyn's and he would quite happily start rubbing their hips together if he was confident Sjurd knew his name. "What's a lodestar?"

Sjurd pulled back enough to scowl at him. "Find them in mines. Like lodestone, but stronger. Pressed between the veins. Like quartz. I *know* who you are."

"Of course you do," Celyn said soothingly, patting his shoulder. He was starting to find Sjurd's morning fog appealing, which was probably a sign that he had spent far too much time in the man's bed.

"Mathilde's ring," Sjurd said, a little forlornly. "She wouldn't take it. Thought it would betray her."

“Oh,” Celyn said, his heart catching a little. He still missed her too. Impulsively, he dropped a kiss on Sjurd’s cheek.

Sjurd just blinked at him, bleary-eyed and startled. Then he let out a low, triumphant, “Hah,” and wrapped himself around Celyn again. It wasn’t possible that he had more than four limbs, Celyn knew, but he felt entirely entangled in the man, every nerve in his body thrilling in anticipation.

Then he felt the slow rise and fall of Sjurd’s breath against his throat and realized that the stupid oaf had fallen asleep again.

“One of these days,” Celyn told him sternly, “you’ll catch up on all that lost sleep of yours, and things will change.”

Waiting for Sjurd to wake up gave him time to think, though, and he squirmed under the rudder before they set off that morning, adjusting the casing of the lodestone carefully.

“What are you doing?” Sjurd asked from somewhere behind him.

“Trying something,” Celyn said and wriggled out ass first. “I think your lodestar is interfering with the steering. Try now.”

Sjurd narrowed his eyes. “That better not be some very strange innuendo.”

“It’s not,” Celyn protested. “Seriously, try flying my girl now.”

Sjurd shot him a skeptical look, but cast off carefully. The wind caught at the *Eirlys’* tilted sails, lifting them, and Celyn felt the difference at once. She was eager for the wind now, and they went racing out over the ruffled waves. He saw the moment when Sjurd felt the difference, his shoulders setting into place and his breath catching.

“There’s my girl,” Celyn crowed, scrambling to stand behind him. “Feel the difference?”

“How does that work?” Sjurd asked.

“You know she’s made of wood that grew on Gwydr? In a completely calm sky, with no lodestone to counteract the call of home, she’d drift steadily back towards Gwydr.”

“There’s a lot of islands between here and there.”

“Which is why we need the lodestone to manage the steering. Your lodestar was interfering, which is why you had trouble steering. I shifted the lead casing on the *Eirlys*’ lodestone to compensate. We’ll have to adjust it again as we move closer to the coast.”

“How do you know how much adjustment to make?”

“Equations,” Celyn said with a shudder. He’d never been much of a mathematician, but some things you had to learn if you wanted to live. He knew the theory well enough to teach it to Sjurd, though he didn’t expect it to sink in. Most first-time sailors went by the feel of the boat and only returned to the math the first time they hit trouble.

It took a week of watching Sjurd’s steering improve at an uncanny rate before he noticed the absent look in his husband’s eyes every time he adjusted his course. Suspicious, Celyn demanded, “Are you doing the equations in your head?”

“They’re not that complex,” Sjurd said absently, shifting their course so they caught the next thermal and went soaring.

Celyn, who still had to work them out on paper every morning before he set sail, narrowed his eyes and kept quiet. Why was this man being wasted fighting monsters and indoctrinated Imperial legionnaires? It wasn’t right.

The next day took them out towards the westernmost isles. It was a long sail, and they had to stop overnight on the craggy uninhabited little isle of Gwymon. There was a bothy there, a little one-roomed wooden hut on the machair with only a rag to fill its doorway and two single narrow bunks with heather-stuffed mattresses. The islet only had a single copse of *derwen* trees, just enough to keep it above the waves, which meant it was low enough that Celyn could cast a fishing line off the side. They had fresh fish for dinner, and then Celyn made Sjurd stay outside and wait for the dusk.

The western sky from here was full of color: green, purple, and moon-silver streaking across the darkness of the night.

“What is that?” Sjurd breathed.

“The Veil of Storms,” Celyn explained. “Built on prayers and held in place by lodestone, that. It’s all that protects us from the bad storms and keeps the islands from floating out into the unknown.”

“Could that happen?”

“It might yet,” Celyn said, the thought sobering him. “If all else fails, we’ll drop the Veil and escape the Empire that way.”

“So easy.”

“Not all the islands have enough fresh water to support their population. Very few can withstand bad storms. If we drift apart...” He swallowed. “Not easy, not at all.”

“I’m sorry.”

“We’ll take your people too, if the day comes. Fill up all our ships and rafts, and take our chances with the storms.”

There seemed no question of taking separate beds that night, narrow as they were. It was too natural by now to just crawl in with Sjurd, laying his head on Sjurd’s chest to be lulled to sleep by the sound of wind, waves, and the steady beat of Sjurd’s heart. He couldn’t imagine what it would be like to sleep alone again, when he returned to the embassy and Sjurd rode grimly towards the front.

Out here in the further isles, the rest of the world seemed very far away. By the time they reached Luaith, it felt like they would be traveling forever, moving from island to island until the world faded into a final sunset. Looking down from the torn-off beach on the island’s northern shore, they watched the priests of Dwynwen slowly drawing rocks from the seabed to the surface of the water, preparing them for a new plantation of *derwen* seeds, another new island to offer hope to the people of Axholme.

But from there, their route swung back towards the mainland, the islands closer together as they left the Veil behind: Blodyn, Metheglin, Callestr, Haearn, where Sjurd forgot to tweak his ear after he kissed him, lingering

instead with his hands on Celyn's cheeks, and all Celyn could do was sigh into it softly.

And, finally, they were coasting into Gwydr, dear rocky Gwydr with its half-timbered houses and brass bells hanging off every eave. Celyn didn't take them to the town pier, but straight home, tying up at the little red-painted landing at the bottom of his garden. There were rabbits on the lawn again, plump and brown, but they scattered as he pulled Sjurd up the back path, their white tails flashing. The house stood among gnarled old *derwen* trees, built a little bit crooked, with its black-timbered top story hanging over the bottom and its chimneys and turret poking out of the roof and side gable awkwardly. The shutters were flung back from the windows, and lace curtains were fluttering in the breeze. Foxgloves and lupins grew against the wall, stretching out of beds full of bright sweet williams and fool's bane. The apple tree was already heavy with fruit, now summer was slowly beginning to fade, and he was pleased to see such a good crop after the hard spring they'd had.

"No one to welcome us?" Sjurd said, sounding a little disappointed. He'd started trying to guess what kind of hosts would greet them on each island.

"No," Celyn said happily. He pushed the back door open, and gestured Sjurd in with a faint flourish.

The kitchen was cool after the bright sun outside, with its worn stone floor absorbing the heat from the air. Someone from the village had been in to prepare the house, and they'd left bread and cloth-wrapped cheese on the big wooden table, along with a big pitcher of freshly-drawn water and a round bottle of cider.

"Do you want lunch before the ceremony this time?" Celyn asked, dropping his bag with a sigh of relief and padding across the kitchen to get a couple of cups out of the top cupboard. "The water's good for drinking, if you're thirsty. I've got a proper covered well in the front garden."

Sjurd was still standing in the doorway, looking a little uncertain. "This is your home?"

“Yes,” Celyn said and, remembering the formalities, he added, a little belatedly, “Enter in, friend, and be welcome to my hearth.”

Sjurd took another step inside, looking around. “It’s not a palace.”

Stung, Celyn scowled at him. “No, it’s not.”

“That wasn’t a complaint.”

“It sounded like one,” Celyn snapped and poured himself some water. Sjurd’s hand on his shoulder surprised him and, annoyingly, steadied him.

“I didn’t grow up in a palace, either. Why were you out here?”

“My father brought us here after my mother died,” Celyn said, shrugging. “We used to spend our quiet seasons here before that, but he couldn’t bear to be in court at all without her. When he died, my aunt took the twins away to Briallen Isle to bring up with her girls, but I was of age, so I stayed here.”

“Have you other family here?”

“No,” Celyn said, and pulled away to hunt out the bread board. “Just friends.”

“How old were you when your father died?”

“Sixteen.”

Sjurd was quiet for a while, just watching him, and Celyn busied himself with the bread, keeping his back to his husband. People looked at him strangely sometimes when they heard that, especially if they knew how rarely his father had noticed that he still had sons. He had brought the twins up himself the last few years, with help from half the old women in the village, and it had been both a weight from his shoulders and a terrible shock when Aunt Edwy had swooped down and taken them away. He hadn’t quite known what to do with himself, besides start visiting Axholme more often.

“Give me that,” Sjurd said gruffly at last. “I don’t trust you with a knife.”

“It’s a bread knife. I’ve been feeding myself successfully for many years, you know,” Celyn complained, and they were back to themselves again.

They ate their lunch in the garden, perched on the wobbly old applewood bench with their elbows knocking. They washed their food down with potently alcoholic cider, and Celyn laughed to see Sjurd's eyes widen at the kick.

“What do you people do to your scrumpy?” he complained.

“Oh, we press the apples under the full moon,” Celyn said airily. “Then we dance naked around the vats every night for a month, praying to Dwynwen to bless...”

“Shut up, Celyn,” Sjurd said, turning his head to kiss him quiet. His lips were warm, and his mouth tasted of cider, nut bread and the faint tang of salty cheese. Celyn fell into it as easily as dreaming, letting his eyes drift closed and his lips press and cling. The sun was warm on his cheek, and the air smelled like apples, and he never wanted to break this kiss.

Then Sjurd drew back, leaving Celyn blinking and confused. What had that been for? There was no one to see them, and they weren't in the middle of a wedding. There was no reason for it, unless Sjurd had wanted to do it, which was the strangest and yet most rational thing in the world.

Draining his cup, Sjurd then set it aside and offered his hand to Celyn. “Shall we go and get married? Again.”

But this time it felt different, and not just because Sjurd kept hold of his hand all the way to the temple. Celyn stole little glances at him as they walked, trying to puzzle it out. He still looked like Sjurd the Oaf, although the shadows under his eyes had faded and there was a new energy in his step. He still grumbled and sighed and cast aspersions on Celyn's wit and strength. It was just...

He just didn't seem that much of an oaf any more, and not just because Celyn could still taste the sweet ghost of his kiss.

As they walked along the winding main street of the village, people came hurrying out of the houses to join them, shouting greetings and congratulations: Nest and Myfanwy, the weaver's girls; old Taryn, her wrinkled face bright and smiling; Math the Dairy with his plump wife Carys;

handsome dark-eyed Teilo, who had been Celyn's first kiss, behind the schoolhouse on a blustery spring day, now carrying his baby daughter against his shoulder. The wind was dancing through the bells on the eaves, making them sing, and soon the chapel bells joined in, peeling out over the steep roofs and the rustling boughs of the *derwen* oaks and apple trees.

They made their vows in the cozy little oak-paneled chapel where Celyn had learned his first prayers, and for the first time Celyn felt more than duty in the words. As the priest spoke of honesty and kindness, protection and compassion, he found himself caught by Sjurd's eyes, the cool steady blue of them. For the first time, he wanted this; wanted this courageous, bad-tempered, infuriating man who had kissed him so sweetly in his own quiet garden.

Then he realized that Sjurd's hands weren't quite steady in his, and his voice was a little rough on his promises. His eyes were locked on Celyn's, and his lips were parted slightly, as if yearning for another kiss.

The priest finally said, "And now you are wed, and may seal it with a kiss."

Celyn was moving forward before he thought about it. He wrapped his arms around Sjurd's neck and fell forward into his kiss. Sjurd met him just as eagerly, his lips parting under Celyn's as he slid his tongue into that warm mouth. It was as sweet as the last kiss, but there was a hunger to it now that made him dig his fingers into Sjurd's arms as Sjurd pulled him close.

It was the noise of whoops and cheers that made him pull back, and he wet his lips and tried to catch his breath, still gazing at Sjurd's flushed face.

Celyn wanted to kiss him again. He was leaning in for it when someone thwacked him around the back of the head with a prayer cushion.

"Save it for your wedding bed," Teilo advised him cheerfully as everyone laughed. "No place for such things in the chapel."

"Oh, because you've never pressed your devotions to the queen of love a little too hard in here," Celyn retorted to general hilarity. It had been a priest's

daughter who finally caught Teilo, after all, and there were plenty of rumors about just where she'd converted him to the cause of matrimony.

Slipping his arm around Sjurd's waist, he made an effort to pay attention to their surroundings, even when Sjurd cupped a hand around the back of his neck to keep him close. There would be another feast or entertainment, of course, just like on every previous island. Although, given this lot tended to forget he was a prince, they could be in for anything. If someone came at him with a wig and petticoat, he was running for it and leaving Sjurd to their tender mercies. "What have you planned for us, then?"

"There's a fair," little Myfanwy piped up. "And a huge feast."

"And you're not invited," Teilo added, to applause.

"What's that?" Celyn asked, startled.

"We're having it without you," one of the girls said. "We thought you'd probably had enough feasts by now."

"There's food on your table, and your bed's made up," Teilo elaborated. "Take your husband home, boy, and we'll see you in the morning."

"Late morning," someone piped up from the back of the crowd, provoking a ripple of laughter.

A month ago, he'd have cursed them. Now he just beamed at them, and said, "I could kiss you all."

"You could not," Sjurd growled, twitching beside him, which prompted another wave of laughter and jostling that carried them out of the temple. The crowds were moving down towards the river meadow, and Celyn could already hear the distinctive wheeze of the steam organ and the crack of hard balls against the Aunt Sally shy. He hadn't been to a proper fair in years, but he didn't care. Instead, he waved them all away and took off up the high street at a run, Sjurd's hand caught in his, laughing at the whoops and whistles that earned him.

Then they were round the first corner, and he was suddenly in Sjurd's arms, being kissed so brightly and fiercely that he lost himself in it.

When that kiss ended, he couldn't manage to pull back more than a breath, though he did manage to say, "I think we've lost our minds."

"I blame the scrumpy," Sjurd agreed gravely and closed the gap between them again.

They were interrupted by the scattering sound of footsteps as children went racing past, giggling their way towards the fair.

"It wouldn't take us long to walk home," Celyn muttered against Sjurd's rough cheek. "It's just up there."

"At the top of the hill," Sjurd grumbled. He was tracing circles on Celyn's hip, through his thin shirt, and it was distracting Celyn, making his thoughts scatter and fracture.

"If we start walking," he suggested, "we'll get there eventually."

They did, though they stopped three more times. It really wasn't fair, Celyn thought, tipping his head back to allow Sjurd access to his throat. Not fair at all. He wasn't quite sure what was so unfair, but something definitely was. Or wasn't. Perhaps it was Sjurd's mouth.

"Ssh," Sjurd mumbled. "You're not making sense."

"That's your fault too," Celyn told him. He reached behind himself blindly and managed to push open the garden gate. "Come in. To the garden, I mean, and the house. Not that you couldn't come in other places, but that's a discussion for ins... *Sjurd!*"

The world was suddenly the wrong way up, as he was tossed over Sjurd's shoulder with a broad hand slammed onto his ass to hold him in place. He got a faceful of lavender as Sjurd strode up the garden path, and managed to splutter, "If you carry me over that threshold, I'll..."

"You'll what?" Sjurd inquired, his hand shifting on Celyn's ass so that his fingers were teasing his crack through his hose.

"Bite?" Celyn suggested feebly, eyeing the delicious curve of Sjurd's ass from very close up. It wouldn't take much of a wriggle to get his teeth grazing that.

“Promises,” Sjurd growled, but swung him back onto his feet, kicking the door open and propelling them both inside. The moment the door slammed shut behind them, Sjurd was on him, pressing him hard against the wall, his mouth hot and hungry as his hips rocked sharply against Celyn’s. They were both hard, and the hot press of cock against cock made Celyn groan.

“Oaf,” he managed.

“Brat,” Sjurd retorted fondly and slipped his hands under Celyn’s shirt, pushing it up as he stroked Celyn’s taut belly. “Take this off.”

“I would,” Celyn said and wriggled against him. “You’re in the way.”

Sjurd hummed and leaned in to kiss him again, his hands slipping down to tease their way under Celyn’s waistband. He sounded smug, which wasn’t to be endured even when Celyn’s brain was slowly melting into syrup. Pulling himself up, he hitched his leg a little tighter around Sjurd’s hips, very aware of how uncomfortably tight his braies were.

Breaking the kiss to nibble the lobe of Sjurd’s ear, he breathed, “If you won’t let me take my clothes off, how are you going to manage to fuck me senseless?”

Sjurd went completely still. “Is that a challenge?”

“Oh, absolutely,” Celyn agreed. “I challenge you to be naked before I am. Shall we say the winner gets to...”

Sjurd had leaned back and was peeling off his shirt, so slowly it could only be deliberate. And, yes, Celyn had seen his bare chest many times now, but not from such close quarters and not when he was already quivering with anticipation. His mouth went dry, and he entirely forgot what he was saying.

Sjurd let the white shirt fall from his hand and leaned forward again, so close that Celyn could almost taste him (and he wanted to run his tongue down from Sjurd’s throat, delving through the dark hair that curled over his solid chest to tease around his nipple. And then he’d work his way down, following that dark trail of hair that led below Sjurd’s belt to...).

“Top?” Sjurd asked, his voice deep and soft.

“What?” Celyn said.

“The winner,” Sjurd reminded him, his left hand slipping back under Celyn’s shirt, “tops.”

“Done,” Celyn said breathlessly and choked out a groan as Sjurd tweaked his left nipple gently, sending little shivers of pleasure rushing down to his cock. “That’s nice. Do it again.”

“Happily,” Sjurd murmured and obliged, making Celyn sway forward, reaching out for Sjurd’s hips to pull him closer. He found bare skin, and froze in delight. Then he slid his hands round to get them on the warm bare muscle of Sjurd’s very fine ass. He’d managed to get his breeches and braies undone with his free hand, and they were sliding down his legs as Celyn explored, trying to get his hands round to the front, even as Sjurd pressed close against him, shuddering as his cock rubbed against Celyn’s bared belly.

Sjurd bit his ear, and Celyn was so lost that it shocked him into a long shudder, his hands clenching on Sjurd’s ass. Sjurd groaned and then said, right into his ear, “You’ve lost.”

Celyn was fine with that, but he made a last stab at dignity and breathed, “Boots.”

Sjurd swore and bent down, and Celyn, despite the wrench of pulling away, patted him on the ass and ran for the stairs. Sjurd roared after him indignantly, but he had the advantage of surprise and being on his home ground, and so made it all the way to his bedroom, three floors up in the turret, before Sjurd caught up and tackled him to the bed.

“What are you doing, brat?” he snarled.

“Getting us into bed,” Celyn informed him with a sniff. “Only barbarians fuck on the floor.”

“What makes you think we were going to get as far as the floor?” Sjurd asked, and then his mouth was on Celyn’s again, hard, hot and demanding. Celyn pushed himself up to meet it, winding his hands in Sjurd’s hair. His clothes felt like an unbearable restriction, especially now he could feel Sjurd’s

bare warmth through them and touch every point on his broad solid body. He lost himself in Sjurd, pressing himself against every muscle, smoothing his hands across Sjurd's ass and down his thighs, reaching forward to where he could feel Sjurd's beautiful cock pressed against him.

Then Sjurd reared back, snarling down at him.

Celyn surged up after him, but Sjurd pushed him down hard with one hand, his eyes narrowing as he held him against the pillows.

"What?" Celyn complained, and it came out breathless and needy. The man was magnificent.

"You're still not naked," Sjurd growled.

"Well, you keep distracting me," Celyn said reasonably, looking up in delight. Sjurd's body was the very best kind of distraction, all defined muscles and strength, his cock as long and broad as the rest of him, dark with blood as it jutted forward. As Celyn watched, wetting his lips, it bobbed a little, the head growing slicker.

Then suddenly Sjurd was on him, pulling off his clothes with clumsy haste. Celyn did his best to hinder him, getting his hands on Sjurd instead, laughing as Sjurd swore at him and then stilling as Celyn wrapped his hand around that lovely hot length and began to stroke him, feeling every quiver that sent through Sjurd.

"If," Sjurd gasped, his cheeks flushing, "you want any of that yourself, you have to... holy *Thunder*, Celyn, your hands."

"Have to what?" Celyn inquired, reaching down to tug his half-done breeches out of the way and set his own cock free. The sight of Sjurd coming apart in his hand was making him harder than he'd ever been in his life.

"Naked." Sjurd's chest was heaving a little now, his cock thrusting hard and fast against Celyn's palm.

Not yet, Celyn thought, and pulled his hand away, spreading his arms out. "Make me naked, then." He actually thought Sjurd might hit him, or bite him

(and there was an idea that made him twitch a little himself). Then Sjurð's hands were knotted in his shirt, dragging it up.

"That still has to do one more wedding," Celyn said, as his breeches were tugged right off.

"I don't fucking care," Sjurð snapped, as one of his hands closed around Celyn's cock and the other dragged Celyn's hand back to where it had been. They went tumbling across the bed then, pressing kisses onto any bit of skin they could reach as they rutted into each other's hands. It was giddy and wonderful, and Celyn felt the excitement rising through him like sparkling wine, prickling across his skin with a promise of ecstasy.

Managing to lunge up close to Sjurð's ear, he breathed, "In me, please. Fuck me, Sjurð, fuck me, please!"

Sjurð went still against him. Then he turned Celyn fast, shoving him face down on the bed as he snarled, "If the oil's downstairs..."

"There's some in the drawer." Celyn thrust his ass up in invitation, and gasped when Sjurð bit it lightly. He heard the rattle of the drawer, and then Sjurð's oiled finger was easing clumsily into his ass, stretching him with a desperate haste. Celyn rocked up onto it, demanding, "More!"

He got a second finger for that, and a first press on his inner nub which made him twitch and whimper. When Sjurð pulled his fingers out, Celyn shivered in anticipation. The first broad press of Sjurð's cock made him gasp as his hole stretched around it, quivering on that magical edge between pleasure and pain. Then the next push brought Sjurð deeper, and Celyn's whole body was trembling now, craving more, more, more.

"This shuts you up?" Sjurð gasped, his voice rough.

Then he thrust again, and Celyn made his next gasp a loud moan instead, just to show the oaf that just because he felt perfect, it didn't mean... it didn't mean that Celyn wasn't going to cry out for real when the next push hit his most sensitive spot, that was what.

“There,” Sjurd murmured, a hint of wonder in his voice. His hands covered Celyn’s on the sheets and then he pulled back just enough to thrust in hard, landing on that same spot again. Then, he began to fuck Celyn, hard and fast, and Celyn lost control of not the situation but himself, yelling out his pleasure as his hands clutched at the sheets and his whole body lit up in pleasure every time Sjurd swore in his ear and slammed forward again.

Sjurd came with a roar, his whole body going still and stiff behind his final thrust, and that carried Celyn over the edge as if he’d fallen into a storm, swept away into the lightning so fast his vision went white.

CHAPTER X

Sjurd

Later, lying sated with Celyn's head upon his chest, Sjurd finally took notice of his surroundings. The room, low-beamed and cozy, was as warm and shabby as the rest of the house. He would never have imagined the brat prince living in a place like this. It felt like a country farmhouse, with only the big glass windows and long skylights above the bed hinting at wealth.

It reminded him of home. Not Holmebury, but his father's homestead of High Aldeby, where he had run wild as a boy, barely aware that a distant grandfather linked him to the throne. He hadn't heard of the Empire then; had only gone into soldiering after watching the local regiment come in to help drive out a rabid ogre that had settled in their grazing land. Fascinated by the shine of armor and clash of swords, he had gone into his service on the front looking for excitement.

"You've gone sad again," Celyn remarked, propping himself up enough to study Sjurd. He looked softer than usual, his hair hanging loose and tousled to his shoulders and his lips flushed. He smiled at Sjurd, without the faintest hint of mockery, which warmed him in a way that should have been a little worrying, but wasn't.

"Do you ever wish the world was as simple as you used to think it was, when you were a child?"

Celyn considered it, his eyes distant and his fingers playing with Sjurd's chest hair. At last he said, as if they actually had the whole conversation and he was just drawing an obvious conclusion, "At least as an adult, you can enjoy the complications with other people. Preferably in bed."

Sjurd's laughter burst out of him, loud and bright and easy, startling him. It hadn't even been that funny, but he suddenly felt free enough to laugh, and it just bubbled out of him. Still chuckling, he reached up enough to snag his arm around Celyn's neck and pull him down. Celyn came happily, meeting his smiling kisses with soft, amused lips and teasing hands. Soon, Sjurd's breath

was coming fast, and his cock was twitching back to fullness, rubbing against the crease of Celyn's thigh.

"Somebody's eager," Celyn murmured, his voice rough and warm. Strange to think he'd have this to come home to, and a little bit hard to believe. Ys still felt like a dream, lovely, restful and utterly untrue. Some moment soon he'd wake to find himself bleeding out in some misthound's den, the frost still clinging to the bare thorns and winter biting down on the border. This was too sweet a moment to be real.

"Sad again," Celyn murmured and then chuckled, rich and a little wicked. "I think I can cheer you up."

"Oh?" Sjurd said, deliberately putting his mood aside. "And how do you plan to do that?"

Celyn beamed at him and then licked his lips slowly. Before Sjurd could work his way through the implications of that, Celyn was sliding down the bed, pushing Sjurd's knees apart to settle between them. His mouth closed warmly over Sjurd's cock, and Sjurd forgot all about dreams to lose himself in sensation.

Later still, they crept downstairs to fill up plates from the piles of cakes, pastries and fancies on the kitchen table, taking them back to bed to share in between honey-flavored kisses.

"I hate sleeping on crumbs," Celyn complained.

"Well, then," Sjurd said, reasonably enough, he thought, "don't sleep."

Eventually, though, they both subsided into a pleasant languor, Celyn nestled into the crook of his arm, still making vague and sleepy innuendos. Sjurd tugged him a little closer, pressing a kiss against his hair, and then looked up.

Through the skylight above them he could see the stars scattered across the great dark depth of the night. As he watched, fallen starflowers went floating over the window, lighter than air and glowing with their own faint trace of moonlight, their blooms open like cupped palms reaching up, lilies of the night sky.

“It’s the season for it,” Celyn said softly. “They fall to the sea eventually. It’s lucky, if one lands on your ship.”

“The Empire,” Sjurd said, a little reluctantly.

“Will suck all the magic from the land,” Celyn said quietly. “And there will be no more starflowers, and likely no more Ys. If they fell the *derwen* forest to build ships, there will be no trees to keep us floating in the sky, or even above the water.”

Sjurd took his hand, squeezing it lightly. There was little to say to that, except, “We’ll stand in their way, for as long as we can.”

“Don’t die for it,” Celyn said, his voice carefully casual. “When the moment comes, don’t make a last stand. Come back here, and fly away with us.”

“My people...”

“Most will be here, in that case. They’ll need someone to speak for them in Ys.”

“I can’t run away.”

“Run *to*,” Celyn said, suddenly fierce. “Run here.” Then, with a visible effort, he relaxed his shoulders and curled close again. “We could be farmers.”

“I don’t know how to farm.”

“I have books on that. We could plant enough vegetables in the garden to feed us, and probably a handful of refugees. We could easily take in a family. Have a goat. Grow our beards long. Learn to chew grass and talk of the weather.”

“Ridiculous boy,” Sjurd said, but let Celyn continue to spin his fantasy as the pale starflowers floated overhead, and he sank slowly towards sleep.

There was no rush to leave Gwydr, so they lingered the next morning. Celyn, to Sjurd’s amusement, knew how to scramble eggs and fry a few sausages, so they ate a hearty breakfast, with the morning sun spilling through the kitchen window and the air sweet with the scent of apples. The lawn

outside was dusted with fallen starflowers, and when they finally cast off, there was one sitting on *Eirlys'* prow.

They weren't expected on Enfys until just before dusk, so they had set out late, and the afternoon sun was already sinking below the islands, turning the sea below them gold. Pale fallen flowers floated on the quiet water, and Celyn had to coax the sails to pick up every scrap of wind. As they approached Enfys, the wind picked up a little, but it was still barely enough to keep them moving.

Enfys Isle was actually two islands, connected by a narrow, shallow strip of rock. The main isles were heavily wooded, and the village stood on the connecting arch, narrow brightly painted houses pressing up against each other in a cheerful jumble. Sjurd sailed them in, ignoring Celyn's cheerful comment of, "And to think, a month ago you nearly threw up walking down the pier. I'll have you flying loops next."

"Strange how much of an optimist you are," Sjurd threw back and brought them in neatly. The usual crowd of dignitaries was waiting for them on the quay, in their peaked hats and smart clothes. This felt like his life now, and it was unsettling to think that it would end tomorrow and he would be back on the border by the end of the week. What would it have been like to live in another age, he wondered, where his biggest concern would have been tax-collecting and potato blights?

For a start, he'd not have been heir at all. The kin would have chosen someone from one of the more important branches of the family. He was only First Prince because he could hold his own in a fight. There would have been no chance of marrying for advantage and wandering around Ys in a time of peace. He would have been a country farmer, just like in Celyn's silly fantasy.

"Sjurd," Celyn said now, his voice tight. He jerked his head towards the group on the quay.

None of them were smiling, Sjurd realized suddenly. Instead they were conferring among themselves, looking unhappy. Then one of them was jostled forward, and he came slowly along the pier to meet them, doffing his scarlet hat.

“First Prince Sjurd,” he said and held forward a rolled scroll. “There is a message for you, from your king.”

The edges of the paper were black, and Sjurd felt the peaceful dream that was Ys shatter around him. Taking the scroll, he snapped the seal and began to read, the world getting a little colder and harder with every word. When he was done, he turned to Celyn. “How long to fly back to Holmebury? Or the border?”

“In this wind?” Celyn said, and all the laughter had gone from his face and voice. “We’ll be lucky to make safe anchorage on the coast before dark.”

“Then fly in the dark,” Sjurd snapped.

“It’s not safe.”

“I don’t care,” Sjurd said, the letter crumpling a little as his fists clenched.

Celyn glared at him. “I care. Maybe you can sail the seas in the dark, but by night you don’t know what else is flying. A bat or an owl in the rudder or ropes and at best we won’t be sailing on for days. As for landing, you need enough light to see exactly where the rocks, trees and rooftops are. If we kill ourselves on the flight, the war is lost.”

Sjurd snarled, trying to untangle impossible demands. Suddenly, for the first time in weeks, he wanted to hit something, the harder the better.

“Sjurd,” Celyn said. “How bad?”

“They’re coming,” Sjurd said, and saw Celyn go white even in the softening light. “They’re coming by *boat*. They just flew down the pass.”

“*Prydwen*,” Celyn breathed, looking even sicker.

“The first guard tower,” Sjurd said, stabbing his words at Celyn, because it had been his people who let the Empire take possession of such a thing, “thought they were Ysian. They were ready to welcome them, until the cannons started. I need to be there!”

“We can go at dawn,” Celyn said. “Ride the morning sea wind inland. If we can get even a slight breeze at our backs, we can make it to the border by

the end of the day. *Eirlys* is no great ship, but she doesn't need much to make her run at speed."

"And what are we supposed to do until then?" Sjurd demanded, taking a few quick pacing steps back down the pier. "Sit and watch the sunset?"

"Well," Celyn drawled, voice sharp with annoyance. "We could always get married. That is why we're here, after all."

"Married?" Sjurd repeated.

"Yes. We've done it thirty times already. You might recall, if you think very hard."

There was a political urgency to sealing the link between their lands now, so Sjurd said, "Fine. Let's do this."

He strode towards the village, Celyn keeping pace with him, and the locals falling in behind in a flurry. Celyn let him stalk for a few moments and then said softly, "You're frightening these people."

"They ought to be scared," Sjurd responded. He'd let himself get caught up in the Ysian attitude to the war, as if it was happening to someone else, far away, and now he was regretting it.

"Diplomacy," Celyn said, stretching out each syllable. "Remember that."

"Don't. Give. A. Fuck," Sjurd enunciated, just as clearly.

It wasn't like their previous weddings, not even the first awkward few. The words spoken over their heads were the same, but the quiet rustling unease of the witnesses was new. Sjurd couldn't concentrate on the hopeful words, not when his mind was steadily filling with troop numbers and strategies, and his stomach was turning icy with fear.

He growled out his responses at the right moments, and then went back to thinking about what route the ship would be taking out of the mountains. Could they set nets or fire the sails to slow it? He'd have to ask Celyn.

Celyn, whose gaze hadn't left his, even as the dusk dimmed the room around them; Celyn, who was making his own responses in a cool voice, his hands steady on Sjurd's. When they knelt for the blessing, it felt bitter, as if it

were an ending, not a beginning: their final marriage, and likely their last days alive.

When Celyn kissed him, there was no mischief in it, and it was warm. Sjurd closed his eyes, trying hard to lock hope away, lest it weaken him. Celyn kissed him again, this time chastely on the cheek and moved away. Sjurd just stood, hearing the quiet murmur of conversation, and the movement of people around him, chairs scraping back and children beginning to run and giggle. He didn't open his eyes.

"I've made our excuses," Celyn said, his voice still very gentle, and Sjurd tried to be angry at that. Celyn was supposed to snap and argue, not treat him as if he were broken. "I didn't think you'd want to go to the feast. We have the storm cottage for the night, and one of the aldermen just retired from the sky. He's bringing across his tabletop maps, which are bigger than the ones I keep in the *Eirlys*."

Sjurd opened his eyes. The little temple was almost empty now, with just a few grave elders standing by the door. He took Celyn's offered hand, and went to thank them.

The night was still, the last heat of summer clinging to the hollows of the path as they climbed up to the storm cottage. The air felt heavy, and Celyn looked up and whispered, "Hold the storm, Great Dwywnwen."

"I thought you were an atheist," Sjurd commented to hide the clench of his gut. He couldn't be stuck here while his country burned.

"Nobody's an atheist in a storm," Celyn said absently, still frowning at the sky. "If we get a breeze before morning, to break the heat, we'll be safe."

Inside, the cottage was stuffy. Sjurd went to fling the shutters open and light the lamps, as Celyn spread the maps out across the big table. They both stripped off their shirts, and Sjurd bent down to get rid of his boots. When he stood up, Celyn was staring at him across the table, his eyes unreadable in the dim light. There was a mark on his collarbone, a little smudge that Sjurd realized with a sudden thrill wasn't dirt, but the print of his own mouth.

Without thinking, he was moving across the room and dragging Celyn in, kissing him hard and desperately, his tongue sweeping into Celyn's mouth. Celyn rose into it, his arms tight around Sjurd's neck, shuddering as he kissed Sjurd back with the same fierce determination.

They stumbled to the bed, kicking off the rest of their clothes in a shambling rush, tripping because neither of them would pull back from the kiss. Celyn's hand on his cock was a beautiful shock, warm and firm and sweaty as Sjurd thrust against him. When Celyn tugged them both down on the bed, he went willingly, following their kiss to sink down against the now familiar lines of Celyn's body.

Somewhere in that moment, the kiss shifted from desperate to tender, and their hands slowed, roaming over each other's bodies in slow wonder. Their long kiss fractured into quick, soft nuzzles, lips against lips, and then Celyn shifted away to kiss his jaw, his throat, and every old scar that marked Sjurd's skin. The soft press of his mouth made Sjurd shiver, and he groaned, twisting around Celyn to return the favor, touching his mouth to shoulder, collarbone, the line of Celyn's spine, in a slow wordless wrestle to see which of them could reach most skin.

Sweat-washed in the warm air, they slid against each other, hands slipping. He savored every gasp he won from Celyn, whether it was from a kiss to the dimple at the base of his spine or the moment he ran his knuckle gently along the long curve of Celyn's cock and then cupped the fat head gently against his hand, bending down to brush kisses against its pink and swollen tip.

Someone had left them oil by the bed again, for which he spared a vague moment of gratitude, because nothing could have induced him to leave this bed, and now he just had to reach out. He let his fingers linger as he teased Celyn's hole, tracing circles as Celyn began to writhe and groan, his voice going gruff as his cock strained against Sjurd's other hand.

"Sjurd!" Celyn protested. "Please!"

He caught the words against his own mouth and took mercy on his husband, pressing one finger to work him open and tease against that inner nub

that made Celyn whimper so happily, his eyes falling closed as he arched into the touch. Sjurd watched him, feeling a warmth grow in his chest to match the fire in his gut. Celyn was made golden by the soft lamplight, all his sharp edges vanished into bliss, and his mouth soft and slack. He liked it spitting insults, Sjurd thought, sliding a second finger in, but he loved it like this.

He kissed Celyn, then, because it was too tempting not to, and murmured, “Ready?”

Celyn’s eyes flew open, and he shifted his hips, pulling his legs up and bunching the blankets beneath them. Sjurd pressed into him, feeling Celyn’s body ease open around him. They both sighed, and then Celyn’s hands were on the back of his thighs, pulling him further in. Sjurd rocked forward, bracing his hands on the bed, and Celyn sighed again, a sound too soft and breathy to be a moan. Sjurd thrust again, slow and deep, his own breath breaking out of him at the soft rub of Celyn’s channel pressing around him. He was close enough to lean forward now and kiss Celyn. Even though it meant he couldn’t move as much, he stayed in the kiss, rocking his hips in short, shallow thrusts. Celyn rose up to meet him, and they moved together in a slow and gathering heat that made Sjurd’s head spin and his heart stumble.

Remember this, he told himself, the world beginning to blur around him as his balls tightened. *Remember this, when the hounds come roaring down; when the legions march towards you; remember, when you lie dying. Remember.*

And his climax went rolling over him, even as Celyn cried out beneath him, gasping his name in slow amazement.

Afterward, he rested against Celyn’s shoulder, enjoying the clasp of Celyn’s arms still holding him tight. Thoughts and feelings were skittering through his brain like fallen leaves in a wind, fast and elusive, and he couldn’t make sense of it all—what he feared and what he felt. At last, out of the muddle of it all, he said, “The first time I saw you, I wanted to kick you off the side of the ship.”

Celyn chuckled against his forehead. “The feeling was entirely mutual.”

“Things change,” Sjurd managed, knowing he was getting this all wrong.

Celyn was quiet for a moment. Then, with a hint of amusement in his voice, he said, “Yes, they do.” And he kissed Sjurd again, just as gently and tenderly as before.

When they finally left their bed to look at the charts, though, things were less peaceable. Celyn’s knowledge of the winds was useful in predicting *Prydwen’s* path, and Sjurd could mark in the guard towers and encampments in her path. If she made it past the first few, she’d carry her cannons right over the big encampment at Dunthorpe, where two thousand soldiers were waiting under canvas to be rotated up into the mountains.

“Why now?” he asked the maps. He’d thought they were in the middle of a reprieve, and cursed himself for complacency.

“Because of the rebellions, I assume,” Celyn said, leaning over the map. “They may need an easy victory to shore up morale and undermine the resistance. *Prydwen*, if she’s still got her cannons, could burn her way across Axholme, all the way to Ys, without the loss of one Imperial life. If I understand the Imperial way of thinking, that would be worth the risk to them.”

“They’re invading us for the sake of their reputation?” Sjurd said flatly, anger twisting bitterly in his gut.

Celyn looked up at him, his lips twisting in a humorless smile. “So we have to show them that it’s not an easy task. If I’m right, doing it without taking casualties is as vital to them as the conquest itself.”

“So where do we try to stop them?” Sjurd asked, and Celyn went back to the maps, murmuring about *Prydwen’s* speed and sails as they tried to work out if they could reach her before she burned past Dunthorpe Camp.

It was when Sjurd began to talk about destroying her before then that Celyn’s expression got stormy.

“How do you imagine we could capture her?” Sjurd snapped.

“It’s possible,” Celyn argued, and then showed a smile which was a little too sharp. “Do you know who my ancestors were, before they united Ys?”

“I dread to think.”

“They were pirates,” Celyn said.

Sjurd laughed incredulously, and then yelped when Celyn smacked him on the bare ass.

“I’ll have you know that I am one of the only people left in the world who knows anything about sky ship warfare. I also know that the cannons on *Prydwen* were loose-mounted, so they could move a little in a storm rather than ripping the decking up. Which means they can be unscrewed. Get a small boarding party, and you could certainly capture the helm and tip the cannons, and have a good chance of bringing her to land as well.”

“Celyn,” Sjurd said quietly, because there were dreams in his husband’s eyes. “They’re going to be using her to transport troops. *Eirlys* can’t carry enough men to fight off that many. I’m sorry.”

“You can’t know that,” Celyn argued. “Not until we’re there. If we can get a few men from the nearest tower...”

“Tipping the cannons is a good idea,” Sjurd said, cutting him off. “But only in case the fire doesn’t take.”

“We saved wood for three hundred years to build her,” Celyn said, his voice cracking. “She was my mother’s ship.”

“Celyn,” Sjurd said again, hopelessly.

And then, suddenly, the maps stirred a little on the table, their corners lifting. Celyn reached out to flatten them and then looked back up at Sjurd, his eyes wide. “The breeze,” he said. “We will be able to sail.”

“At first light,” Sjurd said, leaning forward to feel it curling in the window. It was only then, as his movement made it swing forward, that he realized he was still wearing Mathilde’s ring.

The wind held steady through the night, and they ran before it as the sun rose over the mainland. They took it in turns to steer, heading straight east with the sails full. They didn't speak much, both of them more concerned with what was to come.

Late in the afternoon, as they approached the camp at Dunthorpe, Celyn asked, "Should we stop?"

"They'll know by now."

Celyn nodded but went to rifle through one of the low lockers, emerging with an armful of colored cloth.

"What are you doing?" Sjurd asked.

"Flying our colors off the stern so no bright spark tries to shoot us down."

Sjurd hadn't thought of that, but he grunted approval. "They'll be even more alert at Yawby Tower."

But, long before they reached the tower, they saw that Yawby was burning, the smoke spearing up into the darkening sky.

CHAPTER XI

Celyn

They eventually found *Prydwen* anchored awkwardly above the forest, just southwest of the ruins of Yawby tower. Her sails were still unfurled, and she was straining towards Ys on the end of her ropes.

“Amateurs,” Celyn muttered bitterly.

Sjurd shot him a quelling look, and Celyn went quiet. The tender lover of the last two nights had vanished into the grim soldier, and he couldn't tell what Sjurd was thinking, or how badly the loss of the tower and its guard had wounded him. There was no going home from here, not until the battle was done, but he wanted more than anything to be back in his bed on Gwydr, watching Sjurd smile as the starflowers floated overhead.

“How long would it take two men to loosen the cannons?” Sjurd asked quietly. “Or get to a place where they could set a fire?”

“Cannons, depends how many guards they have on deck. Could be done quick and quiet, but once we tip the ship, there'll be no fighting our way off. Firing her? If they've left the powder chute unlocked, a moment, but again, we won't have time to lay a fuse and get clear like we could have done with ten men.”

Sjurd looked up at the boat again. His hand was over the place where Mathilde's ring was tucked into his shirt. Celyn watched him, and weighed up his life. He was a son of Ys, above all else, and Ys was not ready for the Empire to come flying in. To stop it, he would sacrifice *Prydwen*, if he needed to, and his own life was a brief and paltry thing beside a ship that had needed the dedication of ten generations to build, let alone the thirty peaceful isles that floated over the western sea.

“I can put us alongside the stern,” he said, resolving himself. “We'd have to climb the side, but that's to our advantage. Best they don't know we're there.”

“You are under no obligation...”

“Shut up, Sjurd,” Celyn said absently. The dusk was settling hard around them, and he weighed up the advantages of waiting for night against the extra risk and difficulty of approaching a ship from below in the dark.

“Celyn.”

“We’ll need the grappling ropes now,” Celyn said. “They’re in the aft cupboard, if you could tie one to the rail.”

“I could take her in. You don’t—”

Celyn laughed at that. “You’ve been flying less than a month, lover, and this is difficult. *Eirlys* isn’t a rowing boat. Besides, I’m far too young to be a widower.”

“Surely, also too young to die.”

“No one’s too young to die,” Celyn said, feeling the fear change into something as strong as steel in his heart.

Sjurd looked at him quietly for a moment. Then he reached out and brushed his thumb lightly along Celyn’s cheek, before saying, “Take us up.”

From that moment on, there was no time to think of anything except their mission. Celyn eased *Eirlys* in towards *Prydwen*’s hull. He pointed to the grappling rope fixed to the rail and waited tensely, focused on the wheel as Sjurd threw the rope up and it caught on *Prydwen*’s bow with a clang. Sjurd went tense, scanning the side of the ship, as Celyn pulled them in closer with the help of the rope, lashing *Eirlys*’ prow to a mooring hook just below the curve of the hull.

They waited tensely to see if anyone had noticed their arrival, but the ship above stayed quiet. That was the trouble with only having one stolen ship to fly, Celyn thought dryly. It just didn’t occur to you that other people could fly, too.

At last, Sjurd nodded, looking a little green, and Celyn smiled at him in reassurance, because he couldn’t imagine doing this if you were nervous of

heights. Carefully, he grasped the rope and went swarming up the side of the ship at a steady pace, hand over hand as neatly as he could. This much any sailor could do. Damage to the hull rarely happened when you were safely docked, and repairs had to be done, even in a storm.

He glanced down to check on Sjurd and saw him following, his lips set and his face turned upward. Celyn kept climbing, listening for any shout from above. Just under the edge of the deck, he stopped for a moment, bracing his feet against the hull to keep himself steady. Someone was passing at a slow, steady pace. Celyn breathed softly and hoped they wouldn't be discovered now.

But the steps kept going. Celyn counted to fifty and then glanced down at Sjurd, who nodded. As quickly and lightly as he could, Celyn swung himself up the last length and over the rail, landing lightly and dashing for the shelter of a couple of solid crates. Sjurd climbed up just behind him, a little more slowly, but he moved fast once he was over the rail, already reaching for his bow. Crouched in the shadows beside Celyn, he nocked an arrow to his bow and waited.

Celyn looked the other way down the deck, ready to count just how many guards they needed to overcome (*to kill*, a little cold part of his brain reminded him, and he recoiled a little). What he saw puzzled him at first. There seemed to be men sleeping half-naked on the deck, huddled around the masts and along the rails. Then he registered the chains around their ankles, fastened to solid metal staples in the deck, and breathed in sharply. He had known the Empire kept slaves, but he had never thought to meet any here.

“Sjurd,” he breathed. “The sailors are chained in place. If we fire the ship...”

Sjurd was quiet for a moment, still posed and ready to shoot. Then, very softly, he murmured back, “Their lives are hell. They...”

“Don't!” Celyn hissed.

The sound was just loud enough to make the nearest of the slaves stir. He sat up, blinking in their direction, and Celyn froze. Then, his voice dry but perfectly distinct, he said, reaching out with his scarred arms, “Dwynwen’s grace, I see an Ysian face. Am I dead at last, then, and my soul home in the west?”

“No, cousin,” Celyn whispered, staring at him. He looked old, too old to be sailing, but Celyn had no idea how slavery might age a man. “Merely over Axholme.”

“Then she is pulling towards home,” the slave murmured, lowering his head. “They don’t tell the deck slaves where they’re steering. Oh, my country.”

“I am Aderyn’s son,” Celyn told him. The only Ysians who had not come home from the Empire were his mother’s crew.

“Has it been so long?” the slave murmured, shaking his head a little. “I am Dyfri, Highness.”

His mother’s secretary. Celyn remembered him, just a solemn young man who had always slipped Celyn and the twins sweets or pennies when he visited Gwydr. “I remember you, sir.”

“Can you tell us how many guards there are?” Sjurd asked, with a note of irritation. Fair enough, Celyn supposed. This wasn’t the best time for social chitchat.

“Ten,” Dyfri said. “They are lax in their duties.”

Sjurd’s bow suddenly sang out, and both Celyn and Dyfri turned in time to see a guard by the rail stagger, lifting his hands to his throat as the force of the shot toppled him over the edge.

“Nine above deck,” Dyfri corrected with a faint smile. “But there are almost four hundred below. Are there more of you?”

“We two came to tip the cannons,” Celyn said, and left the rest unsaid.

“You’ll want to block the hatches, then,” Dyfri told them, and gestured towards the crates. “Those are full of disassembled siege machines. If you can shift them, they will weight the hatches down and win you time.”

Sjurd’s bow sang again.

“Eight,” Dyfri breathed, his eyes glinting. “Highness, we all vowed to serve Ys. Do what you must, even if it means destroying the ship. We are ready to die.”

Two more arrows, in swift succession, and Sjurd said, “Start on the hatches.”

There were boat hooks under the rail, so Celyn ran to grab them. Wedging them across the tops of the hatches, he then turned to the heavy crates. The other slaves were stirring by now, and the last few guards came at a run to investigate the disturbance. Sjurd’s arrows sang into the night, and then he was beside Celyn, bracing his shoulder against the first crate. As it grated and moved across the deck, it suddenly came into the reach of the chained slaves nearest the aft hatch and there were more hands at work.

Celyn left it to them and dashed for the second one. Already someone below decks was hammering at the hatch, the long boat hook juddering under the blows. Then Sjurd was with him, and more hands as they moved it.

“Well, that gives us until they find an axe,” Celyn said, a little breathless. “Dyfri, is anyone posted at the helm?”

“No. They won’t leave any of us within reach, and they’re too stupid to watch it themselves.”

“All to our advantage,” Celyn said, and started for the port side, unhooking the wrench he’d brought from Ys from his belt. He worked the first screw free, aware of Sjurd watching. After a moment, he stepped away and started on the next cannon along.

When the whole port side were loose, Celyn dropped his wrench and went racing up the deck to the helm, leaping up the steps. There wasn’t time to pull the anchor up, so he punched the chain’s release. It went rattling away, and he

felt the moment when it slipped free of the hull. The ship suddenly surged forward against the wind, set towards Ys. Celyn grabbed the wheel and steadied himself, roaring, “All hands, brace to heave down to port!”

He got a chorus of hesitant ayes and turned the wheel hard. The ballast below shifted on its rollers, and the ship began to tilt steadily to the side. He heard the cannons roll forward and crash through the rail, but lost count and had to wait until someone below sang out, “All clear!”

“Loosen the starboard cannon!” he bellowed, dragging the wheel round to right the boat. For a moment, he thought she wouldn’t respond, but then the ballast began to move and she swung back up, the stars blurring above him. She wasn’t answering the helm properly, and he tried to pull her round, to ride the wind cleanly.

She moved sluggishly, but he didn’t have time to query it, because Sjurd was calling up to him, “We’re ready!”

“Brace to heave down to starboard!”

This time he got more replies, and she turned more easily, though it was harder to bring her back. For a moment he thought she would just keep turning and they would all go crashing down to earth with her.

Sjurd was at his shoulder now, saying urgently, “How do we fire her?”

Celyn ignored him. An idea was blossoming in his mind, but it wouldn’t work if she wasn’t sailing true. Perhaps these idiots had set the lodestone wrong.

“Take the helm,” he snapped at Sjurd, ignoring the increasing sound of hammering to drop to his knees and crawl under the helm.

“Celyn! We have to set the fire!”

“Actually,” Celyn said, grinning to himself as he peered into the dim steerage compartment. “I thought I’d take her for a bit of a flight.”

“*Celyn!*”

“Ask me where.” He’d found the lodestone compartment by touch, and began to work it open.

Sjurd sighed heavily. “Where?”

“Dunthorpe Camp,” Celyn said. “Thought I might put her down on the parade ground. You’ve got a few soldiers there, haven’t you?”

“A mere two thousand,” Sjurd said, but there was something in his voice that was suddenly brighter than despair. “Can you do it in the time?”

“If I can fix her steering, maybe. Depends how sharp their axes are.” He finally got the compartment open, and reached in.

Sjurd laughed, a little wildly, and said, “It’s a new way to go. Yes. *Yes.*”

The compartment was empty. He groped at it hopelessly, as the stone could have rolled into a corner, but it wasn’t there. The lodestone was missing. It was probably decorating some Imperial general’s desk as a paperweight, he thought bitterly. They wouldn’t need it to steer on the far side of the mountains, where the Axtooth range cut off the pull of Ys. Its lack doomed them now.

He crawled out, and looked up at Sjurd. “There’s a chute to the gunpowder store at the bottom of these steps.”

Sjurd blinked down at him. “But...”

“Her lodestone’s gone.”

“Can’t you use the one out of *Eirlys*?”

“Not for a ship this size,” Celyn said. “Even if one of us could get to *Eirlys* and back before they break through, I need one more powerful. No, I can’t steer her, and if she keeps drifting...”

“She’ll go straight to Ys,” Sjurd finished. “Which island built her?”

Celyn swallowed hard. “Gwydr.” For a moment, it was all he could see—the Empire making its first landfall at the Gwydr landing, slaughtering its way through Math, old Telyn and little Myfanwy to burn the temple and take their

axes to the forests. He'd burn *Prydwen* out of the sky first, and found himself wondering bleakly if even ashes would float back to Ys. Perhaps some part of him would come home in the end.

"There must be some way to steer her," Sjurd said, looking implacable again. "It must be possible."

"Not unless you're carrying a great chunk of lodestone in your pocket," Celyn snapped.

Sjurd's hand went to his chest. Then, without another word, he pulled out Mathilde's ring with its gleaming lodestar, far stronger than any stone. He broke the chain apart, and offered it to Celyn. His hand was trembling, and his eyes were bleak. How long had he worn that thing as a chastisement around his neck?

"It wasn't your fault," Celyn said, covering Sjurd's palm with his own, feeling the edges of the lodestar digging into his skin. "She did what we're doing now, for her country."

"Just use the fucking lodestar," Sjurd snapped. A sudden splintering noise from below made them both startle.

Celyn dived back under the wheel, twisting the lodestar into the empty compartment and sliding the cover round. As soon as he got his hands back on the wheel, he could feel the difference. *Prydwen* answered to his hand now, almost as smoothly as the little *Eirlys*, but with a sense of barely leashed power no yacht could ever muster. Turning her back towards due east, he said, "Are they through?"

"That was the bottom of one of the crates," Sjurd said, but his bow was in his hand again. He took his stance at the top of the steps, clearly ready to take on anyone who came charging at them.

"Sailors!" Celyn hollered. "Tighten the main sail." He then added, more quietly, to Sjurd, "They're far more defenseless than I am. You should protect them first."

Sjurd snorted. "Perhaps, but you're *mine*."

They were heeling before the wind now, faster than any ship he'd ever sailed, but it wasn't just the speed that made him smile. "Oh, well, if it's like *that*, I won't argue."

Sjurd muttered something at that, but Celyn chose not to hear. He just clung to the wheel, coaxing the ship to follow his slightest whim, and watched the dark ground rush by below them, their shadow stark by moonlight.

He had no idea how much time passed before he glimpsed the pale mass of the camp ahead of them. The sound of splintering had stopped, and Sjurd was getting steadily tenser behind him, but Celyn needed all his attention for the wheel. It would be so easy to let her overfly their target, so he started calling the orders to tip her sails, making her begin to coast towards the ground. At this speed, they'd crash, so he had the crew start to slacken the sails, all the time scanning the ground for any tall trees or towers which might rip the hull out from under them.

Then there was a slow, ripping crash from behind and Sjurd drew his bow, saying softly, "They just cut their way up through the deck." His bowstring thrummed, one, twice, again and again. They were rapidly approaching the mass of the camp, and Celyn dared not look around, too focused on keeping them just above the tents. He wasn't going to find the parade square, and he winced as he heard swords squeal against a slave's chain behind him.

There were men running between the tents below, torches flickering and arrows arching up. He saw the first gleam of mud from the fields below and tipped the wheel again.

Prydwen ripped tents from the ground as she furrowed down, hitting the fields hard enough to knock Celyn from his feet and send Sjurd staggering, an arrow falling from his grip. Mud sprayed up around them, and the ship kept skidding on, digging deeper into the marshy ground until she juddered to a final halt.

Sjurd grabbed his bow again, taking aim at one of the few Imperial soldiers still standing. As Celyn picked himself up, he watched his husband begin to shoot again, as smoothly as if nothing had happened, the only difference the

way he was shouting, “Men of Axholme, to arms! To arms against the Empire!”

“The slaves,” Celyn gasped. All the breath had been knocked out of him.

“Spare the slaves!” Sjurd added to his roared orders. “Arm against the Empire, but spare the slaves!”

And as Celyn sat behind him, watching in awe, the army of Axholme came raging to their rescue.

Sjurd

By dawn, it was long over, and Sjurd was reduced to sitting on the camp commander’s cot, his arms around Celyn and his heart still beating a little too fast.

“They came,” he said in wonder to the back of Celyn’s neck. “They came, and we... *we won.*”

“We did,” Celyn said, very fondly. They’d had this conversation a few times already tonight, Sjurd unable to believe it had really happened. It was as if everything he thought he knew about the world had been rewritten, and suddenly there was hope.

They’d come out of it lightly, both scratched and bruised, and Sjurd with a bad slash on the arm where he’d had to fight off the Imperial charge before the bulk of the army arrived. They were alive, though, when he had resigned himself to death. *Prydwen* herself was badly damaged, but Celyn declared she could be mended, and would be, if his people had their way. *Eirlys*, by some strange fluke of luck, had come through almost unscratched, still floating benignly on her tether, a little above the tilting wreck of the bigger ship.

Mathilde’s ring still sat within *Prydwen*’s steerage. It felt strange not to wear it, as if it had been so much heavier than its actual weight.

“*We won,*” he said again, and Celyn let out an exasperated laugh, and turned to kiss him. His mouth was soft, tired, and tasted of camp tea, sweet

and minty. Sjurd closed his eyes and returned it with a new rush of shock. Neither of them were widowers, and there might even be time now to take Celyn to bed again and find out whether they kept burning so hot together. He rather thought they would, not least because his whole body was already flushing from a mere kiss.

They were interrupted by the sound of someone pointedly clearing their throat, and broke apart to find King Snorri standing in the tent's doorway, chuckling at them.

"I see you boys dealt with things before I could get here," he said, and gave Sjurd a pointed look.

Sjurd hurriedly untangled himself from Celyn and found his king a seat, watching with a little awe as Snorri folded his bulk into the flimsy camp chair.

"I'm sorry you missed the fun," Celyn said, and Sjurd flicked him on the ear as he sat back down, because Snorri had clearly ridden through the night to get here, and he was not a man known for his love of action.

"It appears to have been quite a spectacle," Snorri remarked, folding his hands over his belly. His eyes twinkled viciously. "I foresee a very interesting conversation with the Imperial ambassador later today. I thought I might thank him."

"For what?" Sjurd demanded.

"Restoring a cultural treasure of Ys to the right side of the mountains, and returning all those poor stranded sailors home. Such a gracious gesture."

"You're a mean old bastard," Sjurd said, not without admiration.

"Why don't I get to talk to my monarch like that?" Celyn grumbled.

"Because Rhiannon's scarier than you," Sjurd told him gravely. "What now?"

"Depends on the negotiations," Snorri said, and Sjurd suddenly realized he hadn't seen that sort of glee on his king's face in years. "The Empire hates defeat and can't afford to risk further humiliation, not with its internal

problems. If I can twist this to allow it to save face, the legions may be willing to pretend we don't exist for a while... Indeed, if this goes well, you boys could just have won us another ten years."

Sjurd just stared at him. He'd been counting his life in days and weeks for so long that years seemed like nonsense. Celyn squeezed his hand gently and said, "Give us a decade, and Ys will have ten new islands in the air before we have to drop the Veil."

Even Snorri seemed stunned by that. Then he rallied himself and said, "Of course, I want you boys out of the way. Can't have the Empire complaining that my heir attacked their personnel."

"They started it," Sjurd grumbled.

"Well, luckily enough, you were still on your honeymoon." Snorri's eyes half-closed and a slow smile spread across his face. "I think I'll tell them it was brigands."

"Don't get creative," Sjurd warned. "And no one's going to believe we're still honeymooning after a month."

"Nonsense," Snorri said. "If I remember the dates correctly, your last marriage was less than two days ago. Honeymoons come *after* the weddings." His eyes narrowed. "In fact, I don't even want to hear your names for the next three weeks."

"Done," Celyn said swiftly, his arm going around Sjurd's waist. "We'll be on Gwydr, once I've taken the time to brief my queen. With your permission, we'll send a salvage team to lift *Prydwen* from your fields, sir. I'd like to take a few of the original crew home with us as well, if any are fit to travel."

"Certainly," Snorri said, and heaved himself to his feet, the chair creaking. He shook his head, looking entertained. "Of all the people to make a love match..."

"He grows on you over time," Celyn said lightly, turning to send a bright smile at Sjurd. "Rather like a fungus."

“I didn’t just mean him,” Snorri pointed out.

“Me?” Celyn protested, clapping a hand to his heart. “I’m lovable. Everybody loves me.”

“They’d better not,” Sjurd growled. Celyn was his now, and he planned to keep him to himself.

“And to think of all the paperwork I would have avoided if I’d just arranged the match between you two to start with,” Snorri muttered, and left them to it, disappearing off into the bright, cool morning. A few moments later, they heard him berating someone outside.

“I am glad,” Celyn said, squeezing his hand, “that it was you in the end.”

“You just like the sex,” Sjurd grumbled. The idea of Celyn married to someone who didn’t want to fuck him was just preposterous.

“Oh, I do,” Celyn agreed, “but that’s not all I like.” He swallowed a little, turning to face Sjurd. “Not all I might love.”

Sjurd’s heart was in his throat. Closing his eyes, he mumbled, “I’m bad at declarations.”

“Say, I’m glad, too.”

“I’m very glad,” Sjurd whispered and leaned forward to brush a kiss across Celyn’s mouth, as gently as he could. Celyn sighed into it, and Sjurd tried to pour into it all the things he couldn’t quite manage in words yet.

It wasn’t until Celyn’s hands slipped under his shirt that he realized how heated the kiss had become. When a wolf whistle from outside interrupted them, he sat back with a groan. “I hate tents.”

“I want my own bed,” Celyn agreed, and then stood up, rolling his shoulders out wearily. “Let’s go home.”

Sjurd thought of Gwydr Island and smiled. It wasn’t his home yet, but he could imagine it. When the day came that the Empire forced them back to the water, he thought he would choose to live, to escape to Ys, and Celyn, and a

wild hope of freedom. He said as much to Celyn, stumbling over his words until he finished, “If I survive, I’ll do everything I can to make it back to you.”

“And, if you get lost on the way,” Celyn said cheerfully, offering Sjurd his hand to stand, “I’ll just come looking for you. Now, let’s get *Eirlys* flightworthy. We could be on the wind in an hour, love.”

So Sjurd took his hand, and they walked out together, into the fresh hope of a new morning.

THE END

Author Bio

Amy Rae Durreson is a writer and romantic, who writes m/m romances. She likes to go wandering across the local hills with a camera, hunting for settings for her stories. She's got a degree in early English literature, which she blames for her somewhat medieval approach to spelling, and at various times has been fluent in Latin, Old English, Ancient Greek, and Old Icelandic, though please don't ask her to speak any of them now.

Amy started her first novel nineteen years ago (it featured a warrior princess, magic swords, elves and an evil maths teacher) and has been scribbling away ever since. Despite these long years of experience, she has yet to master the arcane art of the semicolon. She has had a novella out with Dreamspinner Press and has been included in two of their recent anthologies.

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THE LION AND THE CROW

By Eli Easton

Photo Description

The photo is of the actor Henry Cavill from *The Tudors*, a very handsome and serious-looking young man with brown hair, a light beard and blue eyes. He's dressed like a medieval knight in a chainmail shirt and shoulder armor.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

I've just won my spurs and a long, hard climb it's been. Being the youngest of seven sons gives you far too many sets of shoes to fill.

But there are things I haven't told my liege, things I can't tell him. These unnatural feelings must mean I harbor a demon. Yet, when I watch him on the practice field... I can't stop the yearning.

Sincerely,

Angel

Story Info

Genre: historical

Tags: knights, first time, slow burn/ust, abduction, abuse

Content warnings: graphic violence, attempted rape, domestic abuse

Word count: 32,101

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THE LION AND THE CROW

By Eli Easton

CHAPTER 1

The first time William saw him, he was riding onto the tournament field on a red horse. His tunic was brilliant blue with a white eagle spreading its wings on the front, identifying him as one of Lord Brandon's sons. Glinting silver armor was plated over his shoulders, his arms, and the tops of his legs. Underneath he wore black leggings and boots.

It is a warrior's habit to size up an enemy—or a rival. So William felt no shame in staring as he took the youth's measure. The armor he wore was polished but functional. It was well-used, not that of a mere peacock. A black velvet girdle was slung low on his narrow hips. His shoulders were broad for his frame, but his chest was slender and his waist slim. There was nothing of the larder on him. He rode his mount as light as a feather. William's eyes dropped to his spurs—gilded. He was a full knight. But William knew well enough that such a thing could be all but bought by the nobility.

The round was archery, and the young knight had foregone any protection or decoration for his head—neither helmet, beads, nor braids. His hair was nearly black, chopped shorter than was fashionable, and bristled on top in a barbaric style. It was a harsh warrior's cut, but on him it only made a more open frame for his face. It was the finest face that William had ever seen. It was long, narrow, and delicate, with full, quirked lips, a straight nose, a dimpled chin, and broad arched brows over large, dark eyes. His skin was as pale as a bucket of cream. There was a rosy cast on the proud bones of his cheek that any maiden would kill her own dam for. It was a battle flush perhaps, in anticipation of the contest.

William was used to forming an impression in an instant, and he rarely changed them. In his mind there were men made for battle, craggy and crude. Those were the men you wanted by your side—if their tempers were not too

odious whilst in their cups. And then there were men made for the pleasing of women, as if God had put such men here for the sole purpose of warming a woman's blood for her husband's bed, thus guaranteeing the spread of the human race. The later might well claim to be the former—as good in battle as any man. But rarely had William found it to be the case. Perhaps it was a problem of motivation. What man, given the choice, wouldn't rather be thrusting between a woman's thighs than thrusting a spear on the practice field? Beauty was most oft lazy.

This young knight was definitely a woman-pleaser. He was beautiful in a way William had never seen on a man. In truth, he'd never even seen it on a woman. That did little to inspire his trust. He registered the distinctly feminine cheers of welcome the crowd afforded the rider, aptly proving William's point. And then the young knight rode past William—and looked at him.

It wasn't a mere glance. His eyes met William's when he was still ten paces away and held them, unrelenting, as he rode in front of him. He even turned his head as he passed before letting his gaze finally slip from William's. William did not back down from the stare. He dropped his eyes for no man. But he stood stoically, nothing showing on his face. It seemed forever that the knight passed, that those eyes were locked on his. They were a rich, dark brown and full of warmth and life. Even with the knight's face placidly composed, those eyes seemed to speak volumes in a language William didn't understand. They reached inside him and made his stomach clench hard with feeling.

Confusion? Curiosity? Outrage?

What did he mean by looking at William thus? They'd never met. Was it a challenge? A welcome to a stranger? The admiration of a young warrior to an elder one? Had he heard tales of William's prowess? Or had he mistaken William for someone else?

William had stopped to watch the procession of archers on his way to the stables, where he'd been taking his tired mount after the last victorious round of jousting. Now he found himself in a crowd of the castle's laborers. One of them was a blacksmith, his beefy form wrapped in a scarred leather apron.

“D’ya know ’im?” he asked William. “The Crow?”

“No.” William frowned as the name sank in. “The *Crow*?”

The man chuckled. “Aye, poor lad. He’s the youngest of seven and his brothers took all the more favorable names.”

Another man, craggy and shrunken with age, spoke up. “Lessee, there’s a bear, a hound, a fox....”

“Badger,” a third man said brightly. “That’s Sir Peter Brandon.”

“Aye. Badger. Vulture’s one, innit?”

“’Tis Sir Thomas,” the blacksmith agreed amiably.

“Lessee. Must be one more....” Craggy Face pondered seriously.

“Lion?” The third man suggested.

The blacksmith glanced at William knowingly. “Nay. None of the Lord’s sons has earned *that* title. And if the first two don’t, you can bet the latter won’t. Elder brothers won’t be outdone.”

“Hence ‘the Crow,’” Craggy Face snorted.

“Boar,” the third man supplied helpfully. “’ee’s the biggest ’un.”

“Sir Stephan! That’s got it done. Boar suits him too. Even the teeth.” Craggy Face barred his teeth and chomped. A stench wafted on the breeze.

William’s eyes were drawn back to the Crow as he moved away, tall and straight in the saddle. From the back his shoulders looked broader still. They narrowed in a defined V to an almost delicate waist. “And that one? The Crow? What’s his Christian name?” William asked.

That earned him guffaws of laughter from all three of his new companions. William looked at the blacksmith in annoyance, his hand going to the hilt of his sword. The blacksmith held up his large paws placatingly. “No offense, Sir Knight. Only his name is Christian. Sir Christian Brandon. ’Tis that what’s amused us.”

William smiled and relaxed. “I see. I must be getting prescient. He’s young to have his spurs.”

“Not *so* young,” Craggy Face said.

“What has Sir Christian, twenty summers?” the third man questioned no one in particular.

“Say what you like, ’ee’s earned them spurs,” the blacksmith said firmly. “Them brothers of his gave him no quarter. Hard as iron nails, every last one of ’em.”

“Let’s go watch ’im shoot,” said Craggy Face, with eager anticipation. They hurried away from William, following the general flow of the crowd towards the archery targets.

William almost followed. He was curious to see the Crow shoot, to see if he had any skill to match that noble bearing. But then he thought better on it, changed direction, and headed for the stables. He did not know what to make of the youngest Brandon, knew not the meaning behind his look. But an uneasy feeling warned him that keeping his distance was the most expedient course. He was here for a purpose. He needed to put his cause to Lord Brandon and earn his help. He couldn’t afford to antagonize any of his sons. And he couldn’t afford to get led astray with wenching, gaming, or fighting either. His suit was too important—to Elaine and to himself.

William walked away, leading his horse to the stables as the *thwunk* of arrows and the roar of the crowd sounded loud behind him.

CHAPTER 2

Christian strode through the castle hallways, his blood thrumming in a splendid rush. It had been a good day. He'd taken top honors in archery and had acquitted himself well in foot combat. He'd earned his father's pleased nod as he handed Christian his cup. And he was bestowed a kiss upon his cheek from Lady Gwendolyn.

Lady Gwendolyn's lips were soft and perfumed. Christian had been unable to stop his eyes from shyly falling to the ground like a callow youth, which had earned him laughs and hardy slaps on the back from his father's men. And even as he blushed and grinned, Christian's eyes had sought a certain face in the crowd, one with lips not soft and not perfumed. Christian hadn't found him there.

The knight's name was Sir William Corbet. Christian had learned this from the man who ran the tournament. William was the son and heir of a minor noble, Lord Geoffrey Corbet, whose lands lay fifteen leagues to the southeast. Christian had noticed William in the first jousting bout of the day, when William had beaten six of his father's knights, including Christian's brother, Thomas.

Christian's eyes had been drawn to the knight from the start—the one in the silver armor, wearing a crimson surcoat with a black lion on the front. Even with his visor down he was arresting. His body was large and broad, strong and confident in the saddle. He'd ridden sure and easy, and he handled the lance with restrained power. Christian had found himself more and more riveted as the bout went on. The knight had beaten his opponents soundly, and then he removed his helmet to accept his accolades. Christian's breath and heart and the thoughts in his head had all frozen, like a gear stuck and held, if only for a moment.

Sir William Corbet was magnificent. He had light brown hair, worn straight to just below the shoulders, serious and kind blue eyes, a square face, full lips, and a closely shaved beard. He looked the epitome of a knight—

noble, powerful, and true. Christian had never seen his equal. Desire had spiked in Christian then, that dreaded, hot, heady, unwelcome feeling that betrayed and stung him, like an adder in his breast.

God's blood he hated it, hated it all. If he were his father's daughter, he might have had a prayer of claiming, wedding, a knight like Sir William. As it was, his response to the man was not only hopeless but deeply shameful. And yet, despite knowing this, despite being fully aware of the risks, Christian had been unable to stop himself from looking at Sir William as he rode past him on the way to the archery. Christian had only meant to glance, maybe nod politely in an offer of friendship. But once his eyes had locked with William's, he could not tear himself away.

Christian cursed under his breath. He had probably made a spectacle of himself. But at least a gaze was only a gaze, and he was sure none of his brothers had seen it. He had done nothing truly damaging—not yet. Dear God, not yet.

If he could only inure himself to the idea that what his eyes could feast upon, and his heart desire in secret, harmed no man. Then he might at least look forward to seeing Sir William at the banquet tonight and be able to—

A whisper of a sound broke through Christian's thoughts. In a moment, his dagger was in his hand, even as he was spun and pressed hard against the wall.

Malcolm's face, contorted with hatred, glared down at him. His beefy arm pressed across Christian's throat. A chainmail sleeve dug into the delicate skin there, bearing down on his windpipe. As the arm pressed deeper, threatening to crush what could not be repaired, Christian let his dagger's sharp tongue slip under his brother's hauberk to prickle and sting his thigh. Malcolm's eyes narrowed on a gasp of pain and the pressure on Christian's throat eased.

His brother's breath stank of ale and of the waft of carrion that always accompanied Malcolm these days, as if there were something rotting deep inside him. The smell seemed to go hand and hand with his increasingly erratic behavior, though none except for Christian seemed willing to acknowledge it.

Malcolm hissed words into Christian's face. "You think you walk on water, do you not, *your highness?*"

"No."

"Are you full up with victory, my brother? Does your own pretty glory make you hard?"

Malcolm ground a cruel thigh into Christian's groin, and Christian gasped in shock. Malcolm had always been sadistic but never before in a sexual way. Christian thanked his stars that Malcolm's attack had turned his body cold after those warm thoughts of Sir William.

"I will sink this blade if you don't get off me, *brother,*" Christian threatened, his voice soft and deadly. The point dug in, piercing the padded leggings and the skin. Christian took great care with his blades. It was as pointed as a needle and sharp enough to sink in to the hilt, as if flesh was as easily spread as a whore's thighs.

Malcolm sneered but backed off. "Be warned. Ne'er dare go against me in the joust little Crow, or I will impale you in front of the crowd and lick your blood from my fingers."

"'Tis not my event, as you well know," said Christian coolly, but his dagger remained pointed at the ready in his hand.

As if to show he had no fear of it, Malcolm reached out and gave Christian's jaw a caress bitter with disdain. "Remember, you quivering bitch. I am watching."

Christian jerked his chin away and Malcolm slunk off. Christian wondered briefly if Malcolm even realized the insult he'd made to himself—calling Christian a female dog, as if it were the lowest creature, when Malcolm bore the name 'hound' thanks to his exceptional skills at tracking.

By the saints, it was pointless to try to understand Malcolm. He was disordered in his mind, truly, and grew more so year by year. Heart pounding, Christian forced himself to calmly walk to his room. But once inside he bolted the door and leaned against it, trembling.

Malcolm hated him, had always hated him. But what had provoked Malcolm this time? The fact that Christian had won acclaim? A nod from his father? But Christian always won at archery; that was nothing new.

Christian remembered the warm look from Lady Gwendolyn, the way her lips had lingered on his cheek. At the last banquet, he'd seen Malcolm watching her, his eyes greedy and half-lidded with want.

God's teeth. *I don't want her!* Christian wanted to open the door and shout it down the hall. But then, he reminded himself, Malcolm already knew that.

When Christian was eight he became a page in his father's household. Most boys were sent to a neighboring castle for such duty, but he was the seventh son. Rules and attention to such structured matters were much relaxed by the time Christian came along. His father was stingy with servants and his older brothers were demanding. Christian did his service at home.

His brothers trained hard and long in the training yard near the castle's stables. When he wasn't doing menial labor, Christian was pressed to join them. He'd looked forward to his training at first, eyes aglow over the blunt wooden swords and the spinning quintain. But once in the arena, he was pushed and bullied and beaten, expected to keep up with his older brothers at once and with no relenting. Training came to mean pain and humiliation, and there was no escaping it.

Thus darkness ate up the rest of his childhood years, like a black dragon grinding up infants in its razor-sharp teeth. His only comfort had been his sister, Ayleth, who bandaged his wounds, came to him in the night, and held him. She stifled his cries and sometimes she cried with him.

Malcolm, six years Christian's senior, had come close to killing Christian at least twice in the training arena. His hand was stayed only because of the watchful eye of Sir Andrew, the knight in charge of their practice. No one else knew it; or at least no one else would admit it. But Christian knew; so did Malcolm. Christian's other brothers all gave him plenty of bruises and half-hearted abuse. But none loathed him as Malcolm did. None had cracked his

ribs, crushed his fingers, or kneed him so hard in the groin he'd pissed blood for a week.

There was something deeply wrong with Malcolm; Christian knew this. It got worse the older Malcolm got. He knew his father and other brothers were worried, but they did not see the worst of it because Malcolm saved his most violent tendencies for Christian alone. And if Christian complained, he only looked weak and childish. At times Thomas or Stephen or one of the others would snap at Malcolm to leave off, to let Christian be. But it was not enough to save Christian truly, never enough. And his father? The great lord dismissed all of their infighting as an annoyance.

Christian had had no choice. He was forced to toughen or die. He'd toughened—until he'd become as brutal and wild in the arena as any of them. His gentle mouth was taught to bare its teeth in hatred. His sharp wits were bent to outmaneuvering and treachery.

Once, when he was fifteen, and Malcolm had “accidentally” pushed him off the top of a hayrick whilst they were building it up, Christian had cornered him against a wagon and asked him one thing. *Why?*

“Because I see you, brother,” Malcolm had said, low and terrible. “I know what you are inside, what you try to hide. And I will kill you before I let you disgrace this family.”

“I won't,” Christian had said, shocked and ashamed.

“I know, brother,” Malcolm replied with an evil smile. “I will make sure of it.”

Thus Christian kept his doors and windows locked at night, always. Thus he carried several sharpened blades, even inside the castle. He'd escaped for a number of years, as a squire, and they had been the best years of his life. But he'd been sucked back in as irresistibly as a man sinking in quicksand. His father's orders; once Christian had earned his spurs he was a knight, and as a knight he owed his fealty to his father's castle.

Between those who wanted to bed him, those who wanted to wed him, and those who wanted him dead, the castle was a place more dangerous than any battlefield.

CHAPTER 3

William had requested a private audience with Lord Brandon. He did not get it until his sixth night sleeping in the castlebailey. He was impatient, humming with anxiety for Elaine. But he forced himself to wait. Lord Brandon was his best hope.

To pass the time, he helped train the castle's youth in the training arena. He loaded and unloaded wagons, making himself useful. He took long rides in the surrounding countryside on Tristan. He courted his own patience.

He had conversations with two of the lord's sons, Sir Thomas and Sir Stephen, talking about battles and distant lords and their armaments. He curried their favor as much as pride and honor would allow.

He saw Sir Christian several times, at a distance. The mere sight of the young knight triggered memories of the gaze they'd shared on the tournament field. And that, in turn, caused William to feel unsettled and angry. He found himself staring at the man despite himself. But when Sir Christian turned to look at him, William looked away. And once, when Sir Christian was clearly walking towards him to speak to him, William pretended he hadn't noticed, mounted his horse, and rode off.

He knew it was cowardly and rude. But he told himself he and Sir Christian could have nothing in common. It was better to avoid any awkwardness.

On the sixth night, most of the tournament's guests had left and Lord Brandon dined alone with his family. William was invited to feast with them and have his audience.

In the great hall, Lord Brandon sat in the place of honor at a table loaded with his sons. His eldest, Edward, sat on his left. The second eldest, Stephen, on his right, and on down the table on either side. Wives and children sat at another table, and Lord Brandon's highest-ranking knights and a few guests

were at a third. It was as private as a castle was likely to get, and William knew it. It was now or never.

They were on the second course, which consisted of platters of various fowl, when Lord Brandon spoke loudly.

“Sir William Corbet. Come forth and name your purpose.”

William wiped his fingers carefully on his napkin and stood. He walked to the front of the lord’s table. With his legs slightly spread, he thrust his right hand across his breast and inclined his head in a sign of deference.

“Lord Brandon. I’m grateful for your generous hospitality in sharing the bounty of your castle. I thank you.”

Lord Brandon nodded.

“You may know that my beloved sister, Lady Elaine, was wed to Lord Robert Somerfield when she was sixteen. ’Twas seven years ago now.”

Lord Brandon narrowed his eyes but said nothing.

“We’ve received only a few letters from her in that time, letters that were deliberately vague. Then last month we had a visitor who came from Lord Somerfield’s castle. He—” William’s voice wavered and he swallowed. “He spoke of horrors visited upon my sister—beatings, imprisonment for perceived infractions, being denied food and water. I’m on my way to Cumbria to defend her honor.”

Lord Brandon sucked on a leg of pigeon, looking thoughtful.

“Have you an army?” Lord Brandon asked.

Regret firmed William’s mouth. “No, my lord. I know you have a long-standing dispute with Lord Somerfield. I can offer my arm and my shield if you press the matter now. I’ve led men in battle for five years. I can—”

Lord Brandon held up a hand, stilling William’s tongue. William felt his face heat and he strove to look detached. His request sounded much less reasonable here in the dining hall than it had in his head.

“Your father, Lord Corbet—he is not with you on the matter?”

William spoke coldly. “He had a large debt forgiven by Somerfield when he gave Elaine in marriage. He is not interested in repaying it.”

Lord Brandon smiled bitterly. “The law regards your sister as your husband’s property. Your own father does not support your cause. Yet you expect me to?” His voice was more curious than anything, but it sent a ripple of shame down William’s back.

“Somerfield is our common enemy. I can help you defeat him.”

Lord Brandon put down the leg and took up his knife, picking at his teeth with dull eyes.

“What I may do about Somerfield, I will do in my own time and for my own reasons.”

It was clearly the end of the discussion. William was bitterly disappointed, but he tried to salvage what he could. “I understand, my lord. Thank you for considering my request. Would you permit me to buy supplies from the castle? And hire a few of your men? I’ve never been in Somerfield’s territories. I need a guide.”

Lord Brandon opened his mouth to speak. His answer was not going to be favorable; William could see it on his face. But before anything came out, a voice rang out loud and clear from the end of the table.

“I’ve been in Somerfield’s territories. I’ve seen his army do battle and can advise. I’ll go.”

William knew to whom the voice must belong, even though he had never heard it. He felt a cold wash of fear and anger in his belly as he turned his head to look at Sir Christian. Surely the man jested? He was mocking William. But... perhaps not. Christian was standing on his feet, facing his father with stoic determination, his arms clasped behind his back.

“Out of the question,” Lord Brandon said dismissively.

“When I squired for Sir Allendale, our force attacked Somerfield. We were in his territory for weeks.”

Lord Brandon took up his wine glass, drinking with a frown.

“I know that land better than any of your men,” Christian insisted.

“You were a mere squire then. You fought not.”

“I was a squire with eyes and a strong sense of direction. And now I’m a knight with keener vision. It’s time we took another look at Somerfield’s holdings. I’ll bring you maps, lists of his forces, and—”

Lord Brandon slammed his mug down and glowered at his youngest son. “I cannot be seen to support this. Sending *my own son*—”

“I’ll use another name,” said Christian quickly. “And I’ll not get near the castle. If I’m caught—and I won’t be, you know how slippery I can be—I’ll tell no one who I am. You tell me I need experience. Let me earn it.”

Lord Brandon considered it. He actually... by the Virgin’s knees, he was *considering it*. Suddenly William realized it might actually occur. He might be stuck with Sir Christian Brandon. He spoke before thinking it through.

“With all respect, my lord, I would not want the responsibility of safeguarding your son.”

It was the *wrong* thing to say. The silence that fell in the hall was deafening. William could hear the thudding gallop of his own heart. Lord Brandon’s face was as stormy as a summer thundercloud. He rose slowly to his feet. And almost as one, all of the sons on both sides of him rose also.

For pity’s sake, William was never going to get the chance to let Somerfield disembowel him. It was going to happen right here.

“My son,” Lord Brandon said stonily, “is the best archer in three territories. He may not be the pick of my loins, but, by my sword, he’s a knight and a Brandon!”

William did not dare look at Sir Christian, realizing belatedly the insult he’d cast on him, and, apparently, on the entire bloodline, perhaps back a multitude of generations. He kept his gaze steady on the father, his face passive.

“Forgive my rash words. I did not speak true. What I meant to say was that I only expected to hire a few of your men. Allowing your own flesh and blood

to accompany me would be... exceptionally generous of you, my lord. It would be a great honor.”

For a long moment Lord Brandon did not speak. Then one of his sons did. It was Sir Malcolm, a man William’s age but with eyes as black as pitch, a lumpy face, and cruel lips. “Let the Crow go, Father. He needs more dirt on those spurs. And if he can gather intelligence on Somerfield, he’ll have done something useful for once in his life.”

“I am master here. Not one word more on the subject. Sit!” Lord Brandon barked. His sons all sat, except Sir Christian, who, William could tell from the corner of his eye, remained stubbornly standing.

“How do you intend to defend your sister’s honor without an army?” Lord Brandon asked William coldly.

William tilted up his chin. Truly, he *had* hoped for Brandon’s army. “Lord Somerfield will grant me an audience. I will ask him to release Lady Elaine. If he refuses, I’ll challenge him to single combat.”

Lord Brandon managed not to laugh, but the calculation that came into his eyes was ominous. William didn’t like the odds that he saw there and he steeled his jaw stubbornly. But either Brandon was not adverse to games of chance or he had motives of his own. He sat down and took up his knife. When he spoke, it was with finality.

“My son, Sir Christian, will accompany you. I will give you supplies for the journey, but no other men. Christian will lead you to within sight of Somerfield’s castle and do reconnaissance for me. Christian, you will, under no circumstances, enter the castle bailey. And if you are caught, you can expect no acknowledgment of blood and no rescue. Is that understood?”

William finally looked at Sir Christian then. He still stood, arms clasped behind his back, looking at his father. His color was high—that red flush that crawled across his cheekbones like a battle flag unfurling on the field. His eyes were alight with excitement. Cursed fool.

“I understand, Father. It will not come to that.”

“And upon your return, you will wed,” Lord Brandon continued. “Lady Margaret White is besotted with you. Her father has offered me an exceptional dowry. And if not her, you will choose another at once.”

His tone brooked no argument. Sir Christian froze for a moment and then took a deep breath. “Yes, Father.”

Lord Brandon waved his knife at William. He was dismissed.

CHAPTER 4

Two days later, William found himself riding out of Lord Brandon's bailey with Sir Christian Brandon at his heels. It was just the two of them off to face the dragon. William had not brought along a squire. His last one had just achieved his spurs, and William hadn't yet replaced him when the news of Elaine arrived. He'd been in such haste to leave that any delay had been out of the question. He'd assumed he could hire a lad to help him with his armor once he was closer to Somerfield's castle. Besides, the idea of taking a new squire on such a dangerous quest disturbed his sense of honor. Men who knew what they were getting into, and who were still willing to fight by his side, were one thing; an inexperienced youth was another.

Disturbingly, he had no clear idea which of these Sir Christian was, spurs or no.

William considered hiring additional men along the way, mercenaries who would trade loyalty, or the appearance of it, for his few sovereigns. But he didn't have enough to raise an army, and his battle sense told him he either needed to attack Somerfield with a full force or go in alone. A dozen men would only prick Somerfield's wariness and make him itch to defeat them.

On Christian's part, he was apparently so newly minted a knight that he had no squire, and he hadn't deigned to choose one of the local lads to go along. So they'd be building their own fires, brushing their own horses and hauling their own water—*their own* being the operative word. If Christian expected to be waited upon, he would be sorely disappointed.

William was musing upon this as they left the woods and entered onto a broad track. Christian pulled his horse alongside William's mount. The mere sight of the man annoyed William and made his sour mood sink lower and lower until his stomach churned with it.

Christian was not wearing the blue-and-eagled livery now. He was in a simple brown quilted gambeson. His armor, along with William's, was stowed on the packhorse William had bought. And still, his straight and easy bearing

on the horse, the refined line of his silhouetted face in the light of the rising sun, the gracefulness of his hand as it held the reins loosely on his thigh, the depth in his eyes when he glanced toward William—all of these spoke of an elegance that was, well, *personally offensive*.

God's teeth! William did not want to be taking Sir Christian Brandon into danger. And he did not want to have to be close to the man. For *weeks*. It was the worst possible outcome of his detour to the Brandon castle. He'd wasted ten full days, gained no army, and been saddled with a knight too young and far too comely to be of any use as a warrior.

He spoke gruffly. "It will be hard going. I intend a punishing pace. I won't stop at alehouses—'tis a waste of money. It'll be bedrolls on the ground. Dried meat. It's not too late to change your mind."

Christian looked at him wryly. "Do you imagine I've never travelled before? Never spent nights on the ground?"

Yes, that's what I imagine. You look like you should be lying on a queen's bed with the queen herself feeding you grapes, damn it all to hell.

William huffed grumpily.

Christian sighed. After a moment he said, "Do you know, those are the first words you've ever spoken to me, Sir William."

William frowned. He opened his mouth to protest and then thought better of it. He'd talked plenty the day before, as they'd prepared for the journey, but most of it *had* been to other people—the cook, the steward, the blacksmith, the stableman.

Perhaps all of it, actually. Suddenly his vexation seemed childish and inexcusable. He felt ashamed of himself.

"I..." he began, only to falter. "What I said to your father, about safeguarding you. I didn't mean it as an insult."

Christian laughed aloud. "Oh, but it was one, a dagger straight to the heart. Nevertheless, it was quite entertaining to see my father and brothers leap to my

defense. I think I heard the gates of Hell yawn open over that one. So I suppose I shall have to forgive you.”

William cleared his throat, feeling no less confounded. “It was kind of you to offer to show me the way. Truly, I’m grateful.”

Christian shrugged. “I know the way. You needed a guide. I wanted to get out of my father’s castle. If it was a kindness, ’twas not an especially noble one.”

William could have asked questions. *Why did you want to get out of your father’s castle? Why should your brothers’ defense of you be surprising?* But that would only lead to talking and silence seemed wiser.

“William,” Christian said quietly.

William looked at him, forcing himself to meet those brown eyes. They were hard and cold, and they struck an icy chill down the center of his body.

“Do not underestimate me.”

William nodded, once, and set his eyes back on the road.

By the morning of the fourth day, William had to admit to himself that he *had* underestimated Sir Christian Brandon. Christian took to travelling as effortlessly as he seemed to do everything else. His horse, Livermore, was an excellent mount, and Christian treated him well. He rode long days without a single complaint. Indeed, he often rode slightly ahead, as if impatient to see the scenery. He kept his face subdued, but his eyes revealed a child’s delight in the woods and hills.

It was quite inconsiderate of him to disprove William’s biases so completely.

They fell into a routine of the evenings. William would brush, feed, and water the horses while Christian gathered firewood and built the fire. William would never admit it, but he preferred the duty with the horses because he was tired and it was less moving around. Though he knew Christian must be exhausted as well, he never said so. By the time the horses were settled,

Christian would have their bedrolls laid out on opposite sides of the fire, a pot of water boiling, and dinner cooking.

On the second evening, Christian had taken one glance at their stores of dried meat and arched an eyebrow. “I think we can do better than that,” he said. He slipped on his bow and quiver and vanished into the forest.

Fifteen minutes later, without a single sound from the woods that William had heard, Christian returned carrying an enormous hare with an arrow through its neck. He cleaned and dressed it without asking for help. It was delicious.

Though they were equals in rank, Christian deferred to William’s advanced years—he was twenty-five—and took on the more menial tasks. William said nothing, but he was slowly adapting his view of the younger knight, like a man whose eyes were slowly adjusting to a brighter light..

Even William’s perception of Christian’s appearance was changing. Before, he’d seen a youth so unusually beautiful as to invoke disdain. He’d assumed vanity and callowness. He’d assumed a sense of entitlement. Christian was none of that. But he was comfortable in his own skin—quick, able, and surprisingly strong.

On the fourth day they came to a stream near some rapids. William rode up to the edge of it, scanning the water.

“It’s not deep,” he told Christian, nodding his head at the opposite bank. “We can cross.”

But when they tried to get Tristan, Livermore, and the packhorse, whom they’d dubbed Sir Swiftfoot, to enter the water, they shied away. Tristain shook his head angrily.

“It’s the rapids,” Christian said, pointing to the misting white water just slightly downstream. “They don’t like the look of it.”

William cursed. The bank further west looked soft and unstable and the trees were thick. They’d have to backtrack to get around it, and William was not in the mood to lose time.

“Let’s lead them,” he said, swinging himself down.

Christian did the same and they tried to pull the reluctant horses into the stream. But Tristan gave a panicked neigh and kicked his front hooves into the air. Livermore and Sir Swiftfoot just dug in like mules, refusing to be tugged.

“God’s teeth!” William roared. “Tristan has never been a coward before. He’s faced legions of flea-bitten, axe-wielding vermin on horseback and not batted an eyelash!”

Christian tried to smother a smile. “Is that so? Well, every horse has his weakness.”

“Not mine!”

Christian made a noise like a strangled cough. He looked around, scanning the brush.

“Up there!” he pointed.

There was an old oak overlooking the stream. An enormous limb had been split from the trunk by lightning and was caught in its upper branches.

“’Tis high up and well snagged,” William said doubtfully.

Christian didn’t answer. He stripped off his gambeson and pushed up the linen sleeves of his shirt, revealing strong, wiry forearms rich with veins. He pulled himself up into the tree with surprising strength and agility.

“Watch out for deadly squirrels,” William said dryly. Christian just snorted.

Watching him climb, William’s perception shifted again with a bone-rattling jolt. Christian was not *soft*, William realized. There was nothing of the coddled child in him. He was hard and tough as sinew. Refined? Refined as a purebred stallion, perhaps, or an elemental sprite. But not weak, no. He was powerful and very male.

For some reason, this shift in perception allowed William to watch Christian, to keep his eyes on the man, unthreatened, for the first time since they’d locked gazes on that tournament field. He watched Christian pull himself up higher and higher, wrestle with the huge limb, lifting and wresting

it out of the tree with raw muscle, maintaining his balance all the while. When the limb was free, Christian shoved it off towards the bank of the stream. As it crashed down, his feet were spread wide to brace himself on a sturdy limb. He looked down at William and grinned, his face open and happy for the first time since William had known him.

And something new stirred to life inside William. Not anxiety, fear, or confusion this time, but something far steadier, thick as honey, and painfully sweet.

It felt like such an integral part of him that William didn't even question it. He just blinked twice, returned Christian's smile, and moved to place the limb across the river.

With their view of the rapids blocked, the horses crossed without further ado.

CHAPTER 5

Christian was in seven kinds of heaven and three kinds of hell. He was free of his father's castle, free of his brothers, free of the need to guard his back at all hours of the day and night. It was even better than when he'd squired Sir Allendale. For then, he'd been of the lowest rank in the camp, and his role was to serve and be silent. Sir Allendale had been good to him, but there had been rough words from other knights and even older squires, as well as shoves and smacks when he did not move fast enough or got in the way.

And there had been, too, a few knights he'd feared in the company, men who looked at him too calculatingly and too long, who would have buggered him cruelly had they gotten the chance, even though Sir Allendale had made it clear that Christian was blood and not to be mistreated.

Those men had been ugly, crude, and cold-blooded. And while Christian might have dreamed his secret dreams of being held in strong arms, of being filled by the cock of a lover, he knew that the experience with men like that would be nothing but pain and humiliation. He kept his knife at the ready, always. And he never went into the woods alone.

But travelling with Sir William, for the first time, Christian was treated as an equal. He couldn't fail to notice the looks of approval William bestowed on him more and more—when he made quick work of building the fire, when he caught game for the evening meal, when he rode from dawn to dusk without complaint. Those approving looks, and his soft words of appreciation and praise, were like balm on the torn places in Christian's soul. He worked harder, did more, acted like he was never tired, ran spritely with aching limbs, climbed trees and moved boulders, just to see that approval shining in William's eyes, to earn that precious reparation.

And yet... it was torture too. It was one thing for Christian to ignore his desires in the castle keep, where there was the constant danger of discovery and unguarded moments were few. It was one thing to hold himself in check when William had been cold, when he'd obviously disliked the very sight of

him. Christian had understood that. He knew that his looks inspired scorn in some men and jealousy in others. It was why he cropped his hair so severely and had learned to school his face against any softness. It had been sharply disappointing that *William* had turned out to be such a man. But it did have the advantage of keeping Christian from acting a fool.

No longer. When William looked at him now there was warmth in his eyes; now he smiled, now he was generous, now he was kind. Now his eyes lingered instead of shying away. Those long looks, those lovely, aggravating, bewildering looks, made Christian hope and burn. And except when they passed through a village, he was alone with William day and night.

If he'd thought Sir William was handsome before, it was nothing to how he felt now. It was like watching a distant rider grow more and more defined the closer he got—familiarity bred an acute awareness of every part of the man. William was solid as an oak and muscled from long days of training and battle. His sturdy waist and chest seemed to call Christian to wrap his arms around them. William's eyes were like the sea after a storm, sucking Christian in. And his lips—whether they smiled and sang, or were pensive and sad—made Christian's own mouth itch with a need to press against them.

Now it was Christian who looked away, afraid his eyes would reflect the hard, bitter edge of his yearning.

Looking away did not help. He was never less than half hard, and the woods along their route had seen enough of his covertly spilled seed to found a forest of Brandons, could babes grow as trees did. William must be beginning to wonder if Christian had a malfunction of the kidneys, he disappeared so often and so long.

It went against Christian's nature to be circumspect. You did not grow up the youngest of seven boys and not learn to take what you needed and what you wanted, roughly if necessary. You grabbed for the platter of meat as it hit the table or your belly went empty, and no one would feel sorry for you and rectify that. That lesson had been ingrained in him from his youth.

That part of Christian wanted to act boldly. It was cruelly unfair. His brothers were never troubled by lust. If they wanted a maid, they pulled her

into their lap and began pawing her. If she had serious objections, she'd knock them upside the head with a mug or a platter and they would find another. But Christian's desires were another matter. They were like hidden daggers turned inward, and he knew if he pressed forward, he might just bleed to death.

Especially with William. To make an advance on another knight could prove deadly. He might be rewarded with a broken arm or a formal challenge. If the man was slightly less offended, Christian might merely be sent home in shame. The worst part about that was he would have let William down. He wouldn't be able to fulfill his pledge to help William rescue his sister. William would be forced to cast him off and carry on alone—alone and with even fewer chances than he already had.

So Christian resigned himself to silence. He would say, do, nothing until the business with William's sister was done. If they both survived, he would make it clear to William, perhaps by moving in slowly for a kiss—*I want to lie with you*. And then, should William not feel the same, he might at least be obliged enough to Christian to send him home rather than force them to single combat or expose him publically.

The possibility of rejection was terrifying. Christian had never dared make his interest blatantly known to a man before. But then, he'd never desired anyone this much, nor been as wracked with speculation and second-guessing. He would gladly take a clear-cut rejection over wondering and wishing, over pondering the meaning of William's every glance.

It was a reasonable plan. But it was not perfect. One or both of them might not survive the confrontation with Somerfield. And even if they did, they would then be travelling with William's sister. If there was even a small chance that the handsome knight returned his interest, this could be their only chance to indulge it.

But Christian had no choice other than to continue to try to prove himself to William—and wait.

CHAPTER 6

After two weeks of hard riding they were nearly to Derby. The past two nights they'd ridden until nightfall, and Christian had no chance to hunt game. But on this night William saw the exhaustion in the horses and decided to rein them in a little early.

Christian went into the woods and came back with two pheasants and a pouch full of mushrooms. They prepared the birds and roasted them over a spit, letting the juices drip into a pan with the earthy, fluted mushrooms. William insisted that they had to finish the wine so he could refill the bladder in Derby. It was a feast.

After they ate they remained at the fire, passing the wine back and forth. William felt a contented warmth he hadn't in years. Even his concern about Elaine faded to a low murmur.

"Why were you eager to leave your father's castle?" he asked Christian.

Christian tossed a chestnut into the fire to hear it pop. "My family is not fond of me."

William frowned. "How can that be? You earned your spurs. You're said to excel at archery. The crowd at the tournament loved you, from the cries I heard. Especially the maidens."

He said this last with a wink, but a sad, ironic smile traced Christian's lips. "Things are different on the inside than they appear on the outside."

"Then tell me how it fares on the inside." William wasn't sure he should press, but it was still early and he felt in the mood for conversation. Besides, he truly wanted to know more about Christian.

"My brother Malcolm wants me dead," Christian said with no emotion. "The others would just as soon have me gone. My father has always both loved and hated me."

"But Sir Malcolm supported your request to come with me."

Christian barked a laugh. “Well, my apologies, Sir William, it did sound a rather hopeless cause. ’Tis easier for him if someone else sticks the knife in my ribs.”

William stilled his questions, but he wondered. A seventh son should be no threat to his elder brothers. Of course, Lord Branson’s other sons were rough-hewn and lumpy, like their father. They could not hold a candle to Christian’s natural looks and grace. Such things could inspire bitter jealousy, especially if a specific woman was involved. Is that why Sir Malcolm wanted him dead? Had Christian stolen his beloved’s heart?

As if sensing his questions, Christian spoke again. “’Tis a simple matter. All my brothers share the same mother, Lady Mary. She was my father’s first wife. She bore him eight children, six of them boys. Then she died of a fever.”

Christian took a slug of wine and continued. “My mother was Lady Enndolyn, my father’s second wife. The story goes that she was a renowned beauty and my father lusted after her for years. But she refused to have anything to do with him while he was married to another.” Christian paused. “In fact, it is said that Lady Mary’s fever might have been helped along with a dose of poison, so strong was my father’s lust for Enndolyn.”

William breathed in sharply. “’Tis an evil accusation to lay on your own sire.”

Christian shrugged. “I only repeat what is whispered among the servants. It was before my time, as you can well surmise. I know naught of it. But however it happened, by means fair or foul, my father was at last free, and he married my mother. He had her for only one year before I was born. She died in childbirth. He has never forgiven me. And my brothers—they hated my mother for dispossessing their dam, and by that same token, me.”

William’s heart ached at the placid, frozen expression on Christian’s face. Christian had learned to school his emotions well.

“My mother also died when I was young,” William said. “’Tis why I was so close to Elaine. She was younger than me, but she raised us both in my mother’s stead. I am sorry, Christian.”

Christian shrugged. “They say I look a great deal like her.”

“She must have been a very great beauty.”

When Christian looked at him in surprise, William felt his face reddening. “What I mean to say is... you do not resemble your brothers or your father.”

“No. I am nothing like them.”

For long moments they sat watching the fire, then Christian spoke again. “I was fortunate that when I was fourteen my mother’s brother visited our castle, Sir Allendale. He saw how I was treated, and he took pity on me. He asked my father if I might squire for him. It got me out of the castle for a number of years. I owe him a great debt.”

“He taught you well,” William said. “Was it your uncle who dubbed you ‘The Crow’? Archers are more oft called after vipers or scorpions or eagles.”

“No, I got the name quite young. I used to sit on the fence of our training arena, watching my brothers fight. I liked to sit with my feet on the top log and balance on my haunches.”

Suddenly, William could see the image clearly. He couldn’t help but chuckle at the vision of a small, dark-haired boy sitting thus.

Christian smirked. “I thought it would build my leg muscles and improve my reflexes.”

“I’m sure it did,” William said seriously, choking back a laugh.

“In truth, the name was meant as an insult.” Christian shrugged. “But it suits me. A crow knows how to get away from its enemies, sitting up high in a tree, watching, invisible. It sees the moment to attack, swoops in, and stings—snatching a sparkling treasure or a bit of prey, and ’tis gone again before it’s even seen. It’s clever and bold, but never foolhardy. That is my warrior’s road.”

William couldn’t help smiling to himself at the earnestness of Christian’s description. He had the pride of any young warrior, still in love with the dream of his own ferocity.

“And you, Sir William? You’re called the Lion. Your strength and bravery is much lauded. But how would you describe your warrior’s road?”

“Me?” William composed his face into a serious scowl. “I sunder things with my sword. Oft.”

Christian blinked at him for a moment and then started laughing. He covered up his mouth as if embarrassed at how it made him look. William felt a wave of anger that Christian had been forced to learn such restraint. He wanted to pull down that hand, to say, *Laugh. Laugh Christian, for there is none here to chide you for it*, but he didn’t. Instead, William smiled back, then he caught Christian’s laughter as if it were a spark, and they chuckled together easily for a good while.

When their laughter died down, William stretched out his legs towards the fire, accepted Christian’s offer of the last swig of wine, and thought about all that Christian had said. He flushed with shame, remembering how it had felt to stand in front of Lord Brandon and admit that his own father refused to help Elaine. But he attempted a teasing tone.

“I’m glad you told me why you joined my hopeless cause. ’Tis good for a man to know where he stands.”

“William... that—that is not the only reason I came with you.”

Christian’s voice was quiet, but there was something in it that made the hair on the back of William’s neck stand up. He looked at Christian then. Christian stared back at him—and held.

William was used to Christian avoiding eye contact of late. But not this time; not tonight. William gazed into those eyes, caught by a pull he couldn’t break. And what he saw in those fire-lit fields of golden brown was an undeniable invitation. Just as their laughter had done, heat jumped from Christian to William, spreading through him, pooling heavily in his groin, and causing his pulse to race like a bolting horse.

At last William swallowed and tore his gaze away. He could feel his face blazing as he struggled to control his body and his thoughts.

“Tis late,” William said. His voice did not sound like his own. “We should rest.”

He got up and, without looking at Christian again, began his nightly preparations.

CHAPTER 7

Sir William lay sleepless that night, watching the dying embers. He was thinking about Edmund. Edmund, his older brother—handsome, quick to smile Edmund, beloved so intently by William, Elaine, and their father. He'd been lost in a battle in Wales when he was only twenty-eight.

William had worshipped Edmund as only a younger brother can. He told him everything. Now he could not stop replaying a conversation they'd had, over and over in his mind. William had been fourteen.

"I need to seek your advice, brother," William had asked with utmost seriousness.

"My word, it sounds ominous," Edmund teased. "Did you steal a piece of cook's pie? And if so, where's my share?"

"*Tis* serious," William protested. "Will you promise to guard my secret?"

It was something they said to one another, Edmund and he, as if secrets were gems that could be locked away in a box.

"Aye. Speak from your heart, Will."

William could not bear to look into his brother's eyes. His face heated. "Is it normal for a boy my age to... to have lust?"

Edmund laughed. "More normal than whiskers. More normal than lice."

"I do not have lice!"

Edmund laughed again.

"Be serious! Is it normal even if you lust for... for..."

"Speak up!" Edmund urged. "Is it Dame Mendelsohn?"

William was aghast. Dame Mendelsohn was gray-haired and wizened. "No!"

"What then? Be not afraid."

“Other boys.” William stuck his chin out fiercely and met his brother’s gaze.

Edmund studied him for a moment and then laughed. “Aye. ’Tis normal enough. You’re a Corbet male and you’ve fourteen summers. Not even the suckling pigs are safe.”

“But...” William was astonished by the easy acceptance.

Edmund leaned in and winked. “Any inch of skin, any curve of ass will stir the blood at your age. ’Tis a natural drive, brother. Virility! You’ll thank God for it once you’ve a wife to swive. Our grandfather was still bedding wenches two at a time in his seventies!”

His smiling face grew serious. “But be careful where you stick it, Will. Messing with a boy or two might be tolerated at your age, but not much older. Find a woman grown, a widow perhaps. They love to tutor a boy still wet behind the ears. Only make sure she’s clean. The pox is a living hell.”

“I understand,” William said, though he didn’t.

Edmund’s face grew darker. “There isn’t a man sniffing around you, is there? That’s tutoring of a sort you don’t need.”

William recognized the murderous glint in his brother’s eye. He spoke hurriedly. “No, I swear. ’Tis only in my own head.”

Edmund relaxed and ruffled his hair. “In your head? Or your hand? Perhaps I should find you a wench, ’ey? Give you a release for all that lust before you get yourself into trouble.”

William sputtered and prevaricated and managed to get out of an imminent intervention by his brother. The idea of Edmund taking him to an older woman was terrifying. And not long after, Edmund had left for war and had never returned.

Messing with a boy or two might be tolerated at your age, but not much older.

Now that William was grown and had travelled widely, he knew the truth was both more complex and darker. Some knights used their squires for sexual

release. He'd heard it in the dark around him on the road on many occasions. While it was generally tolerated, he thought it an abuse of power, and his respect for the men who did it diminished, especially upon seeing more than a few squires who obviously did not relish the role and appeared beaten down.

Still, to use a boy in such a way was largely overlooked, as long as it happened away from home, when men had no alternative. As long as it *was* a boy.

There was a name for men who preferred other men—sodomites. They were publically shunned here, but on the continent such men were burned. There had been treatises calling for the same in England.

Prince Edward II was rumored to be a sodomite, granting outrageous favors to his male lover. But he was despised for it. And then too, it had always been the case that the debauchery that was tolerated at court was a far cry from what was acceptable anyplace else.

The one thing that William was certain of was that it was shameful to want, to bed, another man. So even if the desire had never left him, he had faithfully ignored it. He suspected he did not enjoy women as much as the next man, despite the Corbet virility, and he still found his eye drawn appreciatively to the male form now and again. But it had never been so irresistibly strong, nor so accessible, that he'd acted upon it. All visitors to his bed had been female.

But now he was alone on the road with Sir Christian Brandon. It wasn't only Christian's unusual beauty that provoked William. If he'd been merely a doll with a cold heart, William could have dismissed him readily enough. No, there was something about Christian that struck a deeper chord—a warmth, sweetness, and vulnerability in his deep brown eyes, the hint of shyness, and a need to please that peeked through the mask of cold strength that he wrapped around himself like a disguise. William felt almost bewitched at times, so strong was the urge to protect the man, to stare at him, to brush against him as if by accident, or clap a hand on his shoulder, to make him smile.

God's wounds!

Worst of all, it was not only himself that William had to guard against. For he was beginning to feel certain that Christian... that Christian was... that he was a lover of men—

Sodomite? Evil, odious word. He could not make himself apply it to Christian.

—and that Christian wanted William too.

That is not the only reason. The heat in those eyes in the firelight.

William's cock throbbed and ached, despite having already relieved his lust once before bed, off in the woods. He groaned in frustration and turned onto his stomach, grinding his inflamed flesh into the stony ground. He would discourage by pain what he could not seem to discourage by duty and logic.

Sir William Corbet would not dishonor himself, nor Christian. He would *not*.

CHAPTER 8

It felt like he'd been asleep only a few hours, and the moon was still high, when a hand gently shook William's shoulder. He woke and started to speak, but a hand covered his mouth. Christian's dark eyes were inches from his own.

"Bandits," Christian whispered.

William's hand reached for his sword even as he blinked his eyes to clear them. He strained his ears. He heard a soft sound from the brush, barely there.

And then Christian was gone, melting into the darkness in a crouch. William stood, thrusting off his bedroll and readying his sword. He withdrew it from its sheath quietly, but the metal still sang a soft song in the night. There was a shout and they were attacked.

William's eyes were adjusted to the night, and the light of a full moon turned the world a silvery blue. He could see well enough, and he could see that they were outnumbered. Five men came out of the woods, two of them larger than William, and all of them rough and vicious-looking. Hell, he could already smell them. They were predators. Maybe they'd been soldiers once, but now they looked eager to skin William and Christian alive for their horses and whatever bits of gold and food they carried.

Christian.

William felt a sudden stab of fear for Christian and he glanced around. With any knight in this situation, he'd prefer to fight back-to-back. But Christian was nowhere to be seen.

William felt a surge of disappointment that was surprising in its acuteness. He had been starting to trust Christian. But the young knight was a coward after all. It was true, the odds stank. But you did not desert a comrade in battle.

The five men drew in tighter, two of them moving around to encircle William. He raised his broadsword above his right shoulder and half crouched. As a younger knight, he might have hurried to attack, trying to gain an

advantage by sheer audacity and surprise, but now he knew better. He waited, letting the anger and bloodlust curl in his veins and infuse his body with power. He'd let his attackers make the first mistake.

Where was Christian?

The two men directly in front of him raised their swords and rushed forward.

It happened so fast, it took several breaths for William to realize what was taking place. The largest bandit, directly in front of him, suddenly jerked backwards, like a fish on a hook. An instant later, the man next to him clutched his throat, gurgling. Through the grasping hands, William saw a feathered stick.

Arrows. Christian had not left him.

With a grin and a roar, William spun around, swinging his sword. One of the bandits stumbled back to avoid it while another, a man that had not been anywhere *near* William's blade, suddenly clutched at his throat and then went to his knees.

William looked at the dying man, just a tad annoyed. But the last two bandits were running now. William took chase with a battle cry, determined to sunder *something*.

He heard the arrows coming just before they hit—*thwunk, thwunk*, seconds apart. The remaining bandits went down, one with an arrow cleanly shot to his heart—dead instantly. The other took one in the shoulder. He clutched at it with a scream of pain and stumbled on. A moment later, a second arrow through the back finished the job.

William stood in the clearing, his sword pointed at nothing, breathing hard. He looked around at the five corpses. He scratched his head. A lithe figure separated from the shadows of the trees and approached.

“Let me explain to you the etiquette of battles,” William said tightly as Christian joined him.

The younger knight's cheeks were flushed with excitement, the rosy hue dark in the gray light of the moon. Christian blinked at him, his proud smile faltering. "Uh..."

"It's considered polite to leave me *at least one!*" William shouted. He thrust the tip of his sword in the ground, underscoring his point.

Christian bit his lips. "I... I'm sorry, William. I guess I got caught up."

"You got caught up."

Christian looked around at the bodies. "Well... five is not very many. I could easily have taken out twice that in as much time."

"Are you saying I was too slow?" William said warningly.

"No! I—" Christian looked at him, aghast, but then saw the grin William was fighting to hide.

William suddenly guffawed with laughter. He pulled Christian in with a strong hand around the back of his neck, ruffling his hair and knocking their foreheads together. "By Christ's toes, you are a show off! Trying to impress me, 'ey?"

Christian leaned into the touch, almost stumbling off his feet. But William pulled away, suddenly aware of their proximity. Christian had the grace to look abashed. "Well... I may have been showing off a little."

"Well I may be a little impressed. And in the moonlight too!"

"It wasn't that good," Christian protested modestly. "It took me longer than I hoped to get up in the tree. And then I meant to get both the last two in the heart, seconds apart. That would have been impressive. But I missed and got a shoulder instead."

"Toothless cur! You must try harder next time," William teased.

He went to the nearest corpse and searched the body. He could almost feel the vermin crawling off the man and onto him, and the stench was overpowering, but he had to look. He found a large, soft pouch and tore it off the man's belt. Opened, it revealed a nest of some sort. There were still a few

embers in the firepit and he took it over to get a better look as Christian cast on a few more pieces of kindling.

The pouch was full of hair, human hair, a dozen colors at least, matted together.

The last of William's humor faded and he looked up into Christian's cold eyes and clenched jaw.

"They're well dead," Christian said darkly.

William nodded.

There was no remaining at the camp with the corpses, and dragging them into the woods was not distance enough. Neither one of them wanted to linger. So they packed up and headed out, with hours to go before dawn.

CHAPTER 9

That day they rode along a wide road, approaching Manchester. They'd be able to refill their wine and provisions in town, and Christian was looking forward to seeing it. He'd passed through it once, with Sir Allendale, but they had not stopped. He hoped for an eyeful of the church at least.

But though he relished travelling, the closer they drew to Somerfield's lands, the more Christian's mind worried at the problem of what would happen when they got there. He and William rode side by side on the wide track. They sang awhile—William had a very nice voice. And William talked about his first battle. Christian enjoyed listening to William's tales, but when a comfortable silence fell, he broached the subject foremost on his mind.

“When we get to Somerfield's castle, do you really intend to ask for an audience?”

“I do.”

“And you will tell him that you wish to take Elaine home for a visit?”

William narrowed his eyes at the road in front of him. “I will tell him I have come to take Elaine and her children back home.”

“By the Blood! You would.” Christian cursed.

William frowned at him. “What would you have me say?”

“Say that your father is quite ill. You wish to take Elaine and the children to visit him on his deathbed.”

William pursed his lips firmly. After a long moment, he spoke. “'Tis not a bad plan. But I dislike standing in a man's hall and lying. A knight does not lie. And even if Somerfield bought the tale, he'd be a fool to allow all three of them to go. He'd keep the children so Elaine would have no choice but to return.”

Christian nodded. He'd already thought as much. “Are you sure Elaine would not leave the children? If she hates her husband so much—”

“Never,” William said without a trace of doubt. “Not Elaine. No matter what their sire has done.”

Christian’s chest tightened. “You would not seriously challenge Lord Somerfield to single combat?”

“I must. I can’t raise an army to defeat him. My only option is to get him to fight me man to man.”

“By the saints! You do not challenge a lord in his keep. He’ll have his guard grab you and behead you on the spot. Or perhaps he’ll lock you in the dungeon for a slow death!”

“*Enough*,” William snapped. “’Tis my own affair.”

Christian didn’t argue. They rode on for a bit, then William rubbed his chin pensively. “My best chance is to insult his pride. Somerfield is said to be cruel and vain, and he was a renowned fighter in his younger days. If I say he is too cowardly to face me one-on-one—”

“He will have his guards disembowel you,” Christian finished surely.

“’Tis a chance I must take. You cannot know what he will do, no better than I can.”

“I know *my* father. And I know what he would do.”

William did not reply.

Christian felt his stomach churn with anger. It was even worse than he’d suspected. William’s sense of honor was sure to get him killed. And Christian could not bear the thought of it, if only for the sake of William’s kindness to him if naught else. And there was else—much else. He had to convince William he was wrong.

“Listen,” Christian said, taking on a softer tone, “the lesson I learned in my youth was this—when you do not have the advantage in size and power, you must use your wits and cunning. I don’t suppose that’s a lesson you were ever forced to learn.”

William arched a bemused brow. “Are you saying I lack cunning?”

Christian barked a laugh. "I'm saying you probably have never lacked for power. But such trickery as I have had to learn? Yes, you do lack it. 'Tis no insult, I assure you. Do not go in to see Somerfield boldly. It will go easier if he does not suspect you are there. Don't ask for Elaine; steal her."

William frowned, a deep crease on his brow. "Subterfuge would be difficult. He knows my face."

"But not mine."

William abruptly reined in his horse, stopping. His scowl was fierce. "You, Christian Brandon, are not going into that castle. I gave my word to your father."

"You did not," Christian said coolly. "I did. Or rather, he ordered it of me. I never gave my pledge."

William looked surprised as he thought about it, recalling the exact conversation with Lord Brandon. "And it means naught to you to obey your father's orders? Where is your fealty?"

Christian felt his face flush with a surge of bitter rage. "I keep faith with those who have kept faith with me."

William shook his head in disbelief. "God save me from ever having sons like you."

"I would wish it on no man," Christian said sincerely.

William started riding again, but his face was set. "It matters not what I promised or did not promise to your father. I won't endanger you, Christian. 'Tis not your fight and I won't have your death on my conscience."

"I may not know your sister, but I know *you*," Christian said calmly. "'Tis my fight now, whether you will it or not. I won't have *your* death on *mine*."

William's jaw clenched stubbornly. "I will proceed as I have stated."

"Then you will die and Elaine will not be saved."

William said nothing. They rode in silence for an hour, 'til the sun was high in the sky. Christian suddenly said, "I will strategize on it."

“Now *that* is frightening,” William said.

Christian chuckled darkly.

CHAPTER 10

Three weeks into their journey, and a half day's ride out of Whalley, they had to cross the Ribble River. The ferry was not running, and the alternative was a day's ride out of their way. They decided to swim the horses across. But it was late afternoon and they'd been riding since dawn.

"Let's camp here," William decided. "It will be safer to cross in the morning, when the horses are rested. And then we'll have all day to let the sun dry us."

"As you say." For once, Christian and Livermore looked tired. It was a hot day and the young knight gazed at the river longingly from his mount.

"Let's set the camp back from the river," William said. "So we'll not be seen by anyone drifting by."

They found a small clearing in the woods not far from the river and tended the horses together in silence. It was still early for supper, and there was not the usual haste to set up camp before nightfall.

"Go bathe in the river," William told Christian as he finished feeding Livermore. "I'll start the fire."

"No, you go. I'll make the fire," Christian offered.

William growled. "You are not my squire, Christian. I can start the bedamned fire for once. Go on, before I pick you up and toss you in the water myself."

Christian opened his mouth to protest, but the look on William's face stopped him. He grinned. "As you wish, m'lord," he said playfully. He took some soap from his saddlebags and ran off towards the river with a whoop of joy.

William chuckled to himself. He stretched and started looking around for deadwood, his heart inexplicably light. Gathering the wood did not take long. William dumped it in the center of the clearing and looked at it for a moment.

The sun was still warm. It would be a waste of tinder to start the fire now. Besides, he was hot and sweaty and the river beckoned. With a lazy grin, he answered.

When William stepped from the woods onto the stony riverbank, and saw Christian in the river, his happy anticipation of a bath was snuffed out like a candle caught in the gust of a brewing storm.

Christian was hip deep in the water, hair and skin wet, as he scrubbed at his arms with a bit of cloth and lye soap. William's knees were suddenly unwilling to support him. It would be weak to retreat into the forest now, even if he had the will to do so, and he did not. But neither could he bear to disturb this vision. So he quietly made his way to a large, flat rock on the river bank and sat, his legs bent and spread, arms on his knees. And watched.

By the Holy Virgin. Clothed, Christian was striking. Naked, he was inhuman, a heavenly vision. His shoulders and arms were roped with muscle. His chest and stomach were so lean and pale that every ridge, curve, and nuance that lay beneath the skin could be seen. The bumpy plain of his abdomen marched from breastbone to the waterline like a cobbled road. A girdle of muscle topped his narrow hips and veed inwards, disappearing below the lucky tide.

As they'd ridden further and further from his father's castle, Christian's face had gradually let slack its defenses. And now, as he bathed, it was open and vulnerable, with a vaguely dreamy look in those dark eyes. He looked like a male nymph or a godling.

Christian dunked under the water, rinsing himself. Then he floated onto his back, legs kicking. This raised his hips to the surface, revealing his cock, which was long and thick in its silken sheath and slightly swollen.

William drew in a ragged breath. Perfect. So perfect.

The world William inhabited was frequently ugly. Any market in the land was rife with faces ravaged by fevers and pox. Malformations of limbs were

not uncommon, by birth or by the crude setting of broken bone. Equally as common were cleft lips, disfiguring birthmarks, scars, and malnutrition. Men were oft times coarse and unwashed. Women had a brief youthful bloom that faded quickly, like wildflowers in the field. But Christian... he was unique, a rose blooming in a frozen tundra. Had Christian been a woman, he might have married a king. As a man, he could have any woman's bed, or all of them.

He could inspire ballads. He could inspire wars.

William watched, bewitched, as Christian's lazy kicks spun him closer to the riverbank. He stood suddenly, and he was only thigh deep—thigh deep, water streaming down his skin, and partially erect.

Christian looked down at himself with a musing, distant look, his thoughts far away. His hand skimmed down his chest to grasp himself with a small, secret smile. He glanced up then, towards the woods, as if to verify that he was alone—and froze when he saw William sitting on the rock.

His hand fell from his cock in horror, and then both hands came up to cover it. His cheeks stained scarlet, sending red tendrils as far down as his jaw. He abruptly turned his back.

"I was going to ask if the water is cold," William teased, though his voice sounded deep and rough. "But the evidence suggests that it cannot be as cold as all that."

"I didn't know you were there," Christian said, a rather obvious statement. For a moment he seemed frozen with panic or indecision. He did not turn around—but neither did he walk further into the river to cover himself. His shoulders relaxed in acceptance.

The air grew heavy and charged.

William felt it thickening around him even as he blinked in dazed attention at his new view. He stared in awe at the shape of Christian's back—his shoulders so broad for that slender frame, his torso narrowing to the tender flesh of his waist, dimpled *there* at the small of his back, and then swelling again into the plush curves of his arse...

William had been hard since he first glimpsed Christian in the river. But now a powerful lust—a crude word, a crude emotion, but accurate enough—curled around William’s chest and groin like a constricting snake and squeezed. He could scarcely breathe.

Oh, God. By the saints, by the Virgin, by the most sacred blood.

He was suddenly aware that he was standing on a knife’s edge.

Over the weeks they’d been together, without William even realizing it, the firmament of his resolve and control and self-denial had been eaten away far below the surface. And now he could feel how thin the thread was that held him in check—perilously, horrifyingly, inconsequentially thin.

He stood abruptly and headed for the woods.

“*William.*” Christian’s voice rang out sharply, stopping him in his tracks.

William paused, his back to the river. He could not look.

“They call you the *lion*. I wouldn’t have expected you to be such a dog-hearted coward.”

Christian’s voice held disdain. And those words, those *outrageous, inflammatory* words, made William tremble, literally shake in his boots.

No man spoke to him like that.

William was filled with an imperative urge to stride into that river and grab Christian, push him, tackle him, hold him down, make him take it back, those words, to make him... *beg*. To take him, to crush him, to kiss him, to *fuck* him.

William’s trembling fingers scrambled at the laces of his gambeson and, with a muttered curse, he ripped it over his head and *threw* it. He yanked off first one boot, then the other, hurling them at the trees and causing birds to take flight in alarm. Then his linen shirt was pulled over his head and away, suffering a nasty tear in his fit of pique. He only barely refrained from spitting on it for good measure.

He almost left on his hose, striding towards the river still in them. But the wool was a bastard to dry, and he needed something more to assuage his wrath

before he got his hands on anything that could actually *bruise*. So he stopped and yanked them down. He was so hard that his cock slapped against his belly loudly as it pulled free of his hose. In his rage, he felt not the slightest prickle of shame.

Christian was wide-eyed as William stormed into the water. He put his hands up in front of him, as if to ward William off, but his face told a different story. He gazed up and down William's approaching form with unmistakable hunger, lingering on his chest, then his cock. And if he'd intended to run, like any sane man would have done, it was too late, because suddenly William was there.

He grabbed Christian's upper arms in his two strong hands and pulled Christian up, holding him so that their faces were of a level and his feet were off the riverbed. William didn't bring Christian close, he just held him, firmly. And he glared, growling low in his throat.

Christian licked his lips, looking slightly nervous. But his eyes were heated and they slipped from William's eyes to linger on his lips and then down to the muscles of his chest. When Christian met William's eyes again, it was abundantly clear that he wasn't going to struggle, wasn't going to resist, or even defend himself with that wicked tongue. He tilted his head back slightly, his eyes going half-lidded, as if offering his throat.

God's teeth! The man was more beautiful than anything in the heavens or the earth. And William's anger merged with a strangling desire.

"Do you. Want me?" William asked through gritted teeth, because he wanted to take, he *had* to. But he wouldn't take what was not freely offered.

Christian answered fiercely. "Since the first time I saw you on the jousting field and every minute since."

William pulled Christian in, wrapped him in strong arms, and kissed him.

Oh.

Oh, the feeling of Christian in his arms. William pressed him tight, crushing that beautiful body against his own as firmly as he could without

causing harm. Christian's flesh was warm above, from the heat of the sun, and cool below from the river. And the lean strength of it, the flat chest against his own, the hard cock pressed next to his, felt so right and perfect that it filled William with shivers of delight and brought a stinging heat to the back of his eyes.

Oh. William was so lost.

He plundered Christian's mouth, tasting him deeply. His mouth was warm like a summer day and earthly like the woods and... innocent. Christian was all eagerness, almost frantic with desire. His arms wrapped around William's shoulders in a painful clutch, and he crushed his lips to William's as demandingly as a starving baby bird. But for all that, his mouth was untutored, his moves hesitant.

How was it possible that no one had ever kissed this man?

The thought brought a wave of tenderness, and William softened his hold. His palms pressed flat on Christian's back and he relaxed his grip. But Christian would have none of it. He pulled himself in tighter and began to rut against William's stomach in desperation. His cock was still a bit slippery from the water as it rubbed against William's dry skin. William groaned, wanting to give him what he needed, what they both needed. He turned and started for the riverbank, following a deep instinct to lay Christian down on the ground and take him.

But then he stopped—Christian was not a woman. William did not know what to do. He knew it was possible to take a man's arse but he wasn't sure how the thing was done, not without brutality and pain. So he swallowed down his pressing need and carried Christian deeper into the water.

Christian couldn't believe he'd challenged William like that—called him a dog-hearted coward. It was a dangerous gambit. But he'd just... he couldn't stand it anymore, all the dancing and denial. No man was meant to suffer so much for the want of love. It wasn't fair.

Ever since the night they'd talked at the fire, Christian had been sure. Well, almost sure. What he'd seen in William's eyes that night convinced him that William wanted him, that he'd been as aroused as Christian was himself. So when he'd caught William watching him on the riverbank, desire written all over his face, Christian had *needed*, acutely, and he was determined not to accept another diversion. So he'd pushed.

And he'd won. It was William's colors that lay now, muddied, on the tournament field. But in victory, Christian only felt the desire to surrender completely, to let William take him, do whatever he willed. Dear Holy Mother, *anything*, as long as this heady feeling didn't end.

Christian pressed himself hard against that broad frame. William was strong and sturdy and immovable. Nothing in Christian's entire life had prepared him for how this felt—so safe, so wondrous, so arousing. William's skin was smooth silk over hard muscle. His lips were as soft on Christian's as he'd imagined they would be. His tongue stroked in Christian's mouth, and every caress spurred Christian's need higher and higher. William's cock was as hard as the river stones had been beneath Christian's feet. William was that hard *for him*.

Christian rutted helplessly against William's stomach, along the side of his shaft. The friction on his aching flesh was so pleasurable he couldn't still his hips or his cries.

William began to carry Christian towards the river bank, but then suddenly they were moving deeper into the water. William pulled his mouth away.

"Put your legs round me," he said as the water crept up to Christian's waist.

Christian did. He wrapped his legs around William's hips and recaptured his mouth, desperate for the taste of him. The cool water lapped at the furrow between Christian's legs, tickled the undersides of his bollocks in a marvelous fashion. But the new position meant his cock was not as tightly against William's stomach and he whined in frustration and tilted his hips, trying to get closer.

“William,” Christian begged.

William groaned in answer and half-swam backwards, pulling them in deeper.

“By my sword, what you make me feel,” William growled. He pulled Christian in tight, hands on his arse, and ground them together. *Yes. There.*

The pleasure of it, the sheer sexual pleasure that came from the friction of Christian’s swollen, sensitized cock rubbing against William’s stomach and iron shaft, was so much more intense than anything Christian had ever felt when he’d touched himself that he was in awe of it. He got lost in the sensation—being in William’s arms, the sweet heat of his lips and tender tongue, the delight of their cocks rutting against each other between their bodies.

That Christian could have a man like this, and not just any man, but *William*, a man more handsome, stronger, and more decent than any he’d ever known, seemed entirely unreal. As if, by all rights, the earth should cleave in two at the audacity of Christian daring to be so happy, daring to get so much.

Then William, with a moan, removed one hand from Christian’s backside and pushed it between them, taking them both in his large hand.

Christian threw back his head at the sensation of those strong, calloused fingers on his shaft, and the press of William’s large cock moving tightly against his own. He couldn’t stop the moans that poured from his throat.

“Christian, look at me,” William ground out.

Christian looked.

“Need to see your eyes. So beautiful,” William panted.

“William.” Christian stared into those stormy blue eyes. The level of intimacy shattered him.

“You’re so beautiful, Christian. So fine. You should know that. You should—”

The words were too tender, too much. They tipped Christian over the edge.

“Ah! Oh, God!” He squeezed his eyes shut as orgasm overtook him, streaming hot from his flesh into the cool river tide.

“Look at me!” William cried.

Christian forced his eyes open, still in the throes of his release, and he saw William’s pleasure wash across his face. His cock pulsed against Christian’s. Christian drew his hand down quickly to the head of William’s cock, because he had to feel it, needed proof of William’s desire. The hot semen struck his palm with surprising force even underwater. It was such a vulnerable, erotic thing that William was letting him see, letting him feel, that it touched the core of him. William held Christian’s gaze fiercely until the last of the ecstasy had faded from his eyes.

Christian felt profoundly changed. He knew he could never go back to the person he’d been an hour ago. Something had irrevocably shifted inside him. But as their ardor faded, he suddenly felt unsure. He wanted to bury his face in William’s neck, to feel their heartbeats slowing together in the warm circle of William’s arms. But he feared that, with William’s passion spent, his denial would return and he’d look at Christian like he was perverted and wrong, perhaps want to punish him. Christian tried to pull away.

“No,” William said, pressing him tight.

Christian was stiff for a moment, but when it was clear William was not going to relent, he relaxed in his arms, placing his forehead on William’s shoulder with a sigh.

“I wish you could see yourself as I see you,” William said quietly.

“How do you see me?”

William stroked his back. “Perfect in every way. If I could freeze time and place I would choose this moment and this river, with you.”

Christian’s heart soared at the words, a stab of joy so acute that it hurt. But then he also heard what was not said—*but we cannot freeze time and this cannot last.*

Christian pushed the thought away. He placed his hands on William's waist, relishing the feel of the taut skin under the water. *Say what you like. You are mine and forever will be.*

“And you are my perfection,” Christian said, and then quickly, so that William need not reply, “Now let me loose, and I'll hunt us a fine dinner.”

CHAPTER 11

They worked in companionable silence as they made camp and cooked dinner. Christian caught another hare in the forest—the woods were overflowing with them—and William broke a fresh round of bread from Whalley. They shared a pungent red wine William had purchased at The King's Horse, filling his leather costrel. There was no need for idle conversation.

When Christian would have sat several feet away from him at the fire, William patted a place next to him on the log. As they ate, they bumped knees and elbows, but neither moved to put distance between them.

Now that William had taken the step he'd fought all his life, there was no undoing it, and he would not waste time on regret. He didn't feel ashamed or confused. He felt... strongly protective. He wanted to shield Christian from any more pain in his life, including the pain Christian obviously expected in the form of William's cruelty. William would never be cruel, not to Christian, not deliberately. But he didn't have to be, because the situation was cruel enough. William felt the first knot of a great sorrow, born under his ribs. He knew how brief a reign this thing between them would have. It *had* to be brief, but that made him all the more greedy for every moment of it.

William had heard the troubadours sing of love. His tutor had made him read *The Song of Roland* and much bad romantic poetry. He understood the notion of courtly love, had seen some of his friends pine for their beloved. He'd pretended amusement, teased them mercilessly, but he'd been envious. He'd always hoped that, someday, he would have a wife whom he would love thus, as if she hung the moon and the stars. He'd never met a woman who made him lose his head like that. But he could lose his head over Christian. Perhaps he already had. He recognized that the dewy perfection he saw when he looked at Christian was unrealistic, a sign of a heart struck by Cupid's arrow. But it was so sweet he didn't care.

And you are my perfection, Christian had said. That infant bud of sorrow grew just a little more.

It was dark when they finished dinner, and with no plate or cup to hold in his hands, they felt irreverently empty when Christian was only a breath away. William slipped an arm round the knight's waist, relishing the slender solidity of him. When Christian did not object, William pulled him close. They had not talked about what had happened, and William's sense of honor pushed him to rectify that.

William cleared his throat. "If you were a woman, I would already be before your father on bended knee."

Christian said nothing, but he leaned further into William.

"'Tis wrong in the eyes of God and men," William said firmly, to explain himself. "I cannot regret you, Christian. But we cannot take this much further."

Christian tensed in his arms. "When I was thirteen," Christian said slowly, "and in the sanctity of the confessional, I told our priest that I felt desire for men."

William's hand, which had been rubbing Christian's side, stilled.

"He told me I was possessed by a succubus, a female demon that hungered for men. He told me he would pray for guidance to free me from this creature."

"For a week, I was terrified. I tried to feel this insidious being inside me. I prayed to all the saints, to Jesus, and the Holy Virgin to free me from it, to cast it out. I wondered what I had done to be vulnerable to such an attack. I wondered if I were truly as weak and worthless as my brothers had always claimed, deserving of their hatred and my father's coldness. Why else would the succubus have chosen me?"

"'Tis not so," William breathed into Christian's hair, feeling a murderous anger for the sake of the young boy.

“The following week, when I returned to confession, eager to hear the priest explain how he would free me from the succubus, he told me that God had shown him the way. He made me follow him to his chambers. There, he made me undress and he forced me to kneel. He tried to put his hard cock in my mouth.”

William growled.

“He told me that in order to get the succubus to leave we had to give her what she wanted—a man’s essence. We would be forced to feed her until she had fled. It might take months, he said.”

“I shall kill him,” William said darkly.

“He’s already dead, gone in an epidemic of fever that struck my father’s castle while I was on the road with Sir Allendale.”

“Christian....”

“Fear not. I was no fool, not even at thirteen. I let him taste my dagger, and I told him what he could do with his cock and his succubus. He threatened to tell my father I lusted after men. I threatened to carve off his staff and eggs in his sleep. You could say it was a stalemate.”

William could not stop a smile at the thought of young Christian acting so boldly. “You did well. But I hope you are content to leave my staff and eggs where they are.”

Christian’s hand stole onto William’s thigh. “As long as they serve me well.”

William chuckled, but a tingle went down his spine. After witnessing Christian’s attack on the bandits, he had no doubt that the young warrior could be deadly.

Christian sighed. “The lesson is thus: man makes God’s law and shapes it to suit his purpose. I believe there is a God, but what he thinks of my desires, or those of any man, no one can tell. I am done listening to priests on the matter.”

“’Tis still a sin,” William said with soft conviction. “One corrupt priest does not change that.”

Christian pulled away, his words angry and passionate. “No! I told you, William. I do not break faith with those who do not break faith with me. God broke faith with me. He took my mother, leaving me in a house of enemies. He ignored my prayers for help, night after night when I was only a boy. And his priest wanted to sate his own lust, not save my soul. I care not for God’s law! Or man’s either. There should have been laws of decency, laws of conduct, laws of family that protected me when I was young, but there were none. No law saved your sister from a husband who was a monster, nor helps her now. So what allegiance should I have to man’s laws? Should I believe it more of a crime for us to love one another than the harm my brothers did to me without any fear of retribution from my father or the king? Never!”

William felt his pulse thud sickeningly for what Christian had endured, but he knew it changed nothing. “You mayn’t believe that you and I lying together is wrong, Christian. But that doesn’t change the fact that it is contemptible in the eyes of everyone else.”

Christian’s jaw only set more stubbornly. “Then we must not be caught.”

“Do you imagine it would not be obvious? Were we to be lovers in a lord’s castle or in a company of knights?”

Christian got a calculating gleam in his eye. “Not if well done. One or both of us could wed—”

William groaned and covered his face with his hands. “By the saints, he’s thought this through.”

“What? The right kind of wife, one only interested in hearth and babes, separate chambers... It needs somewhere remote. My father was granted a small holding, four hundred acres in Scotland, by King Edward. I’ve been trying to talk him into letting me take it over, but he says I have not the experience, nor will he send me without a wife. In a place like that—”

William pulled Christian tight, a stab of fear going through his heart. “Hush. Hush, I pray you. You chill me to the marrow with fear for you when you talk like this. You will bring yourself to ruin.”

Christian stilled and pushed deeper into William’s arms.

“We have another six, seven day’s ride ahead. Let me have you, hold you, for this long, Christian, and let us be content with our fate. I won’t waste time fighting about what mayn’t be. Can you do that?”

“Aye,” Christian answered. He sighed bitterly, but his lips rose to meet William’s.

The desperate need with which he pushed against William’s chest, as if they might never have this again, acknowledged every word that the older knight had said, even if Christian himself would not admit it.

They lay their bedrolls next to each other by the fire that night and made love again, stroking each other to sweet release, indulging in endless kisses. It would have to be enough, William told himself, enough to last a lifetime.

CHAPTER 12

“I have thought on a plan to free Lady Elaine,” said Christian, as they rode through the forest three days later.

They were nearly at the village of Kendal. It would be the last town before crossing the Cumbrian Mountains and approaching Somerfield’s remote castle on the wild coastline of northwest England. As they drew closer and closer to Somerfield’s lands, Christian could sense William’s concern for Elaine growing. And he could see in the stony set of the older knight’s countenance as they rode through long days, that he was mentally preparing himself for battle.

Perhaps even preparing himself for death.

And yet, William never completely turned from him. Their bedrolls were now routinely placed together, and William had no hesitation in reaching for Christian. He made love each night as tenderly and fiercely as any lover could. Christian gave back everything that he had. They’d begun exploring each other’s bodies with their mouths as well as their hands. It was unprecedented bliss. And the feeling—the *love*—that Christian had for William settled deeper and deeper into his bones every day.

He could not give William up; he would not. He’d never been surer of anything in his life. But Christian knew it was useless to speak of it, so he said no more about plans for the future. His thoughts for now had to be centered on a more urgent goal—finding a way for William to simply survive the rescue of Elaine.

“What is your plan, Crow?” William asked, with a tone studiously neutral.

“As you have said, Somerfield knows your face. If you directly challenge him, it *will* go badly. Our best chance is to get Lady Elaine out by subterfuge. I will go to the castle and seek work as a servant—”

“Absolutely, and adamantly, *no*,” William said. Loudly.

By the saints, Christian could swear the man was not called the Lion for his valor but for his cantankerous roar.

“You might hear me out before saying nay,” Christian said coolly.

William said nothing.

“I’ll seek work in the castle,” Christian continued. “I’ll learn in what rooms Lady Elaine is kept, and what her schedule is in a week’s time—when she walks in the garden or attends confession. That way, we might find the best time and place to get her and the children out unobserved.”

“I do not want you entering that castle.”

“’Tis our best chance of success! You must consider Elaine. Our goal must be to free her *and* keep your head on your neck. And damn your pride, Sir William Corbet.”

William considered it for a few silent moments. Then he spoke in frustration. “It is an ill thing to risk your neck for hers.”

“’Tis a very small risk,” Christian snorted. “No one knows me there, and a travelling laborer is as common as fleas. I will only be observing after all.”

William said nothing. His face was troubled.

Christian moved his horse closer and reached out for William’s hand. “I beg you, don’t make me watch you play the hero and die. Let me help you in this.”

“I like it not.”

“I am a knight,” Christian reminded him with a hint of ice in his voice. “A trained warrior. Even if I let you hold me as a woman, do not mistake me for such.”

William looked at him wryly. “Oh, I do not.”

“Then trust me to *be* a warrior. It only makes sense to assess the situation. I can do this.”

William finally nodded, but he did not look pleased about it. “If we can abduct Elaine and the babes away, ’twould be better. But if we cannot, Christian, I *will* challenge Somerfield.”

“I know,” Christian said quietly.

In Kendal, Christian slipped away while William replenished their supplies and questioned the locals. Christian made the purchases he needed and packed them out of sight in his saddle bags before rejoining William. It nearly took the last of his coin, but it would be worth it.

“What did you learn?” Christian asked William when they met up again.

“That Lord Somerfield is a vicious, pox-marked bastard, and that everyone in his household fears him. ’Tis said Lady Elaine sits at his side meekly, so well-beaten she never speaks a word, even when he propositions wenches in front of her.”

“Someone told you that?”

“Aye. I would give my eyeteeth to castrate Somerfield. And then cast his innards on a spinning wheel.” William glowered. “But at least we know Elaine is still alive.”

It took them two and a half days to cross the Cumbrian Mountains on horseback. Christian remembered where to find the best path, and where to avoid straying off it onto misleading shepherd’s trails. The mountains were beautiful and chill, but neither man was in much of a mind to enjoy them.

They descended to the foothills on the third day and made an early camp, still far enough away from the castle to feel safe.

“If I leave at sunrise,” said Christian, “I’ll arrive at the castle before midday.”

“Christian,” William said firmly, “I am still not easy about your going into the castle bailey alone to spy.”

“But we agreed,” Christian said calmly. “My face is not known. I’ll get the lay of things and be back in one week. At best, I will learn something that gives you a better option. At worst, you’ve lost some time.”

William wiped his face with a large hand. “But if you’re caught as a spy...”

“I will not be caught.”

“You won’t be able to take your quiver. You’ll be vulnerable.”

Christian raised his gambeson to show off a wicked dagger. He removed it and looked around the clearing. “That sapling there.” He pointed. A moment later, his dagger was sunk deep in the very center of the narrow trunk, nearly toppling the thing.

William could not help a chuckle. “Impressive, Crow.”

Christian grinned with delighted pride, like a young boy being praised by his father. He retrieved his knife, and when he returned he stepped far closer to William than was proper, causing the heat that was always banked between them to stir and rouse.

“I survived my brothers for fourteen years. I’m no fool, William. I beg you to have some faith in me. You are not alone in this.”

William felt his will slipping. He knew he would approve the plan in a heartbeat as a military commander. And he did trust in Christian’s strength and agility, his cleverness. He did. But his heart did not want to let Christian anywhere near Lord Somerfield or his forces. It was bad enough that Somerfield had Elaine.

“You must make no move without me,” William ordered. “You will return in one week—sooner if you can. And you will not take risks—no sneaking into Elaine’s quarters, no going into private areas, no risky questions that would give you away. Swear to me, Christian.”

Christian hesitated. “I swear to you that my dearest wish is for us to be together safe again, and that I will act in no way to endanger that.”

Christian moved even closer to William as he spoke, his eyes full of a fierce affection. A wave of desire dried up William’s demands along with his ability to form any words at all. It seemed the more he had of Christian the more helplessly he wanted him.

“Have no fear,” Christian said softly. He ran long fingers along William’s jaw. “I will slip in and out like a shadow.”

“You put much faith in your... charms,” William said mildly, even though he was already stiffening.

Christian smiled slyly. “I do. I bought something for us in Kendal.”

He went to his horse and pulled something from the saddle bags. William had wondered why Christian had been so long in the shops. When he returned he held out a small stoppered jar.

“Poison?” William asked warily.

Christian laughed. “By the blood, I pray not, considering where this is going.”

Christian uncorked the jar and dabbed some on his fingers. It was clear. He ran it over William’s lips. William tasted it.

“Oil?”

“Linseed oil.”

“For cooking?”

Christian corked the jar and wrapped his arms around William’s neck, standing on his toes to murmur in William’s ear. “For easing your way into my passage.”

William’s heart seemed to leave his chest and get stuck in his throat. His hands moved to Christian’s sides and his face burrowed into Christian’s neck. He groaned as lust shook him and his cock became as solid as his iron sword.

“Is that—you cannot want that.”

“I want it,” Christian said fiercely. “This may be our last night alone together, William. I want everything.”

“You are a saucy wanton,” William muttered, in a tone that said it was a quality he greatly admired.

He pressed Christian tight against him, felt his lover harden as they strove to get closer, as if they could merge flesh, mouths kissing hot and sweet. William was so primed his cock ached like a sore tooth. He certainly had thought about being inside Christian, not only at the river but every time

since—about Christian’s long legs wrapped around him, his lovely arse.... But William would never have asked such a thing of another man and particularly not of a knight. He had too much respect for Christian to ask it.

“Are you sure?” William pulled away from Christian’s kiss. “If it is our last, I want you to enjoy it. I want to give you pleasure.”

“I want it, William, I swear. I want to know what it’s like. Don’t deny me.”

William held himself in check with great determination as he kissed Christian, divested him of every stitch of clothes, and settled him onto the bedroll. The act Christian had offered seemed to awaken even more tenderness and protectiveness in William than usual, and he wanted to kiss and soothe and touch Christian everywhere, preparing him for what he hoped was their mutual bliss.

Christian let him do as he would, not hurrying him, though his cock was rigid and glistening with arousal on his stomach and his eyes burned with far gone desire. William could not get enough of touching that sweet flesh. He ran his hand over Christian’s chest and stomach and hips again and again. His own cock throbbed every time he passed over a dusky nipple and Christian made an involuntary little gasp. But eventually, Christian dug in his heels and lifted his hips.

“Use the oil on me,” Christian said, his voice rough.

William, shaking, obliged. He poured some of the oil into the center of his hand and stoked it over Christian’s stiff cock. Christian arched upwards in pleasure and hissed.

“Not there! I will spend in an instant, I beg you.” He spread his thighs and moved over a little so he could pull his knees towards his chest, opening himself up.

It was the most shameless, vulnerable, and erotic thing William had ever seen. He blushed, even as his eyes fell to the pale perfection, to the tight pink bud Christian revealed so wantonly.

William's fingers shook as he smoothed oil over that tender flesh, making it slick.

Christian moaned. "Press in."

William pressed one oily finger gently against the pucker, then, when it did not give, more firmly. The tip of his finger sank in. Christian made an incoherent sound.

"*Further,*" he demanded almost churlishly.

William thrust the finger deep, determined to not to be mawkish in his inexperience. Christian cried out in shock and pleasure. And *God's teeth*, the way his channel felt around William's finger—grasping and hot and slick with the oil. William almost spent against Christian's thigh like a callow youth.

He muttered Christian's name and thrust his finger in and out, mesmerized by the sight of it disappearing into that pale flesh. Gradually the tight ring slackened a little against him.

Christian pulled at his arms, trying to get William to lie atop him. "Now, William. I pray you."

William resisted only long enough to coat his cock with the oil. Then he dropped the jar and covered Christian fully with his body, using his hand to guide himself to the entrance.

He paused there, his face inches from Christian's, lost in those dark eyes. For a moment they stared at each other, their locked gaze so intense that it did not bear breaking, not even for the act they both desperately wanted. Then Christian thrust up his hips. "Breach me," he demanded.

William pushed in, feeling the resistance, stopping when Christian's face showed pain. But slowly, slowly, inch by inch, retreat and pursue, his cock sunk deep. Until finally, he was buried and there was only the grasping intimacy and ecstasy of being inside Christian's body.

Nature took over, causing William to thrust again and again, now fast to spur them upwards, now slow to keep it from ending too quickly. He loved the feel of having Christian underneath him, pressed flesh to flesh, of being so

intimately united with his body. They kissed. They stared into each other's eyes. Christian's hands roamed over his back. And all the while, William's most sensitive flesh was stroked and suckled, giving him blinding pleasure, and the emotions that chased across Christian's face made it clear he was just as affected.

When William could hold back no longer, he rose up onto his heels and pulled Christian into his lap. Poised thus, William could thrust deeply and stroke Christian at the same time. It only lasted a matter of seconds, but the moment was burned permanently into William's brain—the sight of Christian's slender body below him, that beautiful face, those eyes so loving and passionate gazing into his, Christian's cock, so decadent, stiff in William's hand as he stroked it, Christian's pale spread thighs lying over his, and the sight and sensation of William's own cock plunging into that beautiful body.

In that moment, William knew that this was it for him—the pinnacle of sexual and romantic bliss. Nothing would ever match this; nothing could come close to being as lovely, erotic, and rousing as Christian, just like this, letting William take him. Not a woman, not even another man, if he ever dared such. This was the moment he would take to his grave.

I love you, William thought as his peak ripped through him like a tempest. And even as he recognized the significance of the moment, he was mourning the fact that he would very likely never have this again.

CHAPTER 13

Christian awoke before dawn. He gently disengaged himself from William, assuring himself first that the older knight was asleep. When he rose, he paused for a moment to stare down at his lover.

By the saints, Sir William Corbet was a handsome man, virile and strong in a way that made Christian feel profoundly moved, like the sight of a perfect sunset or the view of green rolling plains from a hilltop. Christian knew it might be the last time he ever saw William, so he allowed his gaze to linger. But soon the ache it provoked in his chest was too much, too large a threat to his will, and he made himself move.

He left his bedroll with William, and quietly led Livermore out of the camp. If William woke, he would only have more doubts about letting Christian go to the castle, and leaving him behind would just be that much more difficult.

He rode all morning. When he could see the walls of the castle, he turned Livermore into the woods. He found a small stream and unpacked his saddle bags. He drew out his purchases: a rolled length of bandaging, a white wimple, a blue linen gown, and a pair of women's simple black shoes.

Christian had never done this before, and it took him some time. He shaved his chin very carefully and soothed it with the linseed oil. He would have to do that often. He could not forget. He bound his cock and bollocks back between his legs. He dressed. He bunched the excess bandages in his bodice and did his best to shape them.

He put on the wimple, which hid his hair and draped over his gown. It helped mask the unnatural shape of his bosom. When he was done, he stood and looked at himself, head to toe, in the moving water of the stream.

Fear spread its icy finger through his chest.

God's wounds, this was an insane idea. How could anyone look at him and not see Christian Brandon, a man? How had he ever thought of such a disastrous plan?

His panic held him tightly for several painful seconds, and then he forced himself to look again, this time with the eye of a stranger. A very odd creature stared back at him, half woman, half man. He blinked. Mostly a woman?

I can do this. I can.

He had thought of it some days back, before he'd ever broached the subject with William of doing espionage in the castle. But he knew if he told William everything he planned, there was no way William would allow it. By Christ's toes, he'd barely gotten William to agree to let him go to the castle at all, just to do reconnaissance.

But as Christian had pondered their situation, he'd come to one inescapable conclusion: Their best chance of freeing Elaine was Somerfield's death.

Yes, there was a slim chance that Elaine might be able to be spirited away, that there might be a time and a place within her daily routine that would allow such, or that her rooms would be but lightly-guarded, or even that Christian could get her a message and she could extract herself from her warders and meet them outside the bailey's walls. But he doubted it. If Somerfield were the beast he was reputed to be, it was unlikely Elaine would have that kind of liberty. And even if they managed to escape with her and the children, her absence would quickly bring alarm, and they'd be pursued by Somerfield's army.

Christian was not completely dismissing that scenario. But he was prepared to go further—should the opportunity present itself. And it was much more likely to present itself in this guise, as was any chance of getting close to Elaine.

He looked down at himself critically. His hands were too large. He would have to hide them as much as possible. And—by the Holy Virgin—he had not thought of the archer's callouses on his right hand. If anyone noticed those he was done for. His voice... He practiced a falsetto, but it sounded laughable to

his own ears. He would have to speak as little as possible. The wimple hid his throat, which was all too male, and accentuated his face, which was the disguise's best hope. Or so he'd thought.

When he'd first thought of the plan, he'd been swept up by its cleverness, by the irony of it. He'd been told so oft, and so disdainfully, that he was pretty, womanly, soft. The fact that he might use that to his advantage was too delicious to resist.

But now, his reflection seemed to only emphasize what was male about him, which was much. He'd spent his whole life acting as masculine and cold as possible. And now it was not a woman's face that looked back at him. He tried to soften it, smiled sweetly at the water. It was an improvement. But would he not revert back to the familiar the moment his attention wandered? It was dangerous.

"Courage," he whispered over his pounding heart. "I can do this. I *shall*."

If he was caught out, a man dressing as a woman, he would most likely be killed. William would be frothing at the mouth if he knew Christian was attempting this. He would murder Christian if he found out.

Nevertheless, the thought of William calmed him. *William*.

Christian would save William. He would be clever and invisible and bold.

Resolved, Christian untied Livermore's reins and gave the horse a nudge and a pat. "Back to Tristan with you. Go on."

Livermore looked at Christian indignantly for just a moment and then took off at a gallop back to camp.

Christian walked on foot towards the castle.

CHAPTER 14

“Take this and hurry up with you!” The cook, Hilde, thrust out a platter bearing an enormous roast goose that was set round with crabapples.

Christian took it, placing both hands on the bottom of the platter to keep them out of view. Not for the first time, he was surprised at the strength women were expected to have. By the Saints! The platter was damned heavy. He couldn't imagine Ayleth carrying such a thing. But then Ayleth was a lady, not a servant. Christian carried it up the stairs towards the dining hall.

It had not been difficult to get work at the castle. There seemed to be a steady exodus of servants from Lord Somerfield's care and keeping, and Christian had already witnessed enough to understand why.

Lord Somerfield was not quite the age of Christian's father, but he was close. His coarse hair was still full, but the midnight was shot through with bitter grey, as if his brain's poisonous thoughts were slowly leaking out. His face was broad, with a sharp nose and full lips. He'd been handsome once, but now indulgence and cruelty had twisted his features; they were bloated and coarse. His legs were thick and muscled but a heavy stomach hung above them. Twice in the five days Christian had been here, he'd witnessed Lord Somerfield strike a servant at table. Once because the servant put a pitcher down badly, interrupting Lord Somerfield's conversation with a bang and sloshing the contents. The other time, it seemed the blow had come for no reason at all except that the servant had gotten too close to the lord at table and had been smacked down for it.

Lady Elaine sat next to Somerfield at every evening meal. She was pretty but wan and egregiously thin. She kept her eyes downcast and her face studiously blank. Christian never saw her during the day. Her rooms, along with the children's, a girl a year old and a girl aged three, were in the southwest tower. Its entrance was well guarded at all times. Christian might have been able to slip Elaine a message in the dining hall, but it would endanger them both, and to what end? To entreat her to escape would be like

asking a fish to get off the fisherman's hook, and even giving her news that help was at hand might make her act in a way that would be risky.

Christian placed the platter of turkey on the lord's table. He dared a glance at Lady Elaine and she looked up just then and met his eyes. It was only a brief moment, but she did smile ever so slightly before casting her eyes back downward.

As Christian backed away from the table, he glanced at Somerfield.

Somerfield was staring at Christian with a heavy, hooded look that Christian recognized all too well. His heart slammed against his ribs in a rush of excitement and fear. His eyes dropped and he backed away completely.

In the five days Christian had been in the castle, he'd been surprised that his identity had never once been questioned. He was accepted at face value. And why not? Who would dream of a man choosing to dress as a woman? It was unthinkable. There had been some glances at his hands, times when he'd had to take a pitcher or scrub the floor, unable to shield them. But they were only glances of curiosity, probably thinking they were unfortunately large for a woman. He'd managed to speak little, and his voice was not questioned either. For that matter, the cook herself sounded like a grizzled old man, perhaps from so many hours spent bent over the smoke.

Indeed, the most dangerous aspect of Christian's role thus far had been avoiding the interest he had from various male admirers. Apparently he was attractive as a woman after all. He'd said he was married, pulled strongly away from grasping hands, and stayed in the kitchen as much as possible. There were few chances of getting caught alone there.

He'd been assigned to serve the dining hall almost at once, being relatively cultured-looking for a serving wench. That had been his first real stroke of luck.

Christian went back down to the kitchen for more platters. Cook handed him a large wooden bowl of what looked like stuffed intestines covered with mushrooms. It smelled pungently sour.

"The lord's table," Cook ordered. "His is the only one that gets that dish."

As Christian made his way to the stairs, he was tempted. In his bodice was a pouch and in the pouch was deadly nightshade. Sir Andrew, who'd taught him archery, had taught Christian to recognize the plant. It was sometimes used on arrow tips, but you had to be very careful to avoid getting it in cuts or letting it linger on your hands. Christian had never used it thus. But he'd seen the plant as he and William crossed the mountains, and he'd picked a good quantity. The leaves could be crushed into a paste and the paste....

He'd hoped to be able to slip it into Lord Somerfield's food or drink, and now he considered the bowl in his hands. But there was no way to know who would eat from the bowl, perhaps even Lady Elaine. He dared not risk it.

If he were to use the nightshade, he would have to put it in Somerfield's cup. But Somerfield was a cautious man with many enemies. He had an older male servant who stood behind his chair and who poured Somerfield's wine and filled his plate. No other was allowed near him whilst he was dining.

Lord Somerfield's private rooms were in the northwest tower, but they were also guarded. Christian had not dared to go there. But his options on accomplishing his goal were dwindling, and his week was nearly up. The longer Christian stayed in the castle, the more likely it was that his secret would be discovered, or that William would decide to take matters into his own hands and appear to request an audience.

Christian entered the dining hall with the bowl of sausages and mushrooms. He sat it on the lord's table, placing it close to Lord Somerfield. Christian raised his eyes coyly. Somerfield was watching at him, his mouth greasy as he chewed. Christian allowed his eyes to heat and linger for a moment. Then he lowered them and started to back away.

“You, wench,” Somerfield ordered. “Come 'ere.”

It had been five days, and William had gone from being beside himself to resigned calm more times than he could count. Christian had sent him a message two days ago, through a young tanner's apprentice he'd hired to seek

William out in the foothills. Christian had merely written that all was well. He'd gotten a serving position in the castle and was pleased to have the work.

It was a harmless missive that, if caught, would mean little to anyone else, even if it was rare that the serving class could read and write. But Christian's message was clear—he was proceeding as planned. He would not have used the word “pleased” if things were awry. But then again, Christian could merely be trying to keep William from doing anything rash. Which was exactly what William wanted to do.

Christian endangered himself every minute he was in that castle. What William didn't know was how careful Christian was being. He could only hope and pray. Still, he'd agreed to give Christian a week and he forced himself to be true to that. A week and no more. If Christian was not back in two days' time, there would be hell to pay.

Twice, William had ridden Tristan to within sight of the castle, watching for any signs of alarm. There were none. The market traffic rode in and out of the bailey's walls as usual. There were no signs of smoke or increased activity.

By the Virgin, it was the longest, most torturous week of his life. William would much rather roar into battle and take on an army than to wait, helpless. He ached to feel blood on his claws. He was thirsty for it.

It was nearly dark on the fifth day when he saw the tanner's boy approaching the foothills on an ancient donkey. William hastened from his camp to meet him.

“Here, Sir. From the lady.” The boy held out a folded letter. William gave the boy a pence and took it.

From the lady? Was it from Elaine? William hastened to read it.

Beloved,

I wish I could see you. I can picture you waiting to sweep me away, at midnight on your horse, at the mill that lies outside the bailey perhaps. Tonight I will dream on it.

C

William closed his eyes, the missive clenched in his fist. Tonight. Christian had written coyly, but the message was clear. For whatever reason, Christian wanted to leave the castle tonight, and he wanted William to come for him. William did not pray oft, but now he sent forth a most urgent prayer.

Let Christian do nothing too dangerous between now and then. Let him be safe. William would give anything; only let Christian and Elaine be safe.

CHAPTER 15

Christian approached the two heavily-armored guards at the door to Lord Somerfield's tower. His pulse thumped ominously in his chest. Sweat trickled down his back inside the gown. He was not afraid of Lord Somerfield, but he was afraid of the importance of this moment—that he'd finally gotten his chance—and he was anxious to do the job quickly and well and to be away before he was caught.

He *was* starkly afraid of being caught.

But, as Sir Allendale taught him, valor comes not from being unafraid. It comes from the determination to proceed anyway. And Christian was very determined. He'd been granted a rare opportunity to get close to Lord Somerfield. The next hour could decide everything. He would not fail.

The guards looked Christian up and down lewdly, despite the fact that he'd borrowed a cloak from one of the other servants, and it revealed precious little of his shape. One guard made a bawdy allusion to bearded oysters. The other told the first to shut up but grinned lustfully anyway. They didn't search Christian, and when they let him through it was obvious that danger and deceit were the last things on their minds.

Christian's dagger was bound against his inner thigh. He'd been quite anxious about being searched. But he was alone on the stairs leading up to Lord Somerfield's rooms, so he took the risk of reaching up under his gown and removing it, placing the dagger inside of one long sleeve. There. Far better.

His pulse sounded like battle drums in his own ears. Christian continued upwards. He tapped on the door at the top of the stairs and Somerfield bid him enter.

The door opened onto Lord Somerfield's bed chamber and Somerfield was alone. The fire was lit, and he had already mostly disrobed. He wore only a heavy linen shirt and hose. He lounged in a chair by the fire, his legs outspread and parted, like a debauched satyr.

Christian's mouth went dry. The dagger seemed to burn at his wrist. He slipped off his cloak and let it fall by the door.

"Evening, pretty," Somerfield purred. He looked Christian up and down but didn't bother to rise. "You look nervous, wench. A virgin's coyness doesn't suit you."

Christian forced a seductive smile. "'Tis shyness. I only hope I can please you, my lord."

Somerfield grunted. "Come here and take my cock in your mouth. That will please me." He spread his legs a little further and pushed the linen shirt to one side. The outline of his stiffening member was evident in his hose, even though it was nearly overshadowed by his belly.

The lazy swine.

Christian lowered his eyes modestly and bit at his lower lip. "I will, my lord, but may I not first have a kiss?"

He kept his eyes downcast, glad for once, for the easy heating of his cheeks. They were flushed now from the pounding of his blood in fear and, increasingly, anger. But Lord Somerfield didn't know that. After a moment he heaved himself to his feet.

"Want a little courting, 'ey?" Somerfield sounded a little more interested and a little more dangerous.

Christian looked up into Somerfield's eyes, managed not to wince at the reek of him, and then Somerfield grasped him with both hands, pulling him in hard and mashing down his mouth on Christian's.

Christian moaned, an involuntary noise of disgust and surprise, but Somerfield took it as encouragement. His tongue thrust into Christian's mouth. He tasted sour, like the intestines dish smelled, but worse, bitter and stale. His tongue was pointed and poking, like an eel. Christian wrapped his arms around Somerfield's neck and set to work with nimble fingers, untying the sleeve of his gown and slipping out the dagger. Somerfield's hands began to wander upward on Christian's bodice. His "keeping them off his body.breasts" would in no way pass inspection.

Christian broke the kiss. “Touch my cunt,” he said baldly. He tried to look lovestruck and dazed with passion.

Somerfield grunted in approval and attacked Christian’s mouth again. His hands changed course—thank God—and he began to gather the material at Christian’s thighs, pulling up the gown. Christian had to fight not to gag on the man’s tongue.

Wait. Wait.

And then one of Somerfield’s hands was under the gown, groping Christian’s thigh.

“You wear much clothing,” Somerfield complained at finding hose there. Christian barely heard him, his blood was roaring so loudly in his ears.

Wait.

And now both hands were under the gown, under the gown where they would be trapped by the fabric, if only for a moment. One hand slid to Christian’s arse while the other pushed between his legs.

Now.

Christian sensed the moment that Somerfield felt his cock and balls, bound in the bandaging. His eyes flew open, and in that instant Christian did three things. With his left hand he pulled hard against Somerfield’s neck, keeping them locked in the kiss, he turned the right side of his body out slightly and, with his right hand, he thrust the dagger with all his might into Somerfield’s chest, his blade easily finding a path between two ribs.

Somerfield jerked and screamed, his eyes staring with shocked, horrified understanding into Christian’s. But the scream was muffled in Christian’s mouth. Somerfield tried to pull away, but Christian held him firm, both with the hand on his neck and with the dagger impaling his body. The man struggled for what felt like an eternity, but was probably less than a minute. As the life in his eyes began to fade, Christian broke the kiss.

“For Lady Elaine from her brother, Sir William,” he whispered into Somerfield’s face. And he was almost positive the man heard him, just before

his gaze went glassy. Christian felt nothing but an icy rage at the man for having abused those in his charge so completely, rage and a tremendous relief that it was accomplished.

It was done. Somerfield's lifeless body was limp and terribly heavy in Christian's arms. Christian became aware of the blood that still pulsed and oozed, soaking into his gown. He released the dagger and moved to catch the body. Struggling, he dragged it to the bed. He laid it on the floor whilst he turned down the bed linens. He wiped his bloody hands on the sheets where it would not show and then squatted. Panting with exertion, Christian managed to lift the body into the bed and cover it up. He laid the head on a pillow, turned from the door. With any luck, Somerfield would not be discovered till morning.

Christian removed his blood-stained gown. He found a basin of water in the room and washed. He used his gown to wipe the blood off the floor, hoping to delay discovery as long as possible, and then stuffed the gore-covered fabric into a wooden chest. When he was done, he found a fresh shirt of Somerfield's and put it on over his hose. He put back on the borrowed cloak, closing it up to his neck, hiding some specks of crimson that dotted the bottom of the wimple.

He steeled himself for the trip back down the stairs, willing the cold rage to leave his face, trying to replace it with a saucy, sated confidence. He closed his eyes and thought of William, of smiling flirtatiously at William in the firelight. His hands calmed and his face relaxed. He tugged the cloak more tightly about himself and descended.

William had packed up camp as soon as he'd read Christian's letter. He waited for full dark and then rode towards the castle. The path was only dimly illuminated by the quarter moon. He found the mill easily enough by following the stream. It was close to the castle walls but surrounded by woods. He waited, his thoughts bouncing around like a wild bird in a cage.

Christian was leaving the castle early. Perhaps he'd learned something which made it imperative that they move quickly. Perhaps tomorrow. Perhaps

Elaine would be travelling and they could waylay her retinue in the mountains. Perhaps Christian had been discovered and had to flee.

Perhaps, perhaps.

It didn't matter. All William prayed for now was that Christian would get out of the castle safe and be here soon, in his arms. That would do for the moment. Only that. Only let Christian be safe. William didn't know why he felt so anxious, but he did. He prayed that Christian had not done, would not do, anything too foolhardy. But right now the hope felt false.

The night seemed to pass at a leaden pace; it felt like a lifetime before William heard a soft noise from the forest. A dark shadow came down the path to the mill. Christian.

He was dressed in a linen shirt William didn't recognize, his own hose, and his shoes. And he appeared unharmed. William strode to him in three steps and pulled Christian into his arms. William clasped his body tightly, feeling the thudding heart against his own. He buried his face into Christian's neck and smelled sweat—and blood.

“Are you all right?” William asked harshly, pulling back to give Christian's arms and torso a quick inspection.

“Yes, but let's move quickly. I want to get farther from the castle.”

“What's wrong?”

“When we're further away, I beg you.”

William heard the urgency in Christian's voice and he heeded it. He mounted Tristan and pulled Christian up behind him. They made their way through the woods and then back on the path to the foothills.

William looked behind them, but he saw no riders coming from the castle and no signs of alarm.

“Do you think you were followed?” he asked.

Christian glanced back. “I pray not. Ride on.”

They rode as quickly as William could push Tristan with two riders. When the castle had vanished from sight, he spoke again.

“What happened? Tell me.”

Christian had his hands on William’s waist and now he grasped him tighter. “Let’s wait until we’re back at the camp. Better yet, let’s ride on and make camp further up the mountain. You have Livermore?”

“Aye, he’s at the camp with Sir Swiftfoot. But—”

“Please.”

“Are Elaine and the children safe?”

“Yes. They’re safe. I swear it.”

With this, William dropped his questioning, though he was afire to know. Clearly Christian had been found out and had to flee. But there was something more. They rode on for another hour before reaching the camp. Christian jumped down and untied the two horses. They moved on.

“This is far enough,” Christian finally said in a weary voice, another hour up the mountain. They left the path and headed into the woods a ways before stopping. As they tied their horses, William turned to the younger knight.

“By my sword, tell me what happened, Christian. I smell blood on you. Whose is it? Did someone find you out?”

Christian shook his head. “’Tis Lord Somerfield’s blood. He’s dead.”

“What?” William whispered. He felt suddenly weak with fear.

Christian ran a nervous hand through his hair. “I had the opportunity. I was sent to serve him alone in his rooms, so I used my dagger and I killed him. I pray it will be dawn before he is found, but it’s best we get as far from the castle as possible. Perhaps we should ride back to Kendal, or, better yet, south to St. Bees.”

“You....” William could not believe it, neither the fact nor the arrogant disregard of danger implicit in such an action. “You *murdered* Lord Somerfield in his rooms? And they know it was you?”

Christian winced. “They know my face. They do not know my identity. But no, I can never show my face there again. You cannot be seen to travel with me. When you return.”

“What?” William said, still confused. He felt a confused rage at Christian for doing this, for taking William’s revenge into his own hands, for risking his own neck so baldly. And he felt an overwhelming fear for what might have happened. It was the worst, most sickening feeling he’d ever known.

“You could have been killed,” he said in a dead voice. “You should by all rights have been killed, Christian. I can’t—”

Christian grabbed William’s arms and shook him hard. “William, *breathe*. Listen to me. I was not caught and I was not killed. Think on it! You know the only way to free Elaine from Somerfield was his death, and you were unlikely to be able to achieve that, being known, being her brother. There is nothing holding her now. In a few weeks’ time you can go to the castle and tell them you want to take Elaine and the children home to visit your father, and there will be none to oppose it. Elaine’s children are both girls, not Somerfield’s heirs. His family will not try overly hard to keep her. It is *done*.”

William pulled away from Christian stiffly. “You had this planned when you went in. You swore false to me.”

Christian shook his head helplessly. “I thought that if I got the chance I would take it, but I did not truly expect to get the chance. And once I was inside I could see that any other option was hopeless. Elaine was well-guarded. We would never have been able to steal her away. And Somerfield—he would never have fought you in single combat, William. He was too old and too debauched. He *would* have had you killed if you’d challenged him.”

William looked up at the moon, frowning. He didn’t know what to believe. But he couldn’t shake his anger or that blood-curdling, belated terror.

“Let’s keep moving,” he said gruffly, untying Tristan and Sir Swiftfoot.

“Tristan needs rest.”

“The horses and I have done naught but rest for nearly a week,” William said bitterly. “We should travel at night and hole up during the day to avoid being seen. We’ll ride till morning.”

He mounted his horse and turned back towards the mountain path, not waiting to see if Christian would follow. After all, Christian could take care of

himself, could he not? Christian, the Crow, who had gone into the castle and killed Somerfield in his rooms with a lethal sting—all by himself.

“William....” Christian began as William rode away.

William didn’t stop. Behind him, he heard Christian mount and follow.

CHAPTER 16

They travelled to St. Bees, which lay south of Somerfield's castle on the coastline. They travelled at night and hid during the day, camping in the woods.

When they neared the town, they circled around to the south and rode in boldly, looking every inch the noble knights. Christian brought out a blue velvet tunic he'd packed in his saddle bags, his gold spurs, and his half armor. He helped William put on his full tournament dress. They were differentiating themselves from the travelers who had gone through Kendal a few weeks before. They were laying down the approach of Lady Elaine's brother-knight Sir William. They said they'd come from Lancaster, to the south, and were headed to Somerfield's castle.

In St. Bees, the rumors about Lord Somerfield's murder had just arrived and were spreading rampantly. It was said the lord's perversions had claimed him in the end. Apparently, he'd gone too far with a serving wench, and she'd snapped and killed him with a kitchen knife. The rumors varied greatly as to what lascivious acts Somerfield had been trying to commit at the time, and as to where he'd been stuck with the blade. One story said his most personal bits had been carved off and fed to his horse.

The wench had never been caught.

If William wondered at the rumors, why it was said to have been a woman servant and not a man, he didn't mention it. Perhaps he assumed that since so much of the rumors either contradicted each other or were fantastical that part of it was too. Christian was only grateful not to have to lie further.

That night they stayed in an alehouse for the first time since their journey began. William thought it wise to cast a record of their passage through the town, should anyone look for it. Christian bathed in front of the fire while William went out. When he came in later, he was more than a few pints of ale looser than he'd been for days. Christian sat up in bed and made no secret of watching William as he used the tub of water in front of the fireplace.

William had not said more than a dozen words to Christian since they'd left the foothills near the castle, much less touched him.

"I did what I thought I needed to do to protect you," Christian said quietly, as William stood up from his bath. The water rolled down his muscled body, and he looked so fine in the firelight that Christian would have given his soul for one more kiss, one more night of tenderness.

"I know," William said.

"You think I lied to you. But I *did* intend to do the things I said, get information about Elaine's routine. Only when I had the chance at Somerfield, I—"

"I understand it perfectly, Christian."

Christian wasn't sure William did. Because the thing that made sense of it, words like *I love you more than anything I've ever had in my life*, and *I would give anything to keep you safe, to keep you with me* were not things he could say to William while he was being cold and distant.

"Will you ever forgive me?" Christian asked.

William dried off with a cloth and came to bed. He slipped in naked, which was more than fine, because Christian was naked too. Christian rolled onto his side to get closer to him, but William grasped Christian's hands, keeping them off his body.

"I don't need your protecting. If I cannot be your master, I *will* be your equal, Christian," William said in a voice that still tasted of anger.

Christian stared at him blankly. "William, you are far superior to me, as a knight and as a man."

"And yet you kept things from me to 'protect me.'"

"Only because I knew you wouldn't allow me to go into the castle if I admitted to even *thinking* about killing Somerfield!"

William stared into Christian's eyes, his face grim.

Christian frowned and swallowed. “You’re right. ’Tis an ill excuse.” He took a deep breath. “I did withhold things from you. And I swear I’ll never do it again. Only don’t be cold with me. I cannot bear it.”

Christian meant it with all his heart. William’s distance had hurt him as nothing had ever done. He knew he’d damaged William’s pride, stolen his revenge, and had not taken seriously enough his need to be protective of those he cared for. And that had nearly been unforgivable to a man like William.

He waited for William’s verdict, allowing everything to show on his face.

William’s eyes were still grim, but his hold on Christian shifted. He grasped Christian’s wrists hard and pinned them over his head, rolling Christian onto his back and covering him. Christian found himself out of breath as he stared up into William’s relentless eyes. William only stared down, unmoving, even as Christian felt his lover’s cock hardening impressively against his stomach. Christian himself had been hard since he’d watched William in the bath.

Christian bit his lips as desire slammed into him. He could not stop his hips from thrusting upward. But William only lay on him more heavily still.

“If you ever do such a thing again, Christian, I *will* never forgive you.”

“I swear,” Christian promised. And then he added, “I would do anything for you.”

The words were said in lieu of *I love you*, because he was unable to stop himself from saying *something*.

With a sigh of release, William crashed his lips down on Christian’s. And for the first time since he’d passed through the walls of Somerfield’s castle, Christian tasted William’s kiss, felt the possessive press of his body. He moaned as aching need ran straight through the center of his soul, not only for William’s body, but for the return of his love and admiration. He arched up into that sweetness as William ground down.

“Take me,” Christian said.

This time William didn't argue. He used his spit to open Christian up and press himself inside. His thrusts, the grip of his hands, his grim face staring down into Christian's, were all rough and demanding in a way he'd never been before. But even so, he was slow with the breaching, watching Christian closely for signs of pain. That mix of tenderness and aggression inflamed Christian's blood all the more.

When the motion became easy, and they were deep in the throes of it, Christian watched the emotions flicker over William's face.

Mine. Submit. Safe. Last time.

Remember me.

CHAPTER 17

Two weeks after Lord Somerfield's murder, Sir William Corbet rode into Somerfield's castle bailey. He came on his mount, dressed in armor and looking every inch the seasoned warrior. By his side was another knight, dazzling in a royal blue tunic and silver mail, a quiver of arrows on his back. The upper part of his face was covered by the plate of his helmet, and he said nothing, only stood silently with the horses as William went into the castle.

The very next morning the pair rode out again. This time they were accompanied by Lady Elaine, her two young children, the children's nurse, and an older male servant who had begged to go with her.

Christian had been right. The next in succession to the title was a cousin who'd be arriving at the castle in a fortnight with his large family in tow. Lady Elaine had failed in her duty to give the family sons for the line of succession. They seemed relieved to hand her back over to her brother and get rid of her permanently.

Lady Elaine rode next to William at the front of their small procession. Christian, riding behind her, saw her turn her delicate head and *spit* on the ground as they cleared the castle's walls, anger tight in her proudly-set shoulders. He felt a vengeful sense of pride at the gesture and smiled darkly.

They rode only until mid-afternoon before making camp that first day. The children were restless and fussy and Elaine was drooping with weariness. Christian wondered when she'd last had a decent night's rest.

He'd never seen the children's nurse in the castle. And the older male servant he'd glimpsed once or twice, but only from afar. One thing his time in the castle had taught Christian; people saw what they expected to see. He removed his helmet on their ride, as it was a warm day, and he didn't think another thing about it until he was on his knees making the fire at their camp that evening. Lady Elaine stepped up to warm her hands—and suddenly gave a small cry. Christian looked up to find her wide, frightened eyes on his face.

He stood slowly and carefully so as not to alarm her. She continued to stare at him as realization dawned, writ plain on her face. Then her mouth opened and her eyes grew bright with tears. Christian gave her a tiny, courtly bow, not knowing how she would react. Elaine covered her mouth with her hand, breathed a sob, and flew around the fire to throw herself into Christian's arms.

He held her, feeling both embarrassed and deeply moved. His mind went to Ayleth and he was very grateful in that moment to have been able to repay his sister's kindness, even if it was to another woman. William was watching them as he tended the horses, his face pensive.

"Thank you," Elaine whispered into Christian's ear. They were simple words, but the emotion in them was anything but.

"My lady."

Elaine collected herself, wiped at her eyes, and nodded at him. She turned away to see to the children.

William came over. "She knows?" he asked Christian quietly.

"Aye. She recognized me from the castle."

William clapped a hand on Christian's back, his eyes still on Elaine.

"We are much in your debt," William said in a raw voice. It was more of an acknowledgement than Christian had ever expected to hear from William. William's hand fell away and he went back to the horses.

That night, when the children and servants were asleep, William, Christian and Elaine stayed by the fire for a good while, enjoying the silence and the fire's warmth. Elaine had taken a nap and then said very little all evening other than gentle words to the children and their nurse. She stared at the fire now. William studied her face. Her petite features were still as attractive as William remembered, but they'd changed. The laughter and spark, the sweetness, were gone, replaced by a flat affect. Her eyes were haunted by shadows upon shadows, and he had the feeling that if he looked too deeply into them it would break his heart.

He wished, with a surge of impotent anger, that he had his hands around Somerfield's neck right now. But that fare had already been paid.

"Where will you take me?" Elaine asked, looking at William.

William came back from his thoughts with a start. He realized that he'd been so preoccupied with the task of simply getting Elaine from Lord Somerfield's castle that he hadn't given any thought to what would happen next.

"I suppose... home. Father will shelter you and the children now that Lord Somerfield is dead, though it will take him some time to forgive me for leaving without permission."

"No." Elaine eyes as they met William's were filled with rage. "Father sold me to Somerfield when even *I* had heard rumors of the man's cruelty. He assured me they weren't true. I'll never forgive him for that, Will. And I'll never place myself back under his care, where he might force me into another marriage."

William felt the passion behind her words, but he didn't know what to say. As his father's heir, he didn't have lands, or a home, of his own. He served as his father's right hand—or he had until he'd abandoned all that to rescue Elaine.

"Where would you have me take you?" William asked her.

Elaine looked pained. "I would enter a convent if I could. But I'd have to leave the children with someone else. That, I cannot do. I will not blame my sweet babes for their father's sins."

"I'm sure Father would not... if I explained. He'd give you time."

"No! He held my life in my hands once and nearly destroyed me. I won't give him the chance again."

William nodded. In truth, he did not blame Elaine. He himself had been away in battle when she'd been hastily betrothed and wed to Lord Somerfield. He'd not even known of it until he'd come home and found her gone. He'd been angry, but his father had assured him it was for the best. And when the

news had come recently of her abuse, he'd been shocked that his father had only shrugged. *What a man does with his wife is his own affair. She is his wife now, not my daughter, not your sister.*

William had thought otherwise.

“In truth, sister, I have not much love for Father myself. Perhaps I could give my allegiance to another lord who might grant us a small—”

“Marry me,” Christian interrupted. He'd been silent all this while, so much so that William and Elaine had almost forgotten his presence, speaking freely of family matters. But now his voice was firm, and it cut through the night like an arrow shot from his bow.

Elaine and William both stared at him, but Christian's dark eyes, dancing in the firelight, were gently fixed on Elaine.

“Pray forgive me, but I will *never* marry again,” Elaine said with conviction. Her eyes fell modestly to her skirts.

“I swear to you on my vow as a knight,” Christian said, laying his palm on his chest, “That I will never lay a hand on you in anger and never in passion either. You may live chaste in your own rooms, and your children will be well cared for.”

“Christian,” William growled, finding his tongue. By the saints, Christian was serious. William was profoundly surprised but underneath that was something he never thought he'd feel—intense jealousy. Did Christian really want Elaine?

“William, my father said I must wed upon my return. This is the perfect solution. Elaine will have a safe harbor, and you and I—”

“*Christian,*” William warned again, loudly.

Christian bit his lip and fell silent, but he returned William's stare stubbornly.

Elaine was watching them both now, her brow furrowed in confusion. William could feel the sweat pop out on his brow. His extremities suddenly felt numb. He poked at the fire to avoid her gaze even as his face burned.

But Christian—the man could simply not stay silent for long. He went on, his voice low and soothing, as if speaking to a child, but it was strung through with excitement. “I told you of my father’s land in Scotland. If I wed, perhaps he’d allow me to take over the management of it. We could live there, you and I, Elaine and the children.”

“You swore to me you would stop scheming,”

“I swore to you that I would never again hide my plans from you. I’m not hiding them! Think on it! This will allow us to all get what we want.”

William glanced up at Elaine to find her gaze on him from across the fire, questioning and intense. He felt shame surge through him at the idea of Elaine knowing his unnatural desires. What would she think? He dropped his eyes.

“William?” Elaine asked him quietly.

He couldn’t answer her. He sensed Christian stiffen near him on the log. But Christian said nothing.

Finally, Elaine spoke. “When I was living in that castle for six long years, there was only one person who was truly kind to me. Her name was Muriel and she was my lady-in-waiting for a time.”

William raised his eyes to find Elaine looking at him. There was no judgment on her face.

“I loved Muriel and she loved me, even though our relationship was a chaste one. But when my dearest husband saw that I cared for her, that I had one thing in my life that gave me courage and hope, he had her thrown from the top of the ramparts.”

“*Elaine.*”

She shook her head, her face dead of emotion. “If I ever let another person into my heart or my bed—and right now I cannot even imagine it—but *if* I ever did, it would be someone like Muriel.”

William shut his eyes and took a ragged breath. He was reminded of why he’d always loved Elaine. She had such a generosity of mind, was so wise beyond her years and her proscribed station. He should have known; if there

was one person he could count on to stand by him no matter what, it was her. But that did not fully erase his sense of shame.

“You will change your mind,” William insisted softly. “Time heals. Now you say you do not want another husband, but you are young. In a few years you’ll want the warmth of a man in your bed, more babes. Do not decide hastily and trap yourself in a loveless match.”

“No, brother. You are wrong.” Elaine began to undo the laces at the front of her gown.

“You don’t have to prove anything to me,” William said.

Elaine ignored him and, when her bodice was loosened, she stood up and turned her back to them, pushing her gown off her shoulders so that it revealed her back. It was covered with a hideous maze of red and white scars.

Christian cursed under his breath. William gave an involuntary cry, his eyes stinging, his fists clenched painfully tight. “Somerfield had you *scourged*?”

“No. He scourged me himself,” she said quietly. “Part of his bedroom games. It roused him. And when I was bloody and wrecked, he raped me. It happened again and again. He liked to show the power he had over me.” She pulled her gown back up and laced it. When she turned around her face was unmoved. “I swear to you on my ruined virtue, brother. I will take my own life before I let another man touch me.”

William nodded, his tongue thick in his mouth. “And I swear to you, sister, that none ever shall against your wishes. I’m sorry I was not there for you till now. I didn’t know.”

“But can you not see?” Christian said fervently. “We can best protect Elaine if she and I were to wed. She’d have a husband who would never be tempted to her bed. And it would be only natural that, with our union, you pledged alliance to my father. We might all live together and—”

“And act like thieves in our own home? Hide from our own servants?” William demanded roughly.

“Well... we would have to choose servants carefully, but—”

“Lie to your family? Lie to our neighbors?” William insisted.

Christian frowned in frustration, as if he could not understand why William was being so difficult.

“Do you love my brother, Christian?” Elaine broke in.

Silence fell around the campfire. *Don't answer, please don't answer*, William thought. He wasn't sure if he could not bear to hear it for his own sake, or if he could not bear for Elaine to hear it.

“With all my heart,” Christian said quietly. He looked at William, the red blush staining his cheeks.

William groaned and put his head in his hands. Dreamers and schemers! It was impossible. Nothing about it was right, nothing could work. Could Christian not see that? Could he truly be so simple-minded? And there he was, already risking his neck just by speaking the truth to Elaine. It was dangerous! William wanted to rend something with his hands.

“Have you no thought of what we would risk?” William hissed, his words heavy with anger. “What I would be risking for Elaine's sake, for the children's, much less for yours? What we've already done is dangerous enough, but to build a life on it...”

“There is risk. But if we're careful, we will not be found out. No one will question what they see on the surface.”

“But *I* am a man of honor, Christian! I cannot live a life full of lies. I will not!”

Christian looked at him fiercely, anger sparking in those dark eyes. “William, I have no choice but to live a life of lies. If I go home and marry a woman of my father's choosing, I will live a lie. At least I can *choose* the lie and find what happiness I can in the sanctity of my own home.”

William shook his head. “As always, you have pretty words, Crow. But I... I cannot live without my honor.”

William's words were thick with finality. Christian buried his head in his hands, pulling on his spiky locks in frustration. And then, without another word, he rose and ran off into the woods to be alone.

William and Elaine sat for many minutes at the fire in silence. William stared at the flames, angry and riddled with doubt and guilt, feelings he could affix to nothing in particular, only the unfairness of life in general, and the hurt he'd caused Christian, even though he hadn't sought it.

Why had he been born thus? Why had Christian? Why was it that the one person who made him happy, who was brave and true, who made him want to sing love ballads and make of himself a giddy fool, was forbidden to him?

But it was what it was; he could not change it, and he would not waste his breath cursing God like a spoiled child. He rubbed his chin, wiped tiredly at his eyes.

"He's remarkable, your Christian," Elaine said finally. "He killed Somerfield."

"Aye."

"For that alone I should wed him. Do you love him, Will?"

William heaved a sigh. "He's a man."

"'Tis not an answer."

William said nothing.

Elaine wrapped her arms tightly around herself. "All I want is a safe shelter for myself and my children, somewhere I can see them grow unafraid and strong, and where I could have no fear of being bothered myself. I like the idea of Scotland."

"'Tis no place for a lady," William said. "Living so remotely."

"Sounds like heaven. I'm done with dances and courts. I have dreamt of peace and quiet for so long."

Sounds like heaven. For one moment, William's defenses slipped and he could see them there, in some remote manor house surrounded by mountains and woods. Elaine was relaxed and smiling, playing in the yard with the children. And Christian warmed his bed, welcoming him with a smile....

"What good would I be without my honor?" William asked her in despair. "Tell me, my sister, I pray you. Advise me truly."

Elaine thought for a bit. "It was my duty to marry the man my father chose for me—a daughter's duty, a lady's role in life. Sometimes, William, what the world asks of us is wrong. And when it is *that* wrong, there is no honor in obeying it."

"You sound like Christian," William growled. He looked down at his hands, rough and strong. He'd sworn to be loyal and true when he'd become a knight, but to whom did he owe his allegiance now? His father? The King? God? Elaine? Himself? Christian?

"I do love him," William admitted reluctantly. "God help me, I wrestled with the devil himself trying to avoid it."

Elaine smiled at him then, a sweet, sympathetic smile, the first he'd seen on her face since he'd come for her. "Think how different my life might have been had I wed someone like that, while I still had a heart left in me. 'Tis no small thing, Will, to have someone's love."

William nodded.

"Some might say it's worth any risk. Do not discard it recklessly, Brother."

William put another piece of wood on the fire.

CHAPTER 18

Christian had to get away. He was so frustrated he could scream. He could feel the emotion tightening his chest, strangling his lungs, threatening to burst his heart if he did not let it out. But men did not cry, let alone knights. He stumbled on into the dark woods, crashing through them like a wounded boar.

He'd never be able to change William's mind. Damn the man's blasted sense of pride and honor! He'd never yield. No, William would ensure that Christian was sent back to his father's castle, alone, his heart crushed as truly as if it had been ground with a mortar and pestle. And he would never see William again. William would go home to his father and marry some woman, determined to live an honorable life. The thought made Christian wretched with anger, jealousy, and a sinking hopelessness. Such was the price for daring to dream.

He paid little attention to where he was going, only heading directly toward the waxing moon so that he might be able to retrace his steps. He'd just climbed over a fallen tree, and had stopped to rest for a moment on the other side, when he heard a noise, a soft footfall behind him.

"William?" Christian said in surprise, turning.

A sack descended over his head in one swift move and strong arms bound his elbows to his side, locking and squeezing. Christian fought with fear and fury, trying to throw them both back, but to no avail. He writhed, trying to shake his attacker, trying to free his arm enough to reach for his dagger. But the man was strong, whoever he was, and he was prepared for a fight. He dug in and hung on.

And then Christian became aware of a throat-clogging smell within the sack, tasted bitter powder on his tongue. *Poisoned*, was his last, frantic thought as his mouth went numb and his body slack. Darkness slid over his mind like an eclipse over the moon.

When Christian awoke his head was pierced with pain, a sharp throbbing ache that was no doubt the result of whatever powder had been in the sack. He didn't open his eyes nor lick his lips, even though they were cracked and dry and he was desperate to do so. He tried to determine his situation.

He was lying on a cold, stony floor. He thought it must be a castle, perhaps a dungeon. But the air smelled sweet and fresh, and a breeze chilled him. Daylight shone bright against his eyelids but he could not feel its heat on his skin. He was outside, then, in the shade. There was no sound at all. A rope bound his upper arms to his sides and his calves to each other tightly. He tried pushing his limbs outward, to test his bonds. They were tight and sure.

After a moment he opened his eyes.

Sitting no more than a foot away on the ground, watching him, was Malcolm.

Christian released a groan. The desperateness of the thing hit him like a slap in the face. Malcolm had him, had him helpless and far away from any possible source of censure. If Malcolm had followed him all this way....

He would never see William again. No one would ever know what had happened to him.

“Awake at last, darling brother,” Malcolm purred. His face was calm, but his eyes were purely demonic. “’Tis well. I was getting bored.”

Christian looked overhead. He could see the top of stone walls and the midday sky. By the position of the sun, it was just after noon. The drug had kept him unconscious all night and through the morning. And they were in some old ruins. Likely Malcolm had taken him east towards Hadrian's Wall. Ruins littered that area.

Christian would have screamed, but it was likely useless. Chances were high there'd be no one near to hear him, and Malcolm would only gag him with something foul. Christian turned his eyes on his brother.

“How brave of you. You must be proud to have mastered me at last—with rope and drugs. Too bad you could not beat me as a man.”

Malcolm smiled. There was more wolf in it than hound. “I have you at my mercy, brother. I care not how I got you there.”

Christian’s eyes narrowed. “You are pathetic and weak.”

Malcolm shrugged. “We’ll soon see who is pathetic and weak. I followed you. I wanted to make sure you’d never come home.”

“How boring for you. Slinking after us all these weeks.”

Malcolm’s smile was razor sharp. “Not boring at all. I watched you and your Sir William Corbet fornicating in that river, and then writhing in your bedrolls, making the two-backed beast. Foul, brother. So very foul.”

Christian felt his face burn. He would kill Malcolm for those words, were he capable of it.

“I was almost tempted to denounce the pair of you. But... no. ’Tis far better like this. Our family should never have to carry your shame.”

Christian looked up at the blue sky, a cold calm filling him. “Kill me then.”

“Oh, I will!” Malcolm said. “In good time. I know you were in Somerfield’s keep. I know you had something to do with his murder, even if I know not how you accomplished it. Did you seduce a wench and get her to do your bidding? Such a whore, Christian. Truly.”

So Malcolm did not know everything. Really, what did it matter?

He felt Malcolm move closer. His face leaned in, his lumpy countenance blocking the sky. His lanky hair hung down like seaweed. Malcolm studied Christian’s face almost serenely. He drew a finger down Christian’s cheek. Christian turned his head away, shuddering at the touch.

Then he felt Malcolm’s mouth on his cheek in a sexual, open-mouthed kiss, wet and passionate. Christian shut his eyes, forcing himself not to wince.

“No one need ever know,” Malcolm whispered. “Roll onto your back for me, Christian. Spread your thighs whenever I say. Tell me that you want me. Speak well, Brother. Convince me. And maybe I will let you live.”

By the Virgin, Malcolm's voice.... Christian had never heard him sound like that before—soft, pleading, and completely mad. It sent a chill of horror through Christian as he realized there could be worse things than death.

Was this why Malcolm had always hated him? Had he harbored some secret desire all these years? Or was this just a brief fancy caused by whatever was rotting his brain?

Christian turned to look into Malcolm's eyes. They were hopeful, pathetic.

“The only way you will ever touch me, *Brother*, is when you have bound me thus, so tightly that I can do nothing to prevent it. I will never let you take me willingly. I'd sooner cut off your cock than let it near me.”

The door that had been open in Malcolm's eyes slammed shut and his face turned murderous.

“Foolish, foolish choice, Brother,” Malcolm hissed. “Now I am going to fuck you, trussed up like the bitch that you are, and then I'm going to carve you up like mincemeat.”

Christian pressed his lips tightly to hold in his frustration. He looked up at the sky as Malcolm's hand rubbed down his body, over the rope, onto the tunic at his waist, and down to cup him through his hose. Malcolm's hand was hot and sweaty even through the wool.

“You not only desire a man, you add incest?” Christian said, trying to think of anything that would change Malcolm's mind. “Truly, you beg for hell-fire, my brother.”

“Ah, but you shall feel its heat first, sweet Christian. In fact, you'll be there today.”

Malcolm put his hands on Christian's sides and rolled him over like a sack of grain onto his stomach. Dear God, but Malcolm stank—of man's sweat, of his horse's, and of piss. Christian's face rubbed against the unforgiving stones and stung. Malcolm had wrapped the ropes around his arms and chest so tightly that he could scarcely breathe. He felt the hem of his tunic pulled up, felt Malcolm press against his arse through his hose, his cock already hard.

“Whore,” Malcolm whispered in Christian’s ear, panting and aroused. He thrust his member against Christian through two layers of wool.

Christian closed his eyes. He tried to summon up words that would so anger Malcolm that he’d be killed on the spot. If he had to die, he’d rather not face the indignity of rape first, and he did not want to leave this earth remembering Malcolm’s touch instead of that of his beloved William.

But at that thought, all the fight went out of Christian. A numbing despair and sadness burst through his breast in a warm gush, as if his heart had cracked, sending blood flowing, or perhaps it was the tears he’d held inside for so long, breaking free of their dam.

In that moment, Christian accepted death. It was for the best. He didn’t want to return to his father’s castle, and he could not bear to live without William. Better his life end here, now. He had never fit in this world. William had the truth of it. No matter how much Christian tried to twist things, use his cleverness to make things right, in the end he himself was wrong and there was no cure for it.

Just let me die quickly, Christian prayed.

His deepest regret was that Malcolm would get the satisfaction of having killed him, that after so many years of slipping out of his brother’s grasp, Malcolm had won.

CHAPTER 19

Christian did not return. Elaine went to sleep, but William stayed by the fire waiting. He waited all night in vain. When dawn finally offered him a sip of the day's draft of light, he took off into the woods, trying to discern where Christian had gone. He would not have left them thus, with Livermore still tied next to Tristan, with his saddlebags still at the camp. Had he been hurt? Had he fallen into a ravine? Been attacked by beasts?

William was a decent tracker, and he forced himself to stop his headlong rush and use his skills. He took a deep breath and closed his eyes. Then he opened them and began scanning the brush. If he knew Christian, he would have followed a straight line using the moon. He just had to find the line and—

There, a bent pine sapling, a crushed fern. William followed the trail.

It took him half an hour to find the tree that Christian had climbed and then—several sets of footprints, evidence of a struggle. One set of footprints escaped the mess—dragging something heavy through the woods.

The gears in William's mind froze, hanging up on what he was seeing, refusing to accept it. He looked over the ground again and again, searching for any clue that would tell him he was misinterpreting it. He found not a single drop of blood, which was good. But nevertheless, the evidence was plain. One man had jumped another and dragged him away. There was no blood, which meant he'd not been stabbed, but it could have been a blow to the head or a powerful punch to the gut. Whatever the assailant had done, it had not been instantaneous. The victim—Christian—had fought, but not for long.

William felt chilled to the bone. *Christian.*

Someone had dragged him off. Had he already been dead? Or merely wounded? Had it been bandits? A hermit who lived in the woods? A madman? Perhaps it was someone who knew Christian had killed Somerfield and was out for revenge. Had Christian been recognized in the castle? Had they been followed?

No answers were forthcoming, but William began to push through the woods, following the attacker's trail.

It is the gift of fear to be able to focus the mind, clear away the dross. And the fear of losing Christian gave this gift to William. The misty confusion that had lived in his pounding heart for days was at last crystalized until there was only one message, clear and strong.

He had to find Christian, his love, his heart, Sir Christian Brandon.

If only God would allow Christian to live, William swore to Christ, the virgin, and all the saints that he would not let Christian down again. He would never let him out of his sight, never doubt them, would face any risk just to have Christian by his side, even if legions were to come against them.

Malcolm yanked on Christian's hose, frustrated at how difficult they were to shift as Christian lay on his stomach like dead weight.

"Lift!" Malcolm ordered angrily.

Christian didn't move.

"I shall cut them from you," Malcolm warned. "And my hands feel very clumsy today. Your skin will suffer for it."

"Cut then," Christian said flatly. "Cut deep."

Malcolm spat some savory curses. He moved off Christian, no doubt to get his dagger.

That's when Christian heard it, the slow, deliberate song of a long blade as it was pulled from its scabbard.

Time seemed to stop. For a moment, Christian heard only Malcolm's alarmed breathing against utter silence. Then there was a scrabble of feet on rock, and the second, quicker song of sword leaving sheath, the heavy clank as blades met in the air. A sword fight.

Christian managed to roll over even as he tried to push himself back against the wall with his feet, to escape the melee, and rise up to sitting. He

finally got his head raised enough to see the courtyard of the ruins clearly—and saw William, in full armor, helmet down, locked in battle with Malcolm.

Malcolm was not wearing his armor or mail, and he'd been taken by surprise. He was an excellent swordsman, strong and agile, but already William had the advantage. He was furious; Christian could see it in the line of his body and in the aggression in his attack. He was forcing Malcolm back, his blows coming fast, hard, and relentless. Malcolm countered each crushing blow, but he was barely keeping up with them. Both his hands gripped the hilt of his sword, and he stumbled backwards away from William's onslaught, his eyes wide. And then—

A mighty, swinging blow from William's sword pushed Malcolm's blade strongly to the right. Before he could recover, William's sword fell again like the hand of God from Malcolm's left—and severed his head completely from his neck.

Christian was transfixed in disbelief as Malcolm's face, that hateful, angry face that had tormented him since childhood, spun up into the air once, twice, his hair flying behind like a horse's tail, before it landed with a sickening thud on the stone floor of the ruins. A second later, Malcolm's body collapsed in a heap.

Christian stared at it in shock. He felt rather than saw William fall to his knees at his side.

“Christian! Are you all right?” William demanded, ripping off his helmet.

Christian nodded blankly.

William drew a knife and began to work at Christian's bonds, slicing them angrily as if they were deeply offensive, first the ropes at his calves then his arms. The moment Christian was able to tug his arms free, he pushed himself off the ground and threw himself against William, arms wrapping around his shoulders.

“You came for me.”

William gripped him tightly, so tightly his armor bruised Christian's skin, but he didn't care.

“Were you in Hell itself, Christian. I would always come for you.” William’s voice was choked with emotion. “When I saw the tracks in the woods, that he’d dragged you to his horse, I thought.... Thanks be to God that you’re alive.”

Christian held him closer, feeling his passion for this man, for his soul, his being, his body, his heart, overwhelm him. After tasting the bitterness of death, it was a sweet, heady brew. “I love you, William. I know I cannot ask you to be something you detest, no matter how much I want to be with you. But I love you.”

William pulled away so that he could cup Christian’s face and kiss his lips sweetly. “No, you were right. If I left you—if I could even make myself do such a thing—the rest of my life would be a lie. So I guess my honor must be to you and Elaine, and to my own heart. As for the rest, we shall have to put our trust in your stratagems, Crow.”

Christian barked a laugh as something hot moistened his eyes. “I would dream up a million schemes to stay with you.”

William smiled. “Just one good one will do.”

CHAPTER 20

The Scottish do not love the English, that is a fact. And while it is not uncommon for the British monarch to give away bits of their sacred homeland to his favorites, a thing that is not in any way *illegal*, since the king does own quite a lot of Scottish acreage, the Englishmen who move onto such land generally find that they are not welcome with open arms. By half.

And yet. There have been, in the course of time, exceptions. Scots are honest and hard-working, fierce and loyal. And it is in their nature to respect a man, once he has proven that he is the same and not a foppish puppet of King Edward II.

Take, for example, the English who lived at Glen Braemar Castle. Its acres of heavily wooded lands were rich with game. But other than the area right next to the castle itself, no man had ever been persecuted for poaching that land. In fact, Sir Christian Brandon, the lord of the place, was an excellent hunter himself. He took game to the widows in the neighboring village at least once a week, even in the deepest, most snow-covered winter. And he always donated several deer to church festivals.

They say Sir Christian could shoot a deer with his arrows even when they were in full run, even in half light. Come to think on it, perhaps that is why poachers were not a huge problem for Glen Braemar Castle.

Sir Christian's wife, Lady Elaine, tended to the sick and unfortunate. Her compassion was legendary. Once, when she saw a woman in the village with a battered face, she attacked the woman's husband so fiercely, it took both Lady Elaine's husband and her brother, Sir William, to pull her off. It might have ended badly, except the woman stammered that her husband had not touched her and, well, the husband was too cowardly to fight both Sir Christian and Sir William—which was not especially cowardly, given their reputations.

Not long after that, the woman left her husband and went into service at the castle. No one in the village complained. The brutish husband moved away and was never heard from again.

The family became accepted in the community over time, English or not. It was, after all, a boon to have two such fine knights in the area, and they were not selfish with their skills. Sir William taught the local youth at swordplay and Sir Christian taught archery.

When the English attacked in 1301, Sir Christian Brandon and Sir William Corbet fought alongside Sir William Wallace—and acquitted themselves admirably.

And if even that did not cement their acceptance as Scots, because Scots can be *quite* hard-headed, then the two bonny lasses who were the daughters of Lady Elaine, both with long golden hair and blue eyes, who were wooed and wed by local Scottish nobleman, certainly did.

The three of them now rest together in the small graveyard of Glen Braemar Castle. Lady Elaine was the first to go, succumbing to a fever in her fifty-sixth year. Her body had never been strong. Sir Christian and Sir William lived another twenty years, Sir William going first at the ripe age of seventy-three and Sir Christian following on only a month later.

And if there had, on occasion, been a rumor that surfaced now and again, like a piece of flotsam on the wild seas, that handsome Sir William had never wed because he was hopelessly in love with his sister's husband—a tragic, romantic, and shocking tale of the sort young maidens love to whisper—well, no one of consequence had ever taken it very seriously.

May they rest in peace.

THE END

Author Bio

Having been, at various times and under different names, a minister's daughter, a computer programmer, a game designer, the author of paranormal mysteries, a fan fiction writer, an organic farmer, and a profound sleeper, Eli is happily embarking on yet another incarnation as a m/m romance author.

As an avid reader of such, she is tickled pink when an author manages to combine literary merit, vast stores of humor, melting hotness, and eye-dabbing sweetness into one story. She promises to strive to achieve most of that, most of the time. She currently lives on a farm in Pennsylvania with her husband, three bulldogs, three cows and six chickens. All of them (except for the husband) are female, hence explaining the naked men that have taken up residence in her latest fiction writing.

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SEEING LAGOS

By Alessandra Ebulu

Photo Descriptions

Photo 1: An aerial view from a city's bridge. In the background are several high rise buildings, and in the foreground, a multitude of cars are parked in an open space, with African people walking by the area.

Photo 2: A face bright with a smile, deep brown eyes, and a head full of dreads. The man's dark skin, a beautiful contrast to his white teeth set off nicely by his eyes.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

I have no photograph to post, because all I want is a story set in some place that never or rarely appears in M/M Romance. Maybe someplace like Kiribati, or Singapore, or Lithuania, or Botswana. Take your pick, dear author.

I have no preference whatsoever about the content of the story. It can be whatever you want it to be, as long as at least one of the MCs is native to the unusual setting, so we get some insight into the local culture. Everything else is up to you.

Sincerely,

Kathleen

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: holiday, Africa, sweet no sex, mini-travelogue, nervous breakdown recovery

Word count: 6,233

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SEEING LAGOS

By **Alessandra Ebulu**

Dámilólá woke up with a jolt to the screeching sounds of the alarm clock. He buried his head in his pillow, hoping against hope that the act would mute the volume. A minute later, he accepted his fate that he wouldn't be getting any more sleep and pushed off from the bed, until he rested with his thighs curved beneath him.

He blinked owlishly and looked at the clock. Five thirty in the morning. He suppressed a groan, unfolded his legs, and climbed out of the bed. He had an interview for nine, and he was already running late.

With the speed of one accustomed to being late, he rushed through his morning wash, brushed his teeth, and got dressed. He glanced at his wristwatch that now read 5:45 a.m., grabbed his keys and wallet, and ran out of the house. “Bíódún, lock the door,” he shouted to his roommate and jogged to the bus stop.

It was pitch black, and the cold air had his body breaking out in goose pimples. Dámilólá rubbed hard at his chilled arms and took a deep breath.

The harsh glare of an oncoming car's headlights illuminated the area, and he put out his hands to signal to the driver, praying fervently that the lights he saw belonged to a *dánfó*—a commercial bus—and not a privately-owned vehicle. The sooner he left Ìkòròdú, the sooner he would be in Ìkejà, and the sooner he could run his errands at CMS. It was going to be another busy day. He wondered if it was too much to hope for something surprising, relaxing, and out of the ordinary to happen to him today. Something to help him snap out of the rut he was presently in.

The *dánfó* came to a stop in front of him and he hopped inside. The conductor called out in a shrill voice, “Mile twelve, Kétu, one fifty; Ojóta, two hundred; Maryland, two fifty; Yába three hundred. *Mú chángè e dání. Mi ò ní chángè lówó o.*”

Dámilólá rolled his eyes. That was the usual closing phrase uttered by every conductor and cab driver in Lagos. They *never* had any change. If a person was going to Yába and handed a one-thousand-naira note to a driver, that driver would complain, spew out some curses about one's family and, with a lot of grumbling, reluctantly hand over the person's change.

Some drivers were rude enough to ask that a passenger forget about the change because they didn't have any. Yet, if the reverse was the case, the conductor or driver would not leave their change with any passenger. It was just not possible.

Dámilólá took out a two-hundred-naira note from his wallet and handed it to the conductor. All that was left was for him to get some breakfast and some sleep. It would take him about two and a half hours to get to Ojóta, considering the traffic, and there was no way he was going to stay awake for that period of time.

The bus crawled from the Ìkòròdú garage to the Agric bus stop, where it had to stop to load up on more passengers.

Dámilólá noticed a girl with loaves of bread and called, "Bread."

She immediately rushed over with her tray and began to push her wares at him. He decided on eighty-naira bread and seventy-naira *Àkàrà*, along with a sachet of water.

He settled back in his seat, cut off a bit of bread, and placed an *Àkàrà* ball in between the bread. He bit into his food, and his mouth was filled with the delicious taste of bean balls fried in palm oil and spiced with pepper and onions. Dámilólá moaned and polished off the rest of the meal. With a few gulps, he emptied the sachet of its contents. That done, he rested his head against the windowpane and dozed off.

He woke up to a light tapping and opened weary eyes to stare at a fellow passenger who pointed outside. "We're at Ojóta."

Dámilólá mumbled his thanks and alighted from the bus. He joined the crowd of people who were all heading to the *dánfós* that were in a queue. Ìkejà

was a busy part of Lagos. It was an area that housed a lot of companies, so everyone was heading towards the Ìkejà *dánfós*.

There was a lot of pushing and curses, and the stench of the Ojóta waste disposal vans permeated the air. Dámilólá walked around a crippled man begging for alms and called out, “Allen Avenue.”

The conductor for the Allen Avenue *dánfó* waved his hands and pointed at his bus.

Dámilólá glanced at his wristwatch and then hurried onto the bus. He only had fifteen more minutes before the interview was to start. This was the sixth advertising agency he had applied to. The others had informed him that they would get back in touch with him, but never did.

It was a surprise when he received the phone call from S, O & U asking him to come in for an assessment test. It had been a bigger surprise when he was informed that he had passed the assessment test and therefore should come in for an interview.

He had his fingers, toes and even mid-section crossed with the hope that he would finally receive good news and employment with a respected advertising agency.

The level of unemployment in the country was high, and to make matters worse, companies were always requesting employees with “experience”. Any time he saw a vacancy ad in the papers or on the Internet and saw the dreaded tagline “... Years of experience wanted,” he felt the need to slam his fist into something. How the hell was anyone supposed to get any experience if they were not even offered the opportunity to gain the experience in the first place?

“Employ me, so I can gain the bloody experience, damn it,” he always felt like screaming.

Dámilólá took in a deep breath. No need to get all worked up before a major interview. He needed to keep calm. Hopefully, this interview would go well. If it didn't, well, he would have to find something to do. The rent would soon be due, and he needed to give Bíódún his share.

He kept his eyes on the Ìkejà landscape as the driver drove into the heart of Lagos' heartbeat, and in his own heart, he kept a prayer that things would turn out well.

Solá buried his face in his pillows and pressed his hands hard against his ears. When that didn't work, he turned around until he was looking up at the ceiling and released a frustrated shout. The thump-thump sound of the pestle hitting the mortar was grating on his nerves.

It was made especially worse because it was still six thirty in the morning. Nobody deserved to wake up to such a racket. It was completely inhumane. Human beings need sleep. And little children need a balanced meal that would fill them up, give them energy, and provide their bodies with the nutrients for development, not the crap Mrs. Bólújòkó fed the little ones. Someone should set her straight. Solá rose from the bed, yanked on trousers and a shirt, and ran down the stairs. He was just the right person to do that. That woman's ignorance had to be rectified.

Outside the Bólújòkó's house, he could hear the racket even more clearly. Early risers, who were headed to work, didn't even seem to notice. Some were focused on their phones, and others had their ears plugged as they all drifted towards the end of the street where there was a bus stop. They'd probably heard the pounding sounds for so long that they'd gotten used to it.

Solá knocked and heard shuffling sounds as someone approached the door. The door swung open, and Solá glanced down at the little boy. His school uniform had obviously been recently thrown on, and the buttons done up haphazardly.

"Is your mother at home?" Solá asked. It was silly, because they both knew that the boy's mother was around. Who else would be pounding yam so early in the morning?

The boy nodded his head, jabbed a finger behind him, and disappeared into one of the open doors, leaving the front door open for Solá to come in.

Solá made a mental note to tell the boy's mother about the boy's carelessness with security. The world was not so safe that a child should give anybody easy access to his home.

He spent some time glancing around the living room. There was a fourteen-inch television on a wooden cabinet, with a DVD player in the slot beneath. A standing OX fan provided the space with adequate ventilation, and on the walls were framed pictures of people of different ages, probably members of the family. The walls were a pale blue, and the worn curtains were a royal blue that matched the rug that lay in the middle of the room, on which there was a small table that held various remotes and glasses.

After he had spent enough time observing the room, and no one had appeared yet, he called out, "Mrs. Bólújòkó? It's Solá Michael. Solápé's younger brother. I came to talk with you about something."

"Come to the kitchen. My hands are busy at the moment," a female voice called out.

Solá shrugged and followed the pounding sounds to the kitchen.

Mrs. Bólújòkó was a short woman with a slim physique. Her arms, however, were heavily muscled, and she handled the pestle expertly, tossing slices of boiled yam into the mortar and pummeling the pieces into a paste. As he watched, she added some water, turning the mixture with the pestle until the mixture's consistency was acceptable. She scooped it out and dished it into a big cooler.

That done, she straightened up and looked hard at Solá. "Aunty Solápé's younger brother you said? The one visiting her from London?"

You mean her crazy brother who was advised by his shrink to take some time off because he couldn't seem to turn his brain off and would soon suffer from exhaustion? The one who doesn't want to be in this country and simply wants to be back in London with his friends.

Solá kept his thoughts to himself, however, and nodded. "Yes."

"Well then, what can I do for you?" Mrs. Bólújòkó asked and wiped her hands on a clean napkin attached to the *wrapa* round her waist.

Just as Solá opened his mouth to reply, she held up a finger and shouted, “Gbémi, Lékè, come and take your food *o*. It’s already fifteen minutes to seven. You’ll be late.”

An older girl and the little boy who opened the door came running into the kitchen. The girl grabbed the steaming bowl of *Ogbono* soup and carefully carried it out of the kitchen while her younger brother carried a smaller bowl in one hand and two small glasses in the other.

“That’s actually what you can help me with. Mrs. Bólújòkó...”

“Call me Détóún,” she interrupted.

“Détóún. I understand the need to have your kids fed, but at six thirty, I’m still sleeping, and the pounding sounds are too loud. I don’t know if others have mentioned it to you, but I just wanted us to talk about it,” Solá said, watching her eyes.

“Really? I didn’t know that,” Détóún said.

Solá observed that she looked genuinely surprised. Obviously, no one in the neighborhood had come out to mention that her pounding was a nuisance. “Besides, no offence meant, but pounded yam and soup is not the most nutritious meal to serve to young kids at this time of the day.”

Détóún’s eyes hardened slightly. “Are you trying to tell me that I’m not feeding my children properly? *E mà gbà mí?* Have you seen how strong they are?”

Okay. I don’t think my words came out the proper way. She seems very pissed. What does E mà gbà mí mean again? Oh yes! Please save me. Okay, I need to rephrase my words before she starts ranting in Yoruba again.

“I didn’t mean it that way, Détóún. I just meant that pounded yam is a heavy meal. Eating such a meal in the morning will make the kids very tired and they won’t be able to assimilate what they’re being taught in school as well as they should,” Solá backpedaled.

Détóún took in some deep breaths. “But that’s what I’ve been feeding them for so long. And no one has complained. Their grades haven’t turned bad.”

“I’m not saying that they will suddenly start failing. I’m just saying that they won’t perform as well as they should. Just try something different for some months. Try some cereal like Golden Morn or cornflakes. Give them oats, spaghetti, rice, and occasionally boiled yam. It will help.”

Solá held his breath as he watched multiple emotions flash across Détóún’s face as she considered his words. She finally nodded. “All right. I will do as you suggest. Although, what is also helping your case is that my pounding yam disturbs you in the mornings,” she added.

Forty-five minutes later, his stomach full of the pounded yam and *Ogbono* soup that Détóún had insisted he eat, he entered the house. He spotted the note that his sister left on the center table.

I’ve gone to work. Whenever you can, please can you help me out by picking up some clothes and books at CMS? There’s a tailor’s shop just beside the First Bank branch at CMS. Just ask for Adéòtí. Tell her I sent you, and she will hand over the package. I’ve already called her, and she’s expecting you. I really do need them today, but it will be too late for me to pick them up. Take the time to enjoy Lagos a bit while you’re at it.

She’d included a smiley face at the end of the note. Solá shook his head at his sister’s silliness and placed the note in his back pocket. He glanced at the clock hanging on the wall. It now read seven forty-five. There was no need to rush. He would watch some reruns of *Law and Order* and be on his way at about four.

Lagos in the evening was loud. It was like a rock concert, with the screeching and the horns representing instruments, and people’s movements like dancers. The conversations, arguments, and shouts were all lyrics to the song of people who live in and have grown to love the city.

Solá could see it in their eyes, in the jaunty way a majority of them walked. They loved Lagos, every part of it. Their excitement couldn’t be faked.

He'd reconsidered the wisdom of driving around, constantly halting in the middle of the road to ask where the First Bank was located. Besides, with the narrow routes that were all too common, there was a chance that he might have to walk to get to the tailor's shop.

So he'd decided to park his sister's car and asked for directions from a bus driver who pointed out the road he should take. Solá thanked the man and immediately began to walk. He'd been walking now for about ten minutes, and he still hadn't gotten to the place that the driver had informed him was just "round the corner".

The sun was high in the sky, and the heat turned his shirt into a soaked mess that he was sure did not smell anything like it had when he left the house. His throat felt parched as well. Immediately he had the thought, he motioned at a little girl with a bucket of drinks on her head and asked, "Do you have Teem?"

She reached into her bucket, which was still on her head, and brought down a bottle of Teem, the condensation on it indicating the coldness of the drink.

He downed the drink in quick gulps and handed her the money. He raised a hand to shield his eyes from the sun and scanned the area, looking for the familiar white elephant set in a blue background, the logo of First Bank.

Solá caught a glimpse of something blue in the distance and began moving forward, with the hope that he had finally gotten to his destination.

He was so focused on the building that he paid no attention to anything around him, not even the person who bumped into him. There was nothing unusual about the act. CMS was teeming with people, and everybody was in a hurry to get to where they were headed. Bumping into others was inevitable during the ever-present rush hour. Sometimes, he wondered if Lagosians ever went to work. No matter the time of the day, the roads were always busy and traffic congestion was forever a fact.

It took him a while to notice that his shoulders had been relieved of a great weight. By the time his brain processed the information, the young thief had covered quite a distance with Solá's laptop bag in tow.

"Thief! Thief!" he screamed and watched the young crook race away with his bag. He mentally went through the valuables he had kept in the bag: his wallet full of cash and his ATM cards, his external hard drive, some gum, an extra pair of shoes that he planned to have a shoemaker—the local cobbler—to fix for him, and most importantly, his laptop.

Solá debated running after the boy, but the thief had gotten quite a head start and had chosen the most opportune time to carry out the theft. Cars were moving swiftly, and he couldn't start chasing the boy through traffic. None of those who were behind him did anything to help apprehend the thief, either.

Solá chewed his lower lip and contemplated returning home to tell his sister about the theft when someone raced by him, bumping into him in a hurry to get to wherever it was the other person was going. Solá swallowed an expletive. Today was just not his day.

He stooped down to pick up the package of books that had dropped when the pedestrian ran into him, when two sneakered feet walked into his line of vision. Solá's gaze travelled up.

He saw well-worn gray jeans, a T-shirt depicting a beach scene, a face brightened up with a smile, deep brown eyes, and a head full of dreads. The man's dark skin was a beautiful contrast to his white teeth and was set off nicely by his eyes.

Solá was so caught up in the man's gaze that it took him a while to notice that the man had his stolen laptop bag swung across his shoulder.

The stranger stooped down and picked up a copy of Sun Tzu's *Art of War* that had slid away from Solá's reach. He brought the now-torn paperback to Solá and said with a sheepish look, "I'm sorry I ran into you. I was in a hurry to apprehend the thief and it didn't occur to me that at the speed I was running, I would bump into you or damage your books."

The man handed Solá the bag and they both rose to their feet.

Solá couldn't take his eyes away from the thief-catcher. He was particularly fascinated with the way the other man constantly licked his lower lip, all the while keeping his focused brown gaze on Solá.

Solá was just about to ask for a name when someone bumped into him, knocking him against his helper. He felt warm arms hold him gently until someone yelled out, "Disgusting."

The word sent a shock through Solá's system, and he and the other man jumped apart. This was Nigeria. A country that handed out jail terms to homosexuals. This was not a country where a man could admit to be tempted to kiss another man in public. Public Displays of Affection of any kind were frowned upon. A display of homosexual attraction was grounds for a lynching.

"Thank you for the help," Solá murmured and tightened his hand on the strap of his laptop bag. "I'm Solá Michael."

"I'm Dámilólá Adérè mí. And it was no problem," Dámilólá said with a laugh. "Although, I'll advise that now you are in Lagos, it's best you keep your eyes and hands on everything you have on you, and at all times. A man who is lax about his things and his environment is soon parted with his belongings in Lagos. And it's not every time you'll find someone come to your rescue like I did. Quite a lot of people will conclude that since you were stupid enough to be taken advantage of, then you don't deserve to have that item."

"But that's not fair," Solá protested. "Why should I be blamed for getting robbed?"

Dámilólá raised a hand. "Nobody's actually going to blame you for having your pocket picked. They just won't see the sense in running to your aid and helping to apprehend the thief. Everyone's in a hurry to get to their destination. They don't have the sympathy to help someone retrieve an object that he should have kept a careful eye on in the first place. It's just the way Lagosians are." Dámilólá shrugged.

“Lagosians sound a lot like jackasses,” Solá retorted, then inhaled sharply. Maybe he had spoken too harshly. This was the city Dámilólá lived in, and that made him one of the Lagosians being spoken about.

Dámilólá laughed hard. “Well, some of us are,” he admitted with a smile. “But you’ll grow to love us and see the city as beautiful, enchanting, and utterly engaging.”

Solá shook his head. “I do not intend to stay here for long enough to witness all the wonders of Lagos. I have a life to return to, a career. Plus, I do not think Lagos is actually the place for me.”

“Who said anything about months—or even weeks?” Dámilólá asked with an impish grin. “Give me one night. Just a night, and I’ll open your eyes to some of the wonders of this city I call home.”

Solá stared at twinkling brown eyes, the infectious smile, and a lithe body that was presently balanced on its owner’s heels and vibrating with contained energy. At that moment, Dámilólá looked like a big cat about to spring.

Slowly, the lethargy that had been with Solá ever since he got to Lagos began to lift, although he still retained his doubts about Lagos being captivating. The Lagos he knew was filthy, loud, and annoying. He didn’t see how Dámilólá could make him love the place. However, only a fool would turn down an invitation with a beautiful man as his guide, and Solá Michael was not a fool.

He presented his hand to Dámilólá and said, “You have yourself a deal. Enchant me.”

Dámilólá laughed. “Sure. Your first lesson is this. People don’t really shake hands on the streets, unless they’re business associates. Rather, we bump our fists.” Dámilólá indicated that Solá should make a fist, and they bumped fists. “Now, where should we start?” Dámilólá mused and tugged on one of his dreads. His eyes scanned the area.

Solá however remembered his errands. “I need to pick up a dress for my sister. That was where I was heading when we bumped into each other. She said the tailor’s shop is beside the First Bank.”

Dámilólá nodded his head. “I know the place. It’s a good place to start.” He began walking briskly.

Solá followed him, wondering what could be fascinating about a tailor’s shop in Lagos, and why it was a good starting point for getting him to understand Lagosians and fall in love with the city.

Solá dropped the bags containing his sister’s clothes on her bed. When the seamstress’s girls began to pack his sister’s clothes, he had wondered if maybe they had miscalculated. His sister didn’t need so many dresses made from lace—beautiful, coloured, fabric with holes meant to reveal bits of skin that tantalized men’s vision—skirts made from ankárá—the locally made material with its richly-coloured patterns that showcased the artistry and imagination of the men and women who designed them—or jackets that were made of the sophisticated Guinea brocade. What was Solápe doing with so many clothes? Clothes that, more often than not, she rarely wore?

Solá shook his head at the question. Women. He would never understand them or their burning desire to own as many articles of clothing as possible. They were a conundrum in his book.

Dámilólá had laughed at his amazement. Solá, though, hadn’t been offended. His attention was captured by the busyness of the place: little girls rushing about carrying bolts of fabric; older girls threading sewing machines, their legs working the pedal as the machines made stitches on the materials; still-older women with their needles, creating intricate embroidery on ready materials; and finally, the head seamstress who moved around, giving advice and help, until she finally settled at her own sewing machine and continued with her work. It was artistry, speed, organization, a dramatic scene; with the end result, the joy and praises that came from satisfied clients who took their packages and left.

Solá had also spent part of his time staring hard at a little girl of about twelve, whose hands moved steadily and well over the swatches of fabric she was embroidering. She spoke animatedly with the other girls, laughed at their jokes, but like the others, there was no misstep, no mistake in her work. She

went through the swatches quickly, but it did not affect the quality of the work she was creating. The women all worked hard, mastered their craft, enjoyed their work, and were relaxed.

He and Dámilólá had been caught in mild traffic whilst they headed to his sister's house. Dámilólá had expressed disappointment at that but cheered up saying that the traffic they would encounter heading out of Lagos island would make up for it. The scandalized look he had given him made Dámilólá laugh before Dámilólá said, "There's no need to worry. Lagos traffic at its height is one that every Lagosian has to experience. Especially traffic on the Third Mainland Bridge, and you'll soon see why."

Dámilólá's voice from down the stairs jolted him out of the memory. "How long does it take to drop off some bags? Hurry or we'll miss the show."

"I'm coming," Solá replied, shutting his sister's door and hurrying out the door, all the while wondering what show they might be late for. The only thing Dámilólá had seemed excited about him seeing was the Third Mainland traffic. How was that a show?

Third Mainland Bridge at night, in the thickest of traffic, was a sight to behold. Cars covered every inch of the bridge, and with their headlights shining strongly, the bridge was ablaze with colours and cars that looked like tiny ants moving slowly. The lights reflected on the ocean, multi-coloured flashes dancing on the surface of the water. It called to him, entranced him.

The cool air breezed into the car, cooling them off.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?" Dámilólá asked, grinning brightly. "This is how a lot of us relax on weeknights. Seeing this, listening to music and being tempted to jump into the ocean that calls to us to forget our worries and sorrows."

Solá shook his head. "I have no plans to jump into any water, thank you very much. I happen to value my life a lot."

"Just because you feel the urge doesn't mean you should give into it. It's enough to feel the call and know that you're one with nature."

At his disbelieving look, Dámilólá cranked up the volume, and the voice of the radio presenter filled the car. Solá, though, was focused on where else Dámilólá wanted to take him. He hoped it didn't involve jumping onto the beach under some misguided notion that it was a way to connect with nature's force.

"We'll soon get there," Dámilólá said, interrupting his thought process.

"Where's there? And what exactly are we going to do there?" Solá asked.

Dámilólá smiled. "*There is Yába. And we're going to watch a rendition of Olá Rótímí's *Our Husband Has Gone Mad Again*, whilst devouring a plate of hot àmàlà and àbùlà soup and drinking gourds of palm wine. It's an experience I want you to have.*"

Lagosians definitely knew how to enjoy themselves. That was the thought that went through Solá's mind as he cut a bit of *Àmàlà*—a thick paste made from yam flour and hot water—and mixed it with hot *Àbùlà* soup—a mix of *Gbègìrì* and *Ewédú* soup. He tossed it into his mouth, followed by bits of fish and meat. He took the meal with copious amounts of palm wine that left him feeling hazy.

This feeling contributed to his enjoyment of the play, and he laughed hard with the audience at the hilarity of Lójokà-Brown and the way the return of his American wife, Lisa, threw his entire household into pandemonium, causing him to say good-bye to his political career and his traditionally-married wives.

By the time the actors and actresses gave their final bow, Solá found himself on his feet, clapping along with the rest of the crowd. Hell, he wished he could contact the playwright so he could congratulate Olá Rótímí on a story well written.

"I can see you're having fun," Dámilólá breathed into his ear. "But the night is just beginning. Next stop is Ozone cinema. Let's watch a movie."

Amidst Solá's protests that they just finished seeing a play, Dámilólá dragged him to the cinema, where he paid for both their tickets. Soon they

were seated in the back of the hall, waiting for the movie to commence. As they waited, Solá looked around.

People had big bags of popcorn and drinks and held on tight to their movie partners. There was a hushed reverence as the movie started, and the hush continued till the end of the movie, letting up for a couple of times when the audience was sympathetic to the characters on screen. The audience laughed when the scene was funny, shouted at the action scenes, and remained quiet otherwise.

Solá briefly let his eyes sweep across the room. Everyone in that room, man, woman and child stared intently at the screen, completely captivated by the plot, and Solá realized that in Lagos, the cinema was almost a religious experience. Be it a stage drama or people on screen, Lagosians liked a good story.

“Next stop is Ìkejà. You need to see how we move, and our clubs,” Dámilólá whispered in his ears as the credits flashed on the screen.

The cool air on his ears caused Solá to shiver slightly. He turned to Dámilólá. “I’ve been to Ìkejà before. There were no clubs there.”

Dámilólá grinned. “Of course there weren’t clubs at that time. Ìkejà is a corporate area. Offices are a dozen a mile there. What you saw was serious Ìkejà in the daylight. I want to show you Ìkejà at night. The chameleon that changes its appearance to suit the environment. That’s Ìkejà for you. It’s the perfect representation of the average Lagosian spirit. We work hard, but when work is over, we’re quite capable of transforming into party animals who want to relax, with as minimal effort as possible.”

They’d been to three clubs already, all within a time frame of four hours, and there were three things the clubs all had in common. The lack of lights, the music of Nigerian stars like Iyanya, Terry G, Timaya, Psquare, Wizkid, et cetera, and the throngs of bodies pressed closely to each other. Bodies that moved sinuously to the music.

Alcohol—beer, spirits, and wine—flowed freely, and everybody in the clubs had that half-dazed look of the drunk. Men ground against each other, women made out with women, and heterosexuals fucked in the corners all over the room. Nobody made a fuss. The haze that had descended on the clubs made everything seem normal. Couples that would have otherwise hidden during the day came out freely at night. It was like the entire city let down its hair and was more receptive.

At the moment, Dámilólá was grinding against him to the hard rhythm of Timaya’s “Málonògèdì”. He had his ass placed just in the right place in front of Solá’s jeans.

Solá tried various images to get out of thinking of his companion’s ass, but Dámilólá spun around and covered Solá’s lips with his. Before Solá could moan, Dámilólá’s tongue had gained entry into his mouth and began to slide against his tongue. Solá’s hands drifted to Dámilólá’s hips, bringing him closer, as they ground together to the beat of Timaya’s song until it ended, and both their jeans were soaked.

The switch to Psquare’s more upbeat “Alingo” had Solá jerking back in panic. What had he done? He hadn’t even confirmed if Dámilólá was okay with it, before he had grabbed the other man’s hips. The amused look in Dámilólá’s eyes reassured him somewhat, though.

They walked in silence to the car, the reverberating beat of the songs playing in the club still reaching them at the car park. Dámilólá leaned his folded arms on the top of the car and asked, “So what do you think of my city?”

“It’s beautiful. I can see why you like it,” Solá replied honestly, his mind flashing back to the sights of Lagos. He smiled as he remembered a little girl they had come across, dancing in front of her mother’s shop. They had caught sight of the girl at a traffic point, and it had been entertaining watching her move and grow more confident as people congratulated her skill.

“That’s just a little bit of Lagos. I wish I had the time to show you more. Show you the great bargains you can get at Balogun market, watch the carvers at Lekki, dance with the musicians at Surulere, eat the *mallam’s Mishai*—a

breakfast of bread and fried eggs with tomatoes, peppers, onions, garlic and seasoning—at Agege. I wish you could see the Eko festival with the canoes coursing across the ocean or the Eyo festival with the masquerades. I wish I could show you Oshodi and where you can get designer knockoffs at Abé e Bridge,” Dámilólá’s eyes flashed. “I wish I could show you so much.”

“Well, you still can,” Solá smiled. “I’m not leaving yet, and I’m sure there’s ample time for you to show me everything. And when I do return to Lexington, you can come visit any time you’re around, so I too can show you my own home, the wonders that await at every corner.”

Dámilólá’s grin was wide. “You’ve got yourself a deal. And I might just take you up on that offer sooner than you expect. I’m processing my Master’s application into the University of Leeds. If it does go through, you can return the favour.” He looked at the rising sun, looked down at the car timer that read 6:05 a.m. and said, “Time for you to get a taste of the *Mishai* and get some shut eye. We have more wonders to see today and more living to do in the city that never sleeps.”

THE END

Author Bio

For as long as she can remember, Alessandra Ebulu has always had her nose buried in a book. The characters appeal to her, and it is not uncommon to find her talking to the various characters in her head—both the ones she has read about and the ones she has created. When not reading or writing, Alessandra can be found watching movies, sitting in front of her laptop (watching animes, reading mangas, or surfing the Internet), or listening to all the genres of music that make her life complete.

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MAKING IT HAPPEN

By S.J. Eller

Photo Description

A black-and-white photo displays two young men. One of the men is standing, holding his shirt up to expose a toned chest. His “artistically” ripped jeans are opened, and the second man kneels in front of him, his hands reaching to pull the pants down. He too is toned, his hair cut close to the head and some scruff lining his jaw. He looks up at his companion who is holding the back of his head, anticipation palpable from beyond the screen.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

We’ve been best friends forever, and I feel like I’ve loved him for just as long. He told me he’s leaving because he’s afraid he’s holding me back from finding my true love—how can I convince him that I already have?

Thank you for telling our story,

Laura

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: farmer, college, established couple, family, grief, reunited, tear jerker, a dab of wit and a touch of humor (to make the world go ’round)

Content warnings: brief mention of past animal abuse (not by the MCs—and one of them puts a stop to it ASAP), death of a secondary character

Word count: 13,320

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Dedication

To the LHNB team for all your hard work and to Laura for providing such a lovely prompt.

MAKING IT HAPPEN

By **S.J. Eller**

PART I

Garrett Delroy had never bought into the whole romantic notion of loving someone enough to “let them go and see what happens.” To him, waiting around to see if someone comes back and then suddenly knowing it’s “meant to be” was always just a load of bullshit—until he started kissing his best friend of twelve years.

Liam Johnson was the exact opposite of him in every aspect. Where Garrett had dark brown hair that he kept close-cropped, and a face that spoke to the fact that he always woke up too late to shave in the mornings, Liam had blond hair that curled around his ears and a smooth face. When they held hands, Garrett’s were rough from work and latched tightly around Liam’s, soft in his clasp. Their skin contrasted just enough to make the connection of their fingers stand out—Garrett’s body tanned and lined from the early days and late nights on the farm, whereas Liam was sun-kissed, but in the way that a hard-working athlete got from hours of practice outside. Liam was darker in the areas his football uniform didn’t cover—his skin an odd gallery of light and dark, rough and soft.

The starkest difference, though, was in their personalities. Garrett had always admired Liam, who seemed to never be deterred by life’s little roadblocks. Liam had aspirations that reminded Garrett of his four-year-old cousins, determined to accomplish what they wanted, even if being Santa Claus when they got old enough wasn’t exactly plausible.

Liam was going to go to school for physics and, as Garrett liked to tell him, “become a certified smartass.” Garrett, on the other hand, knew that while Liam’s future was bright and big, that he himself belonged on his papa’s farm, working in the fields just as he was raised to do.

Therein lay the problem and the point where that stupid romantic notion came into play. Garrett did love Liam—enough to let him go.

“What do you want to be when you grow up?” Liam had asked Garrett a few summers back.

At the time, they were fifteen years old and Garrett already thought of himself as grown up. He didn't see many little kids working from five a.m. 'til school and then five p.m. 'til eight p.m. on their father's farm, and he figured that had to count for something.

“I want to be... a cowboy.”

Liam had laughed lightly at his response but smiled and nodded like it was the most natural thing in the world to want to be something so silly.

“Well, Cowboy, I want to be a physicist.” Liam went on to tell Garrett all about his dreams of teaching physics and doing all these crazy experiments. Garrett couldn't even begin to put into pictures the words Liam had said. It was admirable, and Garrett would do what he always did for Liam—make sure all his dreams became reality, no matter how long or hard that task may be.

This was also the start of a new nickname that earned Garrett some pretty interesting looks from his mother. After all, while Garrett was certainly a strong farm boy, hearing him called “Cowboy” had to have been a little strange, given that the most contact he'd had with the cows was to milk them, and that he had been afraid of horses since he was a little boy.

Garrett was just glad she wasn't around to hear Liam moaning the nickname when Garrett blew him behind the barn later that night and many more nights to follow.

For years, Garrett listened to Liam talk about his hopes and dreams. Sometimes they would talk about getting an apartment together just a few blocks from the University of Colorado, Liam's dream school.

Garrett never had the heart to tell Liam that while that all sounded wonderful, he doubted he'd actually be there, or that he wasn't so sure about going to college after high school. Garrett always preferred the farm life and working with his hands. He did okay in school, but he'd rather be working in the fields, making his papa proud. There was something magical about watching crops grow after putting so much time and effort into them, and he likened it to how Liam felt when he received his grades and found out that, *yes, of course*, he was on the honor roll again. Garrett knew that *that* life just wasn't for him; it wasn't where his heart was.

Unfortunately, Garrett never actually *had* to tell him. They were sixteen when Garrett's father had his first stroke, a particularly bad one with several smaller ones to follow.

Liam's father worked with Garrett's mom at the local bank, and when Olivia had gotten the call and rushed to the hospital, she had asked Mr. Johnson to pick up Garrett from school.

As usual, Liam was at Garrett's side when Mr. Johnson came to the office to get Garrett. Together, they traveled to the hospital, and Garrett was pretty sure he shook the entire way, partly out of fear and partly from holding back the tears that threatened to fall.

Liam's hand stayed tightly wrapped around his throughout the entire day, even when Garrett was finally able to go in and see his father.

Later that night, when they went back to Liam's house, Liam held him, curled tightly in the twin bed, while he cried. It was the first time in Garrett's life that he had ever felt so completely weak, powerless against the cruel world surrounding him.

As time went on, it became apparent that his father would never regain complete control of his muscles, and Garrett spent longer days and nights on the farm doing the work that his father had once done so easily.

They didn't talk about that imaginary apartment near campus again after that.

The thing about Liam that had always attracted Garrett to him was his tenacity. He never gave up, and, in a way, that reminded Garrett of his own father—he was stubborn as hell and sometimes really unpredictable.

There was a time in middle school when they had been “helping” his father paint the barn. In his father's words, though, they were “creating a holy-hell mess” and “Dammit boys, unless your face is a piece of the barn, *stop painting it.*”

Liam viewed Tucker Delroy much as his own father, and like the little devil he was at thirteen years old, he actually went up to Garrett's father and said, “Hey Mr. Delroy, can you help me pick this up?” He was referring to the bucket of paint and the nearly empty tray next to it. And then, because Liam was *really* a little devil, he slapped a shit-ton of bright red paint across Garrett's father's face when he bent down to pick it up.

It turned out to be an all-out paint war that Garrett's mom was very unhappy about, and because Liam was so much a part of their family by then, he even had chores to do to make up for the red stains that were never going to come out of their clothes.

Another time, still during that middle school “little devil” phase, their science teacher, Mr. Filmore, thought it would be oh-so-hilarious to joke about dissecting a cat. He went so far as to bring in an actual, live barn cat.

While the joke wasn't funny at all and neither was what happened directly after, some parts of the incident made him chuckle when he thought back on it.

That cat, old with patchy black fur and a piercing gaze, seemed like she would've been snappy or had some kind of bad-cat-attitude issues. Instead, she curled comfortably in Mr. Filmore's hands, purring when the teacher rubbed behind her ear.

Somehow, in the midst of the completely ridiculous situation, Mr. "I'm going to scratch your ears, pretty kitty" Filmore turned and, after setting the cat down, literally kicked her, and she flew across the room into the paint chipped wall.

All the students sat in shock—well, all but one. Liam had turned red instantly, his face flaring with an anger that Garrett had never seen before nor wanted to see again.

Liam got up from his desk at the front of the room, walked directly up to Mr. Filmore, and kicked him *hard*, square in the back of his leg. "How do you like being kicked, huh? Not so much, do ya?" Liam had said in a voice that was oddly calm, given the stare he was giving their teacher. (This is the part that made Garrett chuckle, seeing Liam go right up there and tell that teacher just how little he appreciated his assholeness and dish it out as good as Mr. Filmore gave that poor cat.)

Liam was taken to the principal's office after that, and the whole class sat in a silence that was completely uncharacteristic of a middle school classroom.

As it was, Liam wasn't in the office for long. When Garrett asked what had happened, Liam explained that when Liam's mother, a force to be reckoned with and a respected county judge, came into the office, she told both Mr. Filmore and the principal just how much *she* appreciated Mr. Filmore's grotesque display of inhumanity. Liam had said that he was pretty sure she would've done more than kick Mr. Filmore if given the chance and, instead of having to apologize for the already blooming bruise on Mr. Filmore's calf, Mr. Filmore had to apologize to Liam, and then the entire class, for his actions.

The look on Mr. Filmore's face throughout the entire incident made it clear that he was glad parent-teacher conferences weren't required, and he barely looked Liam in the face after that.

With all their history together, it should've made sense to Garrett that Liam wasn't going to just let Garrett not fill out a few college applications.

"No pressure," Liam had said, with that stupidly handsome smile on his face.

"Liam, you know I'm not going to any damn college." Garrett's voice had a slight southern twang to it; one that just curled around the edges of his words; one that Liam claimed was like melted butter (which, *yuck*, Garrett wasn't so sure how he felt about that description).

"For me?" That smile, and those bright-blue eyes that did the wounded puppy look so well, caused Garrett's resistance to fall. They both knew that anything that came of these applications wouldn't actually matter, but to Liam, it was the principle of the whole thing or some other weird Liam-like-thing that meant something to him.

"Fine. For you." And for the blowjobs that Liam promised would come that night.

Garrett ended up applying to two schools, both within a thirty-minute drive from his home.

Liam made him promise that they'd open them together when the letters arrived. Liam had made it sound like it'd be some fun bonding experience and not the anxious torture Garrett imagined it would be.

Liam's stack piled high and was obviously much more substantial than Garrett's was, and the thick envelopes spoke volumes for Liam and his achievements. As Garrett predicted, and would always tell Liam, he was too good for any of them to pass him up.

Garrett was accepted to the community college, a point that excited Liam and Garrett's mother much more than it excited him.

There was something missing, though, something that seemed off and should've been like bright red warning flags to Garrett the minute he noticed.

"Where's the letter from University of Colorado?"

The look Liam gave him was like that of an unsure child, and it looked odd on such a grown-up face. "It hasn't come yet."

Liam was never good at lying, and Garrett didn't understand why he would lie unless he was ashamed or something silly, and so completely Liam-ish, like that. He thought maybe Liam was rejected and didn't want Garrett to know that he blew it, his dream school.

The next day, when they ate at Liam's house for dinner, Garrett learned otherwise.

He was sure he wasn't supposed to hear the raised and sharp tones of Liam's father yelling at his son, something that had become a foreign concept since Liam had grown out of his "little devil" phase.

He tried not to listen when he let himself into the house, but it was just one of those things he couldn't help.

"Liam, you are not turning this down. What the hell has gotten into you?" Mr. Johnson sounded tired, like he was fighting a battle he'd fought before.

"Nothing, Dad. I just don't want to go there anymore." Liam, on the other hand, sounded completely cool and calm, rehearsed even.

"*Liam*," the way Mr. Johnson spoke his name was like venom, "What are you afraid of, huh? You've always wanted to go to Colorado. There was never another school for you and now suddenly 'you don't want to go'? I don't buy it."

Mr. Johnson left the kitchen and went directly up the stairs, clearly angry and likely not done with the conversation.

Liam was leaning, arms pressed up against the counter, hair in his face and covering his eyes when Garrett walked in.

Liam's eyes were a crystal color, bright from tears that left his eyes rimmed in a deep red.

"I thought you didn't get the letter yet..."

"It came in the mail last week," Liam sniffed, a sound that Garrett wasn't used to hearing from his normally poised lover.

"And you got in? That's *great*, Liam."

"No. I'm not going, Garrett. I don't want to go."

Garrett probably looked as confused as Liam's father had felt, totally perplexed by the thought of Liam ever not wanting to go to the University of Colorado.

"Why not?"

Garrett stepped forward, closing his arms around Liam in a hug. Liam melted against him, the tension from his shoulders noticeably dissipating slowly.

"I can't leave you, Garrett. You need me."

It was in that moment that everything Garrett had heard about love suddenly made sense. They had never said the "L" word to each other, never actually had to, but Garrett knew that Liam loved him just as much as he loved Liam. He remembered hearing from the girls at school, all this stupid bullshit about how romantic it was to love someone enough to let them go, and up until now that had been *all* it was, bullshit.

Garrett said nothing as Liam rested against him, just tightening his arms around Liam's broad shoulders as if Liam was going to disappear then and there, and probably partly because Garrett knew what he had to do. If he was the reason Liam wasn't going to his dream school, wasn't going to

have all his hopes and desires come true, then he was going to have to take himself out of that equation and hope for the best. If he was going to do what he had promised himself and Liam he always would do—give him everything he could—he was going to have to let Liam go.

Dinner that night was a lot like sitting in a car that's stuck in the middle of train tracks, and all Garrett could do was listen to the loud whistle of the oncoming train approaching closer and closer to him. The feeling of dread settled deep in his gut, twisting his insides into some sick knot that he couldn't seem to unravel.

Any other day, Liam would've noticed his lack of appetite, or the way that he picked at the lasagna on his plate as if it wasn't his favorite food. Instead, Liam was busy pretending not to be affected by his father's chilly exterior, while Mr. Johnson was just trying to get through the meal without touching the topic of Colorado.

Liam's mother tried to make small talk, a stilted attempt that Garrett appreciated. It went without saying that she agreed with her husband when it came to Colorado and college, but she'd never actually tell Liam what he should or shouldn't do. Liam had gotten his stubbornness from his father, but he'd gotten his independence and determination from his mother, and Garrett had a feeling she knew that once Liam made up his mind, it would be *nearly* impossible to tell him otherwise.

Garrett's mom had once told him, "It's best to let you boys boil on your own. You'll either eventually realize that that thick skull of yours got in the way, or you'll fall. In which case, as your mother, I'll be there to pick you up... as long as you admit that mother knows best." He would bet that with the tight-knit friendship Mrs. Johnson had with Garrett's mom, she operated under similar principles.

When Liam seemed unresponsive to his mother's attempt at breaking the tension that surrounded the small table, she turned to Garrett, her lips tight in an almost pained, thin smile.

“So Garrett, how about you? Any plans for college?”

Garrett knew that she had likely talked with his mom, who probably conveyed the “oh so exciting news” that Garrett was accepted into the local college.

“No, ma’am.” The slight twang in his voice curled around the letters as he tried to bite down the still painful mess sitting idly in his gut. “I’m going to stay and help Papa with the land. The way I see it, I’m a born-and-bred farm boy. I think I came out of the womb with a farmer’s tan.”

Both Liam and his father shook their heads while Mrs. Johnson let out a soft laugh in response. She had the look of a delicate woman, though those who knew her understood that she was anything but. Her calm expressions gave nothing away, an asset Garrett was sure she found helpful in the courtroom. Her hair was the same shade of blonde as Liam’s, bright and with a slight curl that framed her face. Even in her mid-forties, she had a sense of youth and vibrancy that Garrett knew she had passed down to her son.

“Well, your mother tells me you got into the state school. Sounds like a wonderful opportunity,” she replied. And, *ah*, there was that damned determination again.

She, thankfully, let it drop after that, and went on to other topics. When dinner was finally finished, Garrett realized that he had hardly even touched his food, and while Liam may have been too out-of-it to notice, his mother gave Garrett a look of concern, but said nothing.

They helped clear the table and clean the dishes before being excused. Garrett thanked them for the dinner, and lied, saying that it was great. “The best, as always, Mrs. Johnson.” He couldn’t actually remember even tasting anything but a sense of dread.

Liam’s bed was too small for the two of them, both with their broad shoulders and muscular builds—Garrett’s from his work on the farm and

Liam's from football season, when he played for the high of running down the field and dodging bodies that came his way.

Still, they made it work, their legs tangled together, bare skin touching bare skin, as they lay naked on top of the baby-blue sheets, Garrett's feet hanging off the end and occasionally kicking the desk that sat just beside the bed. "Shh, you noisy asshole." There was no sense of venom in Liam's tone as he tried to further wrap his legs between Garrett's, "My mom's going to think you're trying to learn how to juggle again."

Liam's light, playful nature nearly made Garrett forget all about his choice and how he was going to have to break-up with the only person he'd ever had eyes for. *Nearly*.

"Sorry," Garrett couldn't bring himself to bite back with another joke as usual. This time, unlike at dinner, Liam was undistracted and caught on, his eyes softening with the same concern Garrett had seen in his mother's earlier that night.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing, baby. Nothing at all." Liam smiled at the name. He'd once told Garrett that hearing him call him "baby" made him melt like a puddle of goo, which Garrett thought sounded pretty shitty, not to mention sticky, and had said as much, but now he just wanted to make Liam feel good and to feel good himself while he still could.

He was a selfish bastard in that regard, wanting to get one last taste before he decided to gamble—with their relationship as the stake.

Garrett never knew if Liam actually believed him when he had said "nothing". He didn't give him much of a chance to analyze the words, to pull apart the lies that were buried just beneath the surface of his words. Instead, he untangled himself from Liam just long enough to crawl down the other boy's body.

He'd long ago memorized all the curves, all the little things that made Liam so perfect and right for him. He knew that when he kissed Liam just

there, right above his navel, the younger boy would always suck in his breath and shudder when he finally released it, trying to force himself to be in some sort of control. Garrett knew that if he licked at the small spot right in the curve of Liam's left thigh, Liam would spread his legs wider, open himself to Garrett, allow himself to be swallowed whole.

Garrett had once thought that this, licking at Liam's weeping cock, tasting the pearl of pre-come that dripped from its tip, would be awkward, too bizarre for him to ever actually do. But Liam had been patient, showed him how he liked it, using his hands to aid the rise and fall of Garrett's head. Liam had taught him to cover his teeth and hadn't scolded Garrett when he occasionally forgot in the heat of the moment, eager to please and to taste.

He licked at the underside of his lover's cock, rolling the heavy balls in his hands and letting Liam thrust in a slow, quiet rhythm, into the back of his throat. Fingers grasped at his scalp, brushing against smooth, short-cut hair.

The rhythm stuttered, faltered slightly, and two sharp thrusts punctuated the change. Hands pulled him up, lifting him to meet Liam in a heated kiss, his lips a deep red from where they'd been wrapped tightly around Liam's erection.

"You gonna ride me or what, Cowboy?"

They moved together, Garrett spreading the lube across Liam's cock while Liam scissored his fingers inside Garrett, their moans cut off between mouths and kisses. They hadn't used condoms since the year before when Liam had driven them to a small clinic on the outside of the nearest city to get tested. It was a freedom and closeness Garrett loved, feeling Liam literally inside him, no barriers holding them back.

Finally, when Garrett couldn't take it anymore, he lowered himself over Liam, his knees shaking where they pressed against Liam's sides, taking Liam in for what might be the last time in a long while.

He refused to think of that now though, not with his best friend, his goddamn *lover* inside him, their bodies thrusting together in the quiet room, the sound of their skin meeting, their spit-slicked kisses, and desperate, throaty moans the only noises breaking the air.

It always felt so good, so new and right when Liam came inside him, his hand pumping Garrett to completion, and his soft voice telling him how good, how wonderful he was.

He collapsed against Liam's chest, sweat and come mingling, as he panted heavily and closed his eyes tight. He didn't feel so wonderful, not with what he was about to do.

The first time Garrett had met Liam wasn't the most poetic. They were both just little kids, just barely reaching their parents' waists. It was a hot day in the middle of July, and the small park had been thriving with life. At least a dozen of the bank's employees had brought their families to the annual summer picnic. Garrett had been nervous, much shyer than he was now.

His mother had just started working at the bank a few months prior and seemed so excited to introduce her own little family to her co-workers. She'd always been a woman proud of her independence but also very proud of the family she possessed.

Liam was actually bigger than him back then, just an inch or two taller and probably ten pounds heavier.

"Hello, Olivia," one of the men had said, turning to Garrett's mother with a bright smile on his face and his arm wrapped around his wife.

"Ben!" Garrett's mother hugged the man quickly, turning to her own husband, who looked out of place in a social situation that involved so many people and so few farm animals.

"Ben, this is my husband, Tucker, and our son, Garrett."

Garrett had been just barely paying attention to the exchange, his eyes focused instead on the boy in front of him who, for some reason, stared right back at him as if they were playing some silly game of “you-better-not-blink-first”.

“Liam, why don’t you go show Garrett around. Introduce him to some of the other children.”

Liam never actually did introduce him to any of the other children. They somehow managed to get into a fight over who would push who on the old, rickety swings, worn down from years of use and rust. Garrett had, in mock defeat, allowed Liam to climb aboard and quietly told him to brace himself. Of course, never one to give in, instead of pushing Liam forward, into the sea-breezed air, he pushed him off the swing and face first into the woodchips at their feet.

It was pretty much a big, ridiculous mess, and Garrett’s mother had pulled him aside, her eyes full of disapproval. “Garrett Quincy Delroy, what on earth has gotten into you?”

He wanted to tell his mother how mean Liam had been, how damn demanding (Garrett would come to find out that some things would never change). She, of course, would have none of it, and before he could get too much into his story of why he should’ve been the one on the swing, because, *yes, it was his turn*, she did that weird mom thing, where she looked him right in the eye, and the look alone spoke more than any words ever could.

“Now, I did not raise you to be a coward. You go over there, and you apologize to him. Oh, and tell him that you would love to go over to his house for a play date next Tuesday.”

His mom had been right, as always. He had been a coward back then, and there was no way he would allow himself to be one now.

The days to follow were some of the worst in Garrett's memory. It was a week of forced smiles, a week of pretending not to feel an ache that rumbled deep inside his chest and all the way down into his gut.

He was pretty sure Liam had noticed something was off, something different in the way he held tension in his mouth, his lips, when they kissed, the way that Garrett's eyes didn't crinkle when he smiled, or that his dimples were nowhere to be seen.

The sky was a deep blue, nearing a shade of black that Garrett hadn't seen the night possess in quite some time. The stars were few and far between, an erratic pattern across the horizon, and the air so hot it almost strangled him with each breath he took.

They were sitting behind the barn, their backs leaning against the tree they'd first kissed under. This place held so many good, fond memories, so many firsts and seconds and thirds. Garrett hated himself for dirtying it with what he was about to do, but somehow it felt right—fitting to do this *here*.

"We need to talk." It took Garrett a moment to even realize that it was his voice that had first hit the air, an almost unrecognizable foreign sound.

The tension in Liam's shoulders was tangible, his entire body and face closing off to Garrett and the rest of the world.

Garrett could've waited for Liam to speak, but he would've been waiting for days, and they both knew that.

"Listen," his voice caught in his throat, "I don't think this thing—*us*, is going to work."

"Wait, what?" Liam turned to him, his eyes wide and wild, the shock painting his face a horrifying shade of fear.

"I—I just think that we're too different. We're not right together."

"What the hell, Garrett? I thought you were mad about me making you apply to the damned colleges. What is this? You're joking, right? It's not fucking funny."

Garrett had expected this to be hard, to be the most difficult thing he'd have to do, but even then he hadn't been anywhere near being prepared to rip out Liam's heart.

"I'm not joking. I'm *so* sorry. I didn't mean to string you along, and it was great while it lasted, but I think you need to go your way, and I should go mine."

The words sounded like lies, each syllable wrong in every possible way, even to Garrett's ears.

"So after everything we've been through, that's it? We're too different? Fuck you, Garrett. Fuck you."

Liam looked at him like he was seeing a complete stranger, not the person he loved, and perhaps that was one of the most painful parts of all of this, watching Liam fall apart and look at him like *that*.

He could see the tears swelling in his lover's eyes, the way that his face scrunched up just slightly, and his cheeks turned an almost violent red. Garrett had seen him cry before, he just never thought he'd be the one causing it, or that he wouldn't be the one to make it all better.

Liam stood, his body rigid and his fists curled at his sides, so tight that his knuckles were visibly white. Garrett watched as he took two steps away before stopping, turning, and looking past Garrett. Liam's voice was barely a whisper when Garrett heard him say, "I hope you're happy."

Garrett wasn't sure how long he'd sat there, underneath that tree that had their initials carved deeply into the wood, surrounded by a shitty heart and the word "forever", barely noticeable but there.

For what seemed like hours, he brushed his fingers across the rough bark, tracing the words that had been there for years, words that *he* had carved in the wood with his pocketknife as Liam had kissed his neck, laughing and smiling against his skin.

“Garrett.” His mother’s voice startled him out of his memories, her presence at his side a mystery to him until she spoke.

“Hey, Mom.” His voice was rough, a scratchy sound from tears he’d forced back, and some that had escaped against his will.

“Oh, sweetie.” Her arms wrapped around him tightly, and he buried his face against her chest, tears welling at the base of his eyes and threatening to fall, and fall they did, desperate and heavy in their release.

“Mom, I did something really stupid.”

She continued to rub his back in short, calming circles, rocking him just slightly in her arms. “I know, baby. I know.”

Garrett pulled back from her warmth at that, his eyes searching her face for answers, for disapproval.

“I saw Liam leave about an hour ago. Was going to ask him over for dinner tomorrow night, but the look he gave me was like he’d seen a ghost.”

The pain in Garrett’s gut rose, guilt soaring through his body.

“I don’t know what you said, but it doesn’t take a genius to know that things didn’t go so well. And his eyes were broken, like I imagine his heart is right now, like I imagine *your* heart is right now.”

Garrett prepared himself for angry words, for her to tell him she didn’t want a gay son, but instead she cupped his cheek, smiled, and shook her head, as if knowing that darkness had crept into his thoughts and made itself home there.

“Baby, I’ve known about you two for a long time. I’m your mother, and it’s impossible to miss the way you look at each other... What happened?”

The words spilled from his lips before he even realized he was speaking, flowing and breaking when he spoke of things that hurt just a bit *too* much.

And that’s when he got *that* look, the disapproval and unhappiness.

She smacked him upside his head, just enough to cause a slight sting, but certainly not enough to replace the pain he felt inside his chest.

“Boy, I never pegged you as stupid, but *dammit*, Garrett Quincy Delroy, that was really damned dumb.” She paused, her lip set in a tight expression of disbelief. “But I understand why you did it. I just wish you hadn’t.”

They sat there together for a while longer, looking into the darkness while his mom continued to comfort him the best that she could.

“Let’s get you inside, yeah? It’s getting chilly out here.”

She pulled him up and guided him into the house, the *creak* of the screen door a familiar, comforting sound.

For the first time in a long, *long* while, she kissed his forehead when he was settled in his bed—the scent of Liam on the pillows, soaking his sheets, painting the goddamned walls—inescapable.

“Tomorrow we move on, you hear?”

He heard. Tomorrow would be the start of the waiting game—waiting for Liam to go off and achieve his dreams, and to see if maybe, just maybe, he’d come back, and it was all meant to be.

PART II

Time stretched on like some proverbial torture device. It was strange, going to school for those last few weeks and feeling awkward whenever he saw Liam, avoiding eye contact and having to remind himself that he did this for “the best”, whatever that meant anymore.

The summer was even worse, but somehow his parents managed to distract him with work on the farm. Suddenly the barn roof needed to be redone, and some of the rooms in the house could “use a fresh coat of paint.” By the end of summer, Garrett was sure he’d pretty much repaired everything that needed to be fixed in the house.

Mr. and Mrs. Johnson still came over for dinner once in a while, but now without Liam, who was also absent from the bank’s annual summer picnic. All he knew of Liam, since the day he’d pushed him away, came from them. And it was only the information they were willing to share. He knew they didn’t tell him everything, especially since he’d heard his mom talking to Mrs. Johnson on the phone just weeks after the breakup. Apparently, Liam hadn’t been doing so well either, and Garrett had to push down his inclination to go and fix that too.

Oddly enough, Liam’s parents didn’t look at him any differently, even though they had to have known something had happened. They were still family, even if a bit fucked up.

But, just like Garrett had wanted, had hoped, Liam had changed his mind. He was going to attend the University of Colorado come fall, and Garrett didn’t fail to notice the glint of pride that came to Mr. Johnson’s face when he talked about the school and the great things Liam was going to do there.

In the end, Liam slipped away without even a whisper. The only way he knew that Liam had left was because his father had asked Liam’s parents if Liam had arrived at school safely. Somehow, time had come and gone, and he’d missed the fact that it was August and that the other kids he’d graduated with were starting their new chapters in life, just as he was.

Garrett had heard that losing someone could feel like losing a limb, but no, losing Liam didn't feel like that. Garrett could work and live without a damned limb, but life without Liam... he couldn't even remember what that looked or felt like; it felt so foreign and wrong. No, losing Liam was more like losing the air in his lungs, or the steady pulse that threaded throughout his body. It was more than losing a physical or even emotional part of himself—it was like waking up one day and trying to breathe without such a fundamental part of life being there. Liam was that part of his life, and now he was gone.

But Garrett didn't know how to sulk, not without Liam there to hold him and make him feel like it was okay to cry a little. So, instead of letting himself feel the overwhelming, gaping hole inside his chest, he worked, forcing the air in and out through his lungs—without Liam. Though he couldn't remember it, he had lived without Liam at one point in his life, and he would do it again. He'd do it for Liam.

Garrett had never thought that time could be so inconsistent—forward and back, fast and slow. The three years since Liam walked out of his life, or more accurately, since he'd forced Liam out of it, proved him wrong. There would be days that would go so fast, *too* fast. Days when he just needed another hour or two of sunlight, and yet the night always came too soon, blanketing him in darkness, mocking him in his desperation to finish whatever was on the workload that day.

Then there were other days, days that felt like suffocating in fear, days that he wished would just *end*. Days like the Monday, about a year back, when his father had another stroke. He thought the first had been bad, the second smaller but still not pretty, and the third and fourth manageable. The fifth, though, was like being hit repeatedly with a metal baseball bat.

When he was younger, his father seemed like a mountain, large and immovable, with a strength that Garrett had grown to admire. Each day watching his father, seeing the ever-dimming glimmer of life in his eyes,

made his father appear less like a mountain and more like a road, continuously traveled on and abused.

Shortly after that episode, his parents decided to sign part of the farm over to him, something he'd always dreamed of but never thought would happen under circumstances like these.

There was a stretch of time when they hired a middle-aged man to help them around the farm. Leo was a hard worker, the single father of a beautiful two-year-old girl. With his help on the farm, Garrett was able to attend classes in business at the local community college; classes that his father had insisted would help him run the farm one day. And he was right—they did.

When Garrett received his associates degree, all he could think of was calling Liam, telling him that he did it—this rusty ol' cowboy went and got a fancy sheet of paper—made his mama proud.

He didn't call Liam though, and like many times before, he leaned against *their* tree and dialed a number without ever hitting "call".

Liam, as far as he knew, was doing great. His mom had said that college suited him well, which came as no surprise to Garrett. If Liam ever came home on the holidays, Garrett never knew about it. He did know, however, that Liam was near the top of his class, excelling in all of his classes, and working during the summers in the university's physics lab, doing some of the very experiments he had once told Garrett about.

The worst day of Garrett's life came late on a Thursday, the night cold with December's chilly kiss. The roads had been slick with black ice for the past week, and the small town surrounding the farm had seen an uncharacteristic number of accidents due to the brutal winter.

The memory was like a film on endless replay—the very moment when he answered the phone after coming in from feeding the animals.

He was sure that the voice at the end of the line was that of a friendly nurse, that her voice had been calm, and that she was attempting to be

soothing with her words—a futile attempt as soon as she told him why she was calling.

The hospital was sterile, the waiting room a shocking white that he'd seen so many times before with his father, but suddenly today, it was so much more haunting than it had ever been back then.

The surgeon who came out to meet them looked at Garrett, and he knew then that his mother had passed. In a sympathetic voice, the doctor told him and his father, who sat stiffly at his side, that they had done their best, that she was too far gone, and worst of all—that he was *sorry*. *Fucking sorry*. For what, Garrett didn't know—for not being able to save her? For the asshole who blew through the red light and crashed into his mother's car head on? For the way Garrett just wanted to crumble into pieces and never pick himself back up again? Sorry was just a word and it did nothing to bring his mother back.

He planned his mother's funeral while his father sat nearly comatose, a shell of the man Garrett once knew, only occasionally nodding his head in agreement at Garrett's choices. *Pink and white carnations, Mom's favorite?* Nod. *How about this casket?* Nod. *Would you like Reverend James Bishop to officiate?* Nod.

Her sister came down from Maine to help, her eyes tearstained and looking as tired as he felt. Aunt Vivian was great, she was, but Garrett was never so relieved as when Mr. and Mrs. Johnson came to his door, a large plate of food in hand. Mrs. Johnson could never replace his mother, but she'd always been like a second mom to him. The minute she walked in the door and took in his grief-stricken face, her arms had wrapped around him, her warmth covering him like a welcome break from the cold winter that mocked him in his despair. Her voice was soft in his ear, reassuring and calm despite her own loss—the loss of her best friend.

It was late in the morning, but she'd taken him to his room, still baby blue from his youth, and insisted he sleep, promised that everything around

the house would be taken care of, that it was okay for him to rest—to mourn and not be so strong.

The funeral was beautiful, and he'd made it through the eulogy without breaking down, a feat he would be forever proud of. The spread of flowers looked great, especially when the pink and white carnations were laid across the deep brown of the casket. And his mother, well she was always a very pretty woman, and they'd done well to make her look her best, make her look like the woman everyone remembered her to be. She almost looked at peace, as if she were sleeping. But the makeup was too white, her cheeks didn't have her usual light pink flush, and her lips were not covered with the hideous shade of red lipstick she so loved.

They buried her in the family plot, right next to her parents. The casket had been lowered carefully into the near-frozen ground, and with it a little piece of Garrett went, lying next to his mother in her final resting place.

Later, when everyone had told him how sorry they were for his loss for what felt like the tenth time, words that he wished would just stop—he didn't need them to be sorry, they didn't do this, and none of them could bring her back; he helped his father into the now too-empty king-sized bed. He closed the door and pretended he didn't hear his father weep through the walls.

It was later that week, a week of the same routine—eat leftover cake and lasagna and whatever else their neighbors had cooked, work, listen to his father cry through the paper thin walls, the sound torturous to his ears. The sky was a bruised-shade of black and blue, and the knock on the door startled him from where he stood in the kitchen, wrapping up cookies from Mrs. White, his seventh grade science teacher. The last person he expected to see on the other side of the door was Liam, handsome, and somehow taller, more muscular than when Garrett had last seen him.

He looked as if he had been crying, his eyes rimmed with a violent red, bloodshot around the edges. Most of all, though, he looked angry.

“Lia—” Garrett could barely get his name out before the other boy, now a man, connected his fist to the hard edge of Garrett’s chin.

“You selfish bastard.” Liam’s voice was deep, a welcoming velvet tone that Garrett wished he could just melt into.

“How could you *not* tell me? How come I had to find out from my fucking father when I got home for winter break? *You* should’ve called me, not him. Not that way.”

Garrett stood in a shocked stillness, the pain rearing at the side of his face warm and blossoming into what he was sure would be a vibrant bruise.

“I’m sorry, Liam. I didn’t think you’d want to hear from me.” In truth, Garrett didn’t know how to do *this*. To call his once best friend, now ex-lover, and grieve with him.

“Bullshit, Garrett.” Liam took a step back, then two more, his body vibrating with a swelling anger. “She was my family, too. She was my mom, too. I loved her, Garrett, just like you did—*do*.” Liam looked at him once more before turning his back and walking toward the car parked at the end of the drive. He climbed in the passenger side, and the car backed out and disappeared—much like Liam had done the first time he walked away—quietly, and with Garrett’s heart in tow.

Strange as it may have been, Garrett had never actually thought about what would happen if Liam *didn’t* come back, if it wasn’t actually meant to be, and the thought of that now, so fucking tangible, haunted him.

He walked into his parents’ room, the sounds of his father’s cries now quieted, the room blanketed in the stillness of the night. Garrett knew his father was still awake, and like a child fearing a thunderstorm, he crawled in the bed next to his father and wrapped his arms tightly around the old, fragile body.

“I love you, Papa,” he whispered into the thick silence, resting against the sheets that still held his mother’s scent, and slept.

Before the incident with Liam, Garrett had held a sense of hope, something to help keep him going. Hope was wearing thin though, as another year passed like a whisper and Liam didn't come home. The ice-brushed silver ground melted back to green, the chilly winter bleeding into an early spring. Mrs. Johnson had asked him if he'd like to come to Liam's graduation, her voice so easy and sweet that it nearly made him sick when he had to tell her no.

She had nodded her head knowingly and hugged him for a solid minute, as if her arms around him would make his world of hurt go away. It didn't. He had to lay off Leo the next day, the income from the farm too thin at that point to support the friendly man who had done so much for Garrett's father.

It was another three months, nearing the end of August, before he heard any more news about Liam. Mr. Johnson had come over to help him work on a tractor that didn't seem to want to start, and he was practically beaming from the minute he entered the old shed.

Eventually, he let it spill. Liam had accepted a job about a half hour away. He was going to be doing research with some corporation that had a pretty fancy name Garrett could barely pronounce. Garrett was proud, and a little weight lifted from his heart for a moment only to be dropped back down heavier than ever.

Liam was coming home, but what that meant for Garrett, he didn't know. Pretty soon after that it became clear that it meant nothing at all. Liam had rented an apartment near his workplace, and apparently went to his parents' house once a week for dinner. Garrett's hope grew thinner, shredding more with each passing day that Liam stayed away.

The second anniversary of his mother's death wasn't as bad as he had imagined it might be, but in some ways it was worse—knowing that time went on, even when his mother didn't. He ate a quiet breakfast with his

father, much like he did every day with the aging man, and then worked around the farm for most of the afternoon.

Garrett finished early, as planned, and took his father down to the gravesite. The snow dusted the ground and covered the top of the granite. He brushed it off, running his finger over the words engraved in the stone. *Olivia Marie Delroy. Loving wife & mother.*

It seemed impossible that she had been gone for a whole two years, that the seasons had come and gone and the world had moved on without his mother, time passing in a way that Garrett barely noticed. He recalled a time when, as a little boy, he'd had nightmares about waking up and finding that his mother wasn't there anymore. He'd run to his parents' room, shaken her shoulders and woken her up from where he cried at the edge of his parents' bed, his shoulders just barely reaching the mattress. There, she'd held him, whispered in his ear, and promised him she'd always be there with him every step that he took.

“Garrett.” His father's voice sounded like leather, aged and rough.

“Yeah, Papa?”

“Since she's not here to tell you this,” he didn't have to say who *she* was, “I'm going to.”

It was probably the longest string of words his father had put together at one time since the year before, usually answering Garrett's questions with a grunt of monosyllabic words.

“Get your head out of your ass, boy.”

Garrett turned at that, staring at his father who appeared perfectly calm. “Excuse me?”

“You heard me. You ain't deaf. I said get your head out of your ass, and now. Before it's too late, ya hear?”

Oh, he heard all right, but what his father was talking about was beyond his comprehension.

“Wha—?”

“Liam, Garrett. I’m talking about Liam. You think your mother didn’t tell me what happened? I’ve been waiting for you to man up and go see him. Lord knows you owe that boy an apology for being such a damned fool.” Garrett waited, his eyes growing wider as he took in his father’s words.

“Now you know your mama loved you, and I love you, but you’ve got to stop this. This is where I have to come to be able to see the love of my life, but you? All you have to do is take the truck to the next town, and what are you doin’? A whole shit-ton of nothin’. Your mama and I didn’t raise you to be stupid, or a coward. So, I’ll say this again—get your head out of your ass before it’s too late. Do you hear me, boy?”

“Yes, Papa. I hear you.”

“Good. Now give me a minute with ya mama, and grab me my coat from the truck, will ya?”

Garrett knew better than to ignore his father’s words. Still, he bided his time, the nervous curl making itself at home in the pit of his stomach an unyielding reminder each day of what he needed to do.

Every meal was like a firm smack upside his head, sometimes more literally than figuratively, when his father would walk in and give him a tap. And Garrett swore he thought *that* look was one that only mothers had, but apparently fathers had their own version of it too. Garrett would have to sit there and try to choke down his scrambled eggs without fearing the burn of his father’s eyes on him, or hearing the inquisitive, sometimes accusing, tone in his father’s voice when he asked, “So what are you doing today?”

The conversation pretty much went the same way every day. “Oh, you know, working around the farm,” Garrett would answer, and his father would grunt and excuse himself and walk out of the kitchen. The heavy pounding of his father’s work boots would signal his retreat and leave

Garrett at a lonely table with cold scrambled eggs, mourning with his burnt bacon over his damn stupidity.

And apparently his father was somehow becoming less of a recluse and more of a Chatty Cathy nowadays, because when Mr. and Mrs. Johnson came over for dinner a week later, every damned word they said was like a poke directed at him.

“Oh, well, Liam is doing such and such.”

“You know, it’s hard starting a new job. I think Liam would like to have a friend right now.”

“I worry about Liam, don’t want him to be lonely in that apartment.”

“Goddammit, guys. Stop it. I get it, I do. I’ll go see him next week. Just let me eat my casserole in peace, okay? Jesus.”

“Well why didn’t you just say that in the first place?” Liam’s mother smiled his way, that ridiculously pretty smile getting on his last nerve, as he shoved the casserole in his mouth and avoided conversation for the rest of the dinner that seemed to go on *forever*.

Mrs. Johnson made damned sure he kept his word, too. She would call Garrett every morning about eight a.m., her voice a sickly, sugary tone when she would ask if he was going to see Liam that day.

As it turned out, sweet Mrs. Johnson had about as much patience as a kid on crack, because one day, a week after the dinner, the pretty “G-rated” phone conversation took a turn for “PG-13”.

“Honey, will you go check my tea?” Garrett heard her speaking to Mr. Johnson in the background and the rustling of newspapers.

“Eh-hem, Garrett.” That was the last of her sweet tone. “Now you listen here, you little asshole. I love you like my own—I do, but if you don’t get your ass in gear and go see my boy, I’ll skin your hide. Ben seems to think you’re just nervous, and well, guess what? I don’t give a rat’s ass. If

you don't get *your* ass over there soon, I'll be setting up a little dinner date, and you will be coming, whether you choose to or not." She hung up the phone after that, leaving Garrett shocked and staring at the phone as if it had grown a head or something.

This time, when his father asked him what he was doing today, he answered with a firm, "Going to see Liam and saving my ass from being skinned."

The apartment building looked nice, covered in a creamy-colored siding and surrounded by green communal areas where a couple of kids were playing when Garrett pulled into a guest parking spot. The doors were facing outward, two floors of the same door and window pattern stretched across the front of the building. He'd had to call Mrs. Johnson again to ask her for Liam's apartment number, and he'd nearly shit himself when she answered him like nothing had happened. *Of-fucking-course.*

The stairs to the second floor were a steady climb, and Garrett gazed at the number on the apartment door for what felt like a good hour, but couldn't have been more than five minutes.

"Garrett? What are you doing here?" Garrett jumped at the sound of a familiar voice, his heart pounding in his chest, and his eyes open wide like a kid caught with his hand in the cookie jar.

"Oh, hey there, Liam. What brings you around these parts?" He bit his tongue as soon as the words came out, his deep-red face speaking volumes for the *what-the-fuck-did-I-just-say* thoughts coursing through his mind.

"I live here. But something tells me you already know that."

"Oh, yeah." Garrett forced a laugh, his hands nearly shaking with nerves. He could barely fight the tension that clawed its way into his back and shoulders, which shook with his laugh like bricks in a thin sack.

“So? What are you doing here?” Liam didn’t look angry, but he sure didn’t look pleased either, his eyebrows raised in a curious, almost confused expression.

And, dammit, he looked good. He was wearing a pale-green shirt, one that matched his eyes in the most remarkable way and made Garrett’s throat dry. The black slacks fit tightly around his sculpted thighs, the sleeves of his shirt rolled up to reveal the muscular arms that Garrett desperately wanted to feel around him again. His skin was paler than the last time Garrett had seen him, probably a product of the time spent indoors working on experiments instead of outside tossing around the football, or helping Garrett on the farm. He’d somehow grown more into his broad frame, his hair an almost dirty blond, the curls cascading against his cheeks and down across his neck.

Garrett shook himself from the thoughts and visions of Liam and that body threatening to make their way into his mind, and tore his eyes away from Liam. “Can we go inside?” Garrett was prepared for rejection, and for the briefest of moments his heart stopped when it looked like Liam seemed reluctant to let him in.

“Yeah, okay.” Liam opened the door, stepping in and toeing off his shoes, before looking back to Garrett who couldn’t seem to make his feet move.

“Oh, Jesus Christ, Garrett. Are you coming in or not?”

In it was. Garrett looked around the apartment at the beige furniture and ridiculously colorful blanket that had been thrown over the back of the couch. Yep. Still Liam.

“Look, Liam, I came here to apologize.” Liam looked like he was listening, but then again he had mastered that look from the time he’d said biochem was boring and too easy for him to pay attention to in high school.

“I’m sorry I didn’t call you when—when my mom died. I just... I wasn’t really in a good state of mind then, you know? And I thought you’d still hate me.”

“Hate you? Garrett, you’re an asshole, but I could never hate you.”

“Really?” The hope in his heart had to have come through with his words, his twang heavier than usual. He could feel the touch of hope spread across his face, his chapped lips parting in a hesitant smile as he stared at Liam’s amused, but beautiful, expression.

“You’ve been my best friend for as long as I can remember. You’re practically family.”

“Well, I’m still sorry. You see, back then—God, I was so stupid, Liam. You remember when the girls in school would talk about how romantic it would be if a guy let them go, to see if it was ‘meant to be’ and all that shit?” Garrett paused, his breath catching in his throat as he saw the understanding cross Liam’s face. “Yeah, I know. I’m so fucking stupid.”

“Wait, what? You’re kidding me, right?” Liam laughed bitterly, the sound much harsher than the playful laugh Garrett had heard in the past. “You dumped me because of some ‘romantic notion’?”

Garrett nodded, unable to look Liam in the eyes.

“So tell me, Mr. Knight-in-Shining-Armor, why did you decide you had to ‘let me go’?”

“I was holding you back from your dreams, baby.” The nickname sounded weird as soon as it hit the air, but the hard look in Liam’s eyes softened with it, a small semblance of a smile touching his lips. “I couldn’t do that. You wanted to stay here for *me*. I couldn’t let you do that, not when you had wanted to go to Colorado since we were fucking thirteen.”

“Did it ever occur to you that I’m a big boy? I can make my own decisions, Garrett. I don’t need anyone to make them for me.”

“I know. I do. But I loved you, Liam.”

Liam looked startled at that, frozen in his spot across the room. The only visible movement was the bob of his Adam's apple as he swallowed, almost painfully slowly.

“So what now? Do you expect me to come crawling back to you now that you've told me all this?”

Garrett could feel the panic rise in his chest, the throb of his steady heartbeat increase. He hadn't thought about the “what ifs” like what if Liam had found someone else, someone who loved him and would never leave him for some bullshit romantic move they'd heard about from girls in middle school. For Garrett, there was never anyone *but* Liam. He was a fool to assume the same for Liam. Still, he had to try.

“No. I mean—I used to think that. But *some* people saw fit to let me know shit doesn't work that way. Apparently *I'm* the one who needs to do the crawling.”

“And why should I give you another chance, huh? Give me one good reason.” Liam's voice rose a bit, not quite loud enough to be called yelling, but loud enough for Garrett to know that Liam was pissed. The shock had worn off, anger left in its place.

“Because I *still* love you, Liam. And I'd do anything for you, even now, even if you ask me to leave and never come back. Though you might want to tell your mom if you don't want me to ever come back, 'cause she's got some crazy dinner plans where I think she may be serving my ass as the first course.”

Liam's laugh was smooth and sweet, not the hateful, harsh sound that Garrett had heard earlier. He stepped toward Garrett until they were just inches apart, their breath mingling in the space between them. His face moved closer, and Garrett closed his eyes. The sudden feeling of a fist against his face was a familiar one, a fresh swirl of pain arching up his chin and into the soft area on his cheek. He'd barely had time to process the punch and open his eyes before Liam's lips touched his, soft yet firm at the same time.

The kiss grew harsh, a complete fucking mess, much like the past five years of their lives. But it was also wonderful, sweet, and when Liam's tongue entered Garrett's mouth, battling hungrily with his for a moment, it felt like the pain in his chest had been lifted, like he could breathe again.

Liam pulled back, a soft look in his eyes, as he cupped Garrett's bruised cheek.

"You've gotta stop doing that, baby. It fucking hurts."

"Good. I'll stop doing it when you stop being an asshole."

"Getting right on that." Garrett smiled and pulled Liam close, holding his body tight against his chest like the time in the kitchen before all this mess happened, but this time for a different reason. This time because he knew Liam was his to keep and to cherish, and he'd be damned if he ever listened to another romantic notion again in his life.

EPILOGUE

Whoever claimed that love comes easy was a masochistic liar. Garrett soon learned that words like “easy” had no place when it came to rebuilding a friendship, let alone a relationship that had been severed for five years. Not unless easy was actually a synonym for hard with the subtext of *really fucking hard*.

Liam was no pushover, and as much as Garrett had dreamed they would just walk into each other’s lives and it would all just click back together, it didn’t quite happen that way. Their lives had pieces that fit together perfectly like an intricate puzzle, but it was all just a matter of situating the pieces the right way again and putting them back where they belonged to form the whole.

For the first time in his life, with the exception of one disastrous occasion with Lucy Wilson in eighth grade, Garrett went on a date. Well, more like many dates.

Once they had finished kissing on that first day back together, catching up on the years of missed chances for their breaths to mingle and their tongues to battle, Liam had sat Garrett down on the couch, and instantly went into serious mode. His face was so perfectly silly that it had nearly made Garrett burst out laughing at the way his best friend’s light blond eyebrows furrowed together on the slightly freckle-dusted face, his kiss-swollen lips pursed together in thought.

“There are going to be rules,” Liam had said at last, poking his finger against Garrett’s chest.

“Rule number one—you are going to take me out on a date—no, not just one, many. You, Garrett Quincy Delroy, are going to *date* me.” Liam paused, long enough to allow Garrett to nod in understanding and agreement. “I’m a classy man. I deserve to be treated right. So you’d better make it good, or I won’t put out.”

“Rule number two—I swear to God, Garrett, if you take any more advice from preteen girls, I will wring your neck. So don’t. Got it?” Garrett nodded, and Liam smiled, seemingly pleased with himself and his rules.

“Rule number three—I reserve the right to add rules as I so please. You may want to take notes on this...”

Garrett didn’t. Instead, they spent hours sitting on that couch, talking about their lives and everything that had happened in the past five years away from each other. Liam had co-written and published two papers in research journals, he loved his job and the people he worked with, and in a confession that pained Garrett to hear—he had dated a few men, slept with a couple, but never really had anything serious—not serious in the way that he and Garrett were.

Garrett shared bits of his own life with Liam, telling him about going to college, accomplishing so much, and going through hell and back. He talked about his mother, about how much he missed her and still set a spot for her at the dinner table, sometimes even waited to hear her call out to him and tell him to hush when he was being too noisy around the house.

Their time together that night had been good, great even, but just one small step in a line of many that needed to happen for them to find what they used to have, and allow it to flourish and grow.

Dating Liam was fun but never predictable. On the bright side, Garrett would never have to go through the awkward parental introductions or worry that his father wouldn’t like Liam. Hell, sometimes he wondered if his father preferred Liam, especially when it came to watching football on TV together and how much of a better cook he was (and Garrett agreed—Liam clearly missed his calling when it came to being a chef).

It was the start of something new and old all at once, something that should have never *not been*.

A year later, a year of ridiculous conversations and getting back the friend, and eventually the lover, that Garrett so treasured, he finally worked up the nerve to ask Liam to move in to the farmhouse with him and his father.

Liam agreed, and Garrett learned that his mother had been right about many things, including the whole “you don’t know someone ’til you live with them” bit. Garrett learned that Liam did not like to be interrupted at work, unless it was at lunchtime and as long as Garrett came armed with Liam’s favorite sandwich from a little deli at the center of town. He also learned that Liam was the biggest baby ever when he was sick, and insisted that the bed was his fortress of germs, not to be penetrated in any way—“and no, Garrett, don’t get any ideas about penetration, you perv,” —and that the couch wasn’t as uncomfortable as he had imagined it would be.

On their first anniversary of moving in together, Garrett grilled a few steaks and invited their families over. He was pleased when Mrs. Johnson didn’t mention his ass once, especially when it had once come so close to being served up on a silver platter. It was a nice night of family and laughter, and once everyone had gone home, they took a walk to their special spot—the tree that still had their names carved deep in the old bark.

Their fingers were entwined down at their sides, Liam’s back pressed against the tree, while Garrett leaned in and kissed from his lover’s cheek to his lips and down across his neck.

“I’m so lucky to have you,” Garrett whispered hotly against Liam’s ear, his tongue darting across the shell before sucking the lobe into his mouth.

Liam was purring against him, his fingers loosening from Garrett’s, exploring underneath the thin fabric of Garrett’s T-shirt and rubbing the smooth skin of his toned stomach.

“I love you, Garrett.” Liam’s voice was barely a whisper, the crickets louder in Garrett’s ears, the night a thick veil around them.

Garrett drew back, the shock plainly written on his face. In all the years, all the ups-and-downs, Liam had never actually said it back, never let a word that seemed so serious and strange hit the air between them, seep its way into their lives. Garrett always knew he loved Liam, always hoped Liam had loved him too, but to hear it was a different beast all together.

For the smallest moment, Liam looked nervous—afraid even. “I love you, too. More than anything.” Garrett wanted to wipe the look of fear from where it marred his lover’s face, from where it sat across the full lips that were pressed so tightly together.

Time felt heavy, as if a tangible thing sitting on their shoulders. It weighed on Garrett for only a second before he laughed, and Liam joined in, the sounds of their voices a light dance in the night.

They loved each other. So what else was new?

Liam tangled their fingers back together as they walked quickly toward the dark house where Garrett’s father was fast asleep.

Garrett allowed himself to be led to their bedroom, a room that they had painted together just the week before—painted being a loose term that encompassed splatter across their clothes and faces as if they were kids painting the barn again.

They undressed each other slowly, fingers crossing paths on skin that they knew so fondly even in the deepest areas of darkness. When their clothes were long forgotten, spread across the old wooden floors, Liam laid Garrett out across the bed, his tongue tracing an intricate pattern in the center of Garrett’s chest.

A warm mouth closed around Garrett’s nipple, teeth toying carefully with the small nub before pulling back and blowing a stream of air across the heated, red skin. Liam kissed the abused skin, licked it in slow, caring strokes, then moved to Garrett’s other nipple and repeated the process.

His fingers danced over Garrett’s side, tickled the smooth skin there, and edged down in the same movements as his tongue that had slid across

Garrett's navel, dipped inside and swirled around, before continuing its travel downward.

Garrett moaned, the quiet disrupted by their movement against the sheets and the pleas that escaped his lips and grew louder as Liam inched closer to his cock, already dripping with pre-come.

Liam took Garrett's cock in his mouth, his hand at the base as he moved his head up and down, occasionally pulling off just long enough to dart his tongue across the tip and curl around the head of his lover's erection before taking it back in his hungry mouth.

The blond took him to the very edge, Garrett's calloused hands buried deep in his thick curls, and finally pulled back with a smile that Garrett could only describe as wicked spreading across his face.

He reached across Garrett's body, digging into the nightstand and pulling out the bottle of lube that was resident there. He spread the liquid across his fingers, rubbing them slowly together before reaching down and circling them around his lover's hole.

Garrett arched up, his body electrified as his lover took him back into his mouth and the first finger pushed in. They'd been sleeping together on a regular basis, but no matter how much time had elapsed since their last lovemaking, Liam still prepared Garrett with the utmost of care, digit by digit, slowly entering and stretching Garrett.

The world could've collapsed around Garrett, and he wouldn't have noticed, not with Liam between his legs, practically worshipping his body, spelling out his dreams and desires with each touch.

“You ready, Cowboy?”

Liam's voice was rough, his lips spit-slick and looking perfectly fucked.

Garrett, not trusting his voice, just nodded his head and reached back toward the nightstand for the condoms they kept there. He was surprised by the hand that caught his wrist and the most amazing light of life in Liam's eyes as he shook his head.

“Not tonight.”

They both had been tested again, but had used condoms as per rule twelve or so on Liam’s Rules to Dating... well, Liam.

“If that’s okay with you?” Liam seemed reluctant, his voice more fragile than Garrett had ever heard it—and Liam was anything but fragile.

Garrett didn’t respond verbally, instead pouring more lube into his palm and jacking up and down Liam’s cock, spreading the lube and then his legs.

Liam pulled Garrett closer so that his long legs wrapped firmly around Liam’s waist and carefully, tortuously slow, Liam pushed in, allowing Garrett to accommodate to him, with deliberate pauses until he was finally pressed tightly against Garrett, their bodies entirely connected as one.

“Fuck me, baby,” Garrett shifted his hips, humping up against Liam, frantic for movement.

Liam pulled out at a snail’s pace before delving back in quickly, his strokes solid and sure. Garrett pulled his lover down, their lips meeting in a sloppy kiss, just as desperate as the thrusts between them, growing with each inward stroke until the bed began to shake with their movement, rattling loudly against the old, freshly painted wall.

“God, Cowboy. You’re so fucking tight.” He paused, his voice breaking with each thrust. “I love this—Jesus, I love you.”

Their moans tangled until Garrett couldn’t tell who was saying what, which hungry cry belonged to him and which to Liam. It felt right, again, to have Liam buried so far inside him that he didn’t know how anyone could ever get closer, ever touch him so fucking deep inside.

Then Liam shifted, lifted Garrett’s leg a little more, and thrust forward like his life depended on it and hit the spot that set Garrett’s insides afire, burning and sizzling until the heat became too much to stand, the sensation so unbearably profound, and he came with a scream that turned into Liam’s name.

Their sweat mingled, Garrett's come smearing between their bodies as Liam moved to kiss him and thrust inside once, twice, three times more and came, his mouth open against Garrett's lips, breath so warm and heavy that it made Garrett shake.

“Rule number eighteen—” Liam's breath caught in his throat, a smile playing across his face, glowing in the moonlight that seeped in from the window. “Never leave me again.”

The path they had taken to get to this point, to Liam lying against his chest, to the most perfect fitting of pieces, and life suddenly making sense, was less than clean. It was difficult, full of potholes and fuckups that neither of them could have ever seen coming. There was loss, and gain, and everything in between. It was never anything like what is written in fairy-tale books, never some picture perfect moment that magically happens. No, it was much more than that.

You see, what they don't tell you in those bullshit romantic notions is that sometimes you gotta do things yourself; sometimes you gotta get up and *make* it happen. And yeah, a lot of times it's really messy, and you may get a strong uppercut (or two) to the jaw—but it's also completely worth it to see that look of love in someone's eyes and know, just *know*, it's for you.

THE END

Author Bio

S.J. Eller is a young, first time author. She is from a small town but has big aspirations in the field of psychology and has a love for sociology and history. In her (not so spare) spare time, she enjoys reading, spending time with her family (especially her two dogs), and having a good laugh. She is also adept at graphic design and various forms of coding and enjoys a challenge.

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TREASURE

By Kim Fielding

Photo Description

A handsome blond wearing a cape and embroidered tunic is on one knee. He's clutching a smaller man protectively to him. The smaller man is bound hand and foot and wears knee breeches and a long shirt. The blond wields a sword, which he has just used to cut the rope that is twisted around the smaller man's arms.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

The sea air would be good for me. That's what the doctor had said. The sea air and the sun. "A few quiet weeks on the coast is what you need. Go for a swim. Explore the beaches and the caves. Maybe you'll find a mermaid. Or..." he added with a wink, "some hidden treasure, like in your adventure books."

He was teasing me, I know, but a part of me burned with the idea that maybe... there would be something there, something special, something hidden.

Of all the things to find washed up on the beach, I was not expecting this half-drowned man. Nor what followed after.

Sincerely,

ttg

Story Info

Genre: fantasy

Tags: alternate world, pirates, virgin/first time, hurt/comfort, abduction/kidnapping, bookish/nerdy/geeky

Word count: 38,345

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TREASURE

By **Kim Fielding**

CHAPTER ONE

The room smelled of dust, sour sweat, and bergamot. And of medicine. The heavy curtains were closed and Julian found the shadows oppressive, as though they had an actual weight and were pinning him to the chair. The darkness also seemed to muffle sounds, reducing the conversation in the hallway to senseless murmurs—his mother’s thin and high, his father’s and Dr. Brinkett’s deep and low.

The door opened with a groan, and Julian squinted against the light. His parents and the doctor entered in a small parade, his mother and Dr. Brinkett with false, bright smiles.

“Well now!” boomed Dr. Brinkett, making Julian wince. “And how are we feeling this afternoon, my boy?”

“Fine.” Julian kept his gaze on a gloomy painting of fruit in a bowl. He hated that painting. Why on earth hadn’t he removed it from his wall long ago?

His mother made a clucking sound. “You are *not* fine. You’ve hardly left your room, you won’t eat—Look at him, Doctor! He’s thin as a rail.”

Dr. Brinkett frowned. “How is your appetite, Julian?”

“It is fine. I am fine. I only... I only need peace and quiet.”

Julian’s father gestured at one of the room’s untidy stacks of books. “What you need is to stop filling your mind with all this rubbish and get out in the world. You will never regain your strength by turning pages.”

Julian compressed his lips. He’d never had much strength to begin with, as his father well knew. As a child, he’d always been the first to contract illnesses and the last to be cured of them. Whereas his older brothers had grown into big, strapping men with muscles as large as any laborer’s, Julian was shorter,

slighter. His mother liked to say that he had a delicate constitution. Sometimes it felt as if he'd spent half of his twenty-five years ill in bed. During the long days of his confinements, it was only his books—the *rubbish*, as his father would have it—that provided companionship and allowed him to escape, in mind if not in body.

The doctor was a cheerful sort, prone to bad jokes and silly stories. He'd been tending to Julian for years and still treated him like a child. Now, Dr. Brinkett chuckled uncomfortably and rubbed his hands together. "We've a fine idea for you, Julian. One that will give you peace and quiet yet also expose you to fresh air and exercise."

Narrowing his eyes skeptically, Julian asked, "What?"

"The seaside, my boy! The lovely seaside. And it is all arranged for you already. You shall travel by rail to Bythington. I have taken that journey myself; loads of beautiful scenery to admire along the way. But I expect Bythington itself is rather too... boisterous for your tastes. More of a place for mobs of young families. A coach shall take you from there two hours north to Urchin Cove, a quaint little village. Quite serene. I used to spend summers there myself when I was a boy. You shall have a cottage all to yourself, with the sandy beach right outside your door. And you shall have all the sunshine and bracing sea air you could want. Just the thing to make you well again."

The doctor sounded like a tourism salesman. Julian didn't care for the idea at all, but he could tell by the set look on his father's face that decisions had been made and arguing would get him nowhere. Julian didn't have the will to fight. Besides, what did it really matter where he was? He could be lonely at the seaside just as neatly as he could in the city, and it would be a pleasure to be away from his mother's eternal hovering.

Perhaps Dr. Brinkett thought Julian needed more convincing, because he picked up the topmost book on the nearest pile and waved it around a bit. "You can have a bit of exercise in Urchin Cove. A walk on the beach, a bracing swim. And it may be that you will find a bit of adventure, just like in your books. A hidden treasure, perhaps." He winked jovially.

Resigned to his fate, Julian squeezed his eyes shut. “When do I leave?”

He might have enjoyed the rail journey if he could have allowed the swaying motion to lull him to sleep. But his mother had used his travels as an excuse to shop, and had filled trunk after trunk with clothing he would probably never wear. As a result, Julian’s compartment was almost entirely filled with his luggage. His father had lectured him at great length on the dangers of thieves who would sneak into unwary travelers’ compartments and steal their belongings. So Julian felt obligated to remain vigilant. His feet were propped on a suitcase, a blanket spread over his lap. He leaned his cheek against the cool window glass and watched the scenery roll by.

It was late afternoon by the time he reached Bythington. The porters gave him sour looks over the number and weight of his bags, then scurried away as soon as he handed them a few coppers. Weary and hungry, he stood abandoned in front of the train station for quite some time. Perhaps some error had been made with the arrangements. Perhaps he was stranded.

He was beginning to feel the first twinges of panic when a large, disreputable-looking wagon rattled to a stop in front of him. It could not, even under the most charitable description, be called a coach. It looked like the sort of vehicle a farmer might use to haul turnips to market—or perhaps even less savory loads. The dragons that pulled the cart were stocky and rather lumpy, with little shine to their green scales. They growled impatiently as the driver looked down at Julian from her high seat.

“Mr. Massey?” the driver asked, and Julian gave up the last bit of hope that this conveyance wasn’t intended for him.

“Yes,” he answered quietly. “I suppose so.”

The driver pushed a tangled mass of gray hair behind her ears. “Well, get yer kit in the wagon then. I want to be home by suppertime.”

He sighed and lifted the nearest trunk. But when she saw how he struggled to get the heavy pieces on board, she heaved an aggrieved sigh of her own and hopped down from her seat with an audible *umph*. Despite being older than his

mother and quite round, she was clearly much stronger than Julian. She made short work of the loading, then rolled her eyes as he scrambled ungracefully up to the seat. The wood sagged a little when she sat beside him. She barked a *gee-up* at her dragons and flicked a lazy switch at the larger one's tail, and then they were off, the cart heaving and shaking over the rutted road.

"Name's Nerva Crabbottom," she said as she turned the cart onto a wider street that led out of town. "I own the house yer stayin' in. Finest holiday home in Urchin Cove." She enunciated *holiday home* very clearly, as if she wanted to make sure he understood the grandness of it. "Got it all ready for you, I have. Bedding, pots'n'pans, a goodly stock of fuelstones for the fire. Some groceries too. When you need more, you'll come into the village. My husband runs the store, and your family's set up an account fer ya."

He nodded. "And the servants? Are they settled as well?"

Mrs. Crabbottom guffawed so hard that one of the dragons craned its neck to look at her. "Servants? *Servants* he says! Sure. Got a whole flock o' pixies and merfolk ready to cater to his lordship."

It hadn't occurred to Julian that he'd have to cook and clean for himself. He'd never done so before. When he was a boy, he'd spent long hours in the kitchen, watching Cook bustle about her work. Now he hoped he'd be able to replicate some of her cooking.

The driver continued to chuckle as the wooden houses of Bythington grew smaller and farther apart, and soon they were traveling past fields of sunflowers and corn and other crops he couldn't identify. Just as the doctor had promised, the sun shone brightly here—none of the city's eternal gloom—and Julian was thankful his broad-brimmed hat was protecting him from a burn. His skin was pale and prone to freckles.

"Yer from Greynox," Mrs. Crabbottom commented after a long silence.

"Yes."

"Ain't never been there myself. Don't see the point of it, all those crowds. I like to know my neighbors, I do. Like to know who I can trust and how far I can trust 'em."

He started to reply with something inane, but a cloud of dust set him to coughing hard. By the time the fit passed, his chest hurt, but at least there was no sign of blood in his handkerchief. For years he'd been fearing the appearance of those deadly little specks of scarlet.

“You been sick?” the driver asked.

He nodded.

“It's the city air. I wonder the whole lot of ya don't drop dead. You'll do better here, you'll see. Good food, clean air. You'll put a little meat on yer bones in no time at all.” Then she segued into a long monologue on her children and grandchildren, on her husband, on the strengths and vices of each and every inhabitant of Urchin Cove.

Julian slumped uncomfortably, hoping the shaking of the cart over the rutted road wouldn't make him vomit. She didn't seem to expect more from him than an occasional grunt. He watched the broad gray-green backs of the dragons. After a time, the road began to rise and the fields gave way to scattered trees and then thicker woods. Every now and then they neared a cliff edge and he'd catch an uneasy glimpse of the sea far below. He'd never seen anything so vast and featureless. Something about the water unsettled him, as if he feared monsters hiding below the gentle waves.

Maybe his father was right—maybe he *did* read too much nonsense.

If he squinted at the horizon, he could make out a few tiny fishing boats. He'd never been on a boat before. He marveled at the courage of sailors, who would trust their lives to such small crafts in such a great ocean.

Mrs. Crabbottom's words weren't quite limitless: she ran out as they began to descend. But the dragons must have known they were nearing home because their pace became considerably more sprightly, causing Julian to grasp the seat handles firmly.

They were back down at sea level, once again passing between fields, when Mrs. Crabbottom turned the wagon onto a narrow path that was even bumpier than the main road. They crested a tiny hill and Julian caught his first glimpse of his temporary home. It wasn't an impressive sight: a half-dozen

tiny cottages clustered in a rough semicircle around a minuscule bay. The buildings looked long abandoned, and due to high rocks on either side of the inlet, the entire area looked isolated from the rest of the world.

“See?” Mrs. Crabbottom announced happily. “Peace and quiet.”

“I’m to stay *here*?”

“Course. Yers is the biggest of ’em.” She brought the wagon to a halt in front of a ramshackle house that, to his eyes, looked as small as the others but might have been in marginally better repair. The roof looked intact, in any case, and red flowers bloomed in boxes fastened beneath the shuttered windows.

The dragons shuffled and huffed impatiently as Julian and Mrs. Crabbottom unloaded the wagon. The cottage contained only a single room, with a bed against one wall, a table with two chairs in the middle, and a small kitchen tucked into a corner. Some small pieces of furniture, mainly stools and shelves, stood here and there, and a few bright rugs were scattered over the stone-paved floor.

“That pump there’ll bring water straight to the sink,” Mrs. Crabbottom said proudly. “You’ll find enough pots and pans for yer needs. Extra bedding and towels in that cupboard. Outhouse is just steps away.”

Outhouse. Julian shuddered. “And where shall I bathe?”

She gave him a look as if he were something strange and exotic. “You’ve got the whole ocean right there. If the salt gets too much fer ya, just wipe it away. I think it’s good fer ya. It’s like pickles—salt keeps ya fresh longer.”

He attempted a wan smile.

After several trips back and forth—and really, she carried far more than he—Julian’s belongings were heaped inside the cottage. She looked around and nodded. “Well, yer set then. There’s food here to last you a day or two. After that, just go up the main road. Town’s twenty minutes’ walk. My husband keeps the store open ’til suppertime every day, and we’ve one tavern open at night if you fancy a drink or two. Or three.” She winked.

He was suddenly loath for her to leave. “And the... the other guests?”

That earned him one of her cackles. “Ain’t no other guests, love. Yer lord of all the holiday homes.” She was still chuckling to herself as she climbed onto the cart and urged the dragons away.

Julian didn’t have the energy to unpack. A chill was coming on as the sun began to set, so he chucked a couple of fuelstones into the stove and then struggled with the pump, filled the kettle, and set it to boil. He was relieved to discover a pair of lanterns hanging from hooks on the wall, and lighting them gave the room a comforting glow. After finding a loaf of soft bread and a hunk of cheese, he ate while standing at the open door, staring out at the twilit sea.

His new home wasn’t exactly quiet, not with the waves pounding against sand and stone. But it was a different sort of noise than he was used to. No noisy carts passing over cobblestones, no salesmen hawking their wares, no family members or servants bustling about the house. He wasn’t sure if his current situation was an improvement. In Greynox the sounds had often bothered him, especially when he was ill, but at least they’d been company of a sort. Now he had only himself.

His dinner eaten and his tea drunk, he rinsed his cup and knife at the sink. A quick visit to the outhouse brought the pleasant discovery that it was reasonably clean, and back inside again, he washed his hands and face. He ran his fingers through his reddish-brown hair. It had grown too long; he should have had it cut before he left the city. His nightshirts were still packed away, so he removed his boots, breeches, and tunic, leaving on his hose, linen drawers, and undershirt. He lay on the bed—a bit too firm but reasonably wide—and listened to the waves until he fell asleep.

CHAPTER TWO

It was very odd to wake up on his own, without his mother or a servant pushing a tray at him and insisting he eat *something* for breakfast. And strangely enough, the fact that nobody was insisting he eat made him suddenly quite ravenous. He hopped out of bed. While the kettle heated, he ate more bread and cheese, as well as some salty dried fish. He felt a bit silly, standing half-dressed and shoving food into his face, but then who was there to see him? Without an audience, he could be as ridiculous as he wished.

When his stomach was full and he'd had three cups of tea, he washed up quickly. It occurred to him for the first time that he was going to need to learn to shave himself, or else decide to grow a beard. Not that his whiskers came in particularly quickly or well, but eventually they would come in.

The sky was as relentlessly blue as the day before, with the sun setting the wavelets glittering like jewels. Gulls squabbled on the beach while something larger wheeled far overhead. He could have been the only man on the planet, except for a few distant boats that he saw through the rocky mouth of his inlet. Maybe they had ghost crews, as in some of the tales he'd read. He grinned crookedly at his foolishness.

The first order of the day, he decided, was to unpack. He didn't wish to unpack *everything*—not only would he never need a fraction of what his mother had sent, but he had no place to store most of it. The biggest problem was that he didn't know which pieces of luggage contained which items. As a result, he spent the better part of the morning rummaging, moving the heavy bags here and there, unfolding and refolding various items of clothing. He was exhausted by the time he'd gathered a few of his plainest, most comfortable shirts and several sets of hose, breeches, and drawers to go with.

He'd saved one piece of luggage for last. It was the only bag he'd packed himself, and it contained nothing but books. He'd agonized at length over which of them to bring and, in the end, had chosen a dozen favorites. Each was thick, with a worn cover. The well-thumbed pages contained stories of princes

and knights, of explorers, powerful wizards, heroes, and brave men who saved beautiful women or desperate kingdoms. Nobody wrote books about shy, sickly types who possessed no discernible skills and for whom a seaside cottage was the pinnacle of exoticism.

He spent the afternoon sitting in bed, reading one of his books, and listening to the waves.

Within a few days of his arrival, Julian had begun a daily walk to the village for food. That round trip was far more exercise than he was used to, and at first his legs and feet had complained. But very soon he'd grown stronger and was surprised to find himself seeking out even more activity. He walked on his beach and traipsed around in a nearby woods, and for the past few days he'd even done some climbing on the rocks at the entrance to his inlet. Interesting small creatures lived on those rocks, but he was even more intrigued by the caves he'd discovered. Chances were they were perfectly ordinary caves, but he could imagine them as hiding places for treasure or homes for sirens.

As Julian walked the dusty road into town this time, his mind wandered. He was curious whether his family and Dr. Brinkett had deliberately settled him so far from civilization. It was possible that in the doctor's youth, Urchin Cove had been much more popular among holiday travelers, and that neither he nor Julian's parents were aware that the place had been nearly abandoned. On the other hand, it was possible that they knew he'd be here alone and had sent him deliberately. Julian was always an embarrassment to his father: the weakly youngest son who, even when well enough to be seen in public, kept to the shadows and muttered inanities when spoken to. Julian had even overheard the servants repeating rumors that he was simpleminded, that the fevers had shriveled his brain as well as his body.

Whatever the motive, Julian found his parents' decision to send him to Urchin Cove surprisingly pleasing. The solitude wasn't nearly as much a shock to him as it might be to someone who'd lived a more gregarious existence. And he'd come to rather enjoy doing tasks for himself, such as

preparing his meals and keeping the cottage clean. Yes, they were small tasks indeed, but they gave him a sense of accomplishment.

A pair of sprites flittered a few paces ahead of him, making him smile. He'd never seen wild sprites in Greynox, just a few miserable and tattered captives kept in cages in the Zoological Gardens. Those had made him sad, but the wild ones were joyous and amusing. Sometimes he even found himself chuckling—an unfamiliar action for him.

In the three weeks since he'd arrived, he'd seen sprites every day. Also more kinds of birds and insects than he'd known existed, and ground squirrels who scolded when he passed, and at least two species of long-haired imps. He'd taken to leaving his bread crusts, cheese rinds, and other food scraps in his doorway, and sometimes the imps crept over to snatch them away with an excited squeak. And it wasn't just the land creatures that fascinated him; twice now he'd spotted dolphins leaping in the waters of his little bay.

He came upon a little stone house close by the side of the road and knew he'd almost reached the village. On every one of his forays into town, the elderly couple who lived there had been working in their front garden, pulling weeds and harvesting vegetables. Julian had heard that the man was a wizard, but he suspected that was an exaggeration. The old man looked perfectly ordinary: graying, slightly stooped, and with a gardener's dirty hands. Julian waved at the couple and they waved back.

Urchin Cove was almost too small to be called a village. Perhaps two hundred people lived in or near the little hamlet. Most of them were fisherfolk, their brightly painted little boats bobbing in the harbor that gave the town its name. Almost everyone in Urchin Cove resembled Mrs. Crabbottom: stout and weathered, plain-speaking but not unfriendly. As far as Julian knew, the entire town might be related to his landlady.

As had become his new habit, Julian went first to the village's sole tavern. The tavern keeper walked with an unsteady gait that suggested he might be oversampling his own wares, but he was pleasant enough. Julian sat down among the grizzled old men and women who seemed to spend all day drinking, smoking, and talking, and the tavern keeper immediately brought

him a huge bowl of hearty fish stew and a small loaf of crusty bread. He plopped a tankard of bitter ale on the table as well.

Julian ate his meal with a gusto he'd never experienced in Greynox. It wasn't so much that the food was all that delicious, although it wasn't bad. But it was the only hot meal he would eat that day; back in his cottage he subsisted on cheese and fruit, bread, and bits of sausage and dried fish. Besides, he'd been working up an appetite lately.

The local residents didn't speak to Julian as he ate, but they didn't seem to resent his presence. They gossiped about their children and the weather. They told unlikely tales about the huge fish of their youth or encounters with pirates. They complained about their illnesses and crippled limbs and compared their mysterious aches and pains. And they teased each other about their sex lives, which always made Julian blush furiously. He'd never had so much as an amorous kiss, and his knowledge of the matter was limited to his brothers' tales and a few furtive peeks at scandalous volumes in bookstores.

Julian used his bread to sop the remaining stew from his bowl and wondered whether he was daring enough to order a second pint of ale. But before he could make a decision, a large man entered the tavern and squeezed onto the bench next to him. "I'll take my pint now!" the man yelled at the innkeeper, who was clearing away someone else's dishes.

"You'll wait yer turn, Samuels," was the gruff reply.

Samuels snorted. "If the seaguards worked on yer schedule we'd be overrun by pirates by now, we would."

An ancient woman named Editha flapped her hands at Samuels. "Pirates, he says. Liken he knows so much of 'em."

"Know 'em far better'n I ever want to. Seen what they do to towns what have more'n fish guts to plunder."

"The seaguards keep the pirates far from here." Editha leaned closer to Julian. "My Bobby's a seaguardsman. Just like his daddy and *his* daddy afore him."

“Seaguards and our wizard, you mean. Pirates know better than to cross our wizard.”

She flapped her hand dismissively. “*Him*. Uses his magic for nothin’ but growin’ tomatoes and boilbeans. It’s the seaguards what make a difference. No pirates near here.”

Julian nodded at her. That was his usual contribution to these discussions, and it seemed to satisfy her. But Samuels shook his head. “I seen the *Dark Prince* not far from here, just the other day. Runnin’ quick she was.”

A thrill ran up Julian’s spine. Even he had heard of the *Dark Prince*; he’d read lurid accounts of the ship in the Greynox broadsheets. Headed by the infamous Captain Thomas Booth, the crew was said to have murdered countless innocent sea merchants while looting their shipments.

Editha made a sour face. “You didn’t see no such thing. ’Twas a sunspot and too much drink.”

“I know what I seen, and what I seen was a tight little sloop flyin’ Booth’s colors. Crowned devil on a red background, ’twas.”

Most of the men and women proceeded to make fun of Samuels’ ability to discern shapes or colors with any accuracy. Although they scoffed, Julian thought he detected a note of unease. Well, didn’t matter much to him. He had nothing to interest a pirate—unless the pirate wanted several trunks full of Greynox’s latest men’s fashions, in which case Captain Booth was welcome to them.

Julian left two coppers to pay for his meal and then left. Urchin Cove’s only store was across the street. Its shelves were crowded with foodstuffs, home goods, and nearly everything a sailor could want. Mr. Crabbottom was behind the counter, measuring a bolt of cloth for a young woman. He nodded in Julian’s direction.

Julian browsed a bit before choosing a round of seeded bread, a small pot of strawberry jam, and a bag of hazelnuts. He took his purchases to the counter and waited for Mr. Crabbottom to finish with the other customer.

“Yer lookin’ hale an’ hearty today,” Mr. Crabbottom said when it was Julian’s turn. “Sea air agrees with ya.”

“I suppose it does.”

“I ain’t never used a doctor in my life. All of them potions and medicines. Pff. Give me fresh air and a spot o’ exercise, and I’ll be healthy as can be. Good food don’t hurt neither.” He pointed at Julian’s little pile of purchases. “Ya still got fish? You’ll be wantin’ to eat it every day, ya know. Makes you strong.”

“I had some fish stew already, and I have some of the dried sardines I bought the other day.”

“Good.” Mr. Crabbottom placed the food into the burlap sack he’d given Julian during his first visit to the store. Then he made a few scratches in a ledger, no doubt keeping track of Julian’s account. “There’s a storm blowin’ through, tonight and tomorrow.”

“A storm?” Julian said with alarm.

“Just make sure ya keep them shutters closed and you’ll be fine. That house o’ yers has stood much bigger blows than this ’un. But ’ware the waves this evenin’. That little bay o’ yers usually ain’t much tossier than a copper washtub, but sometimes the sea’ll bring you a surprise with a storm.”

“All right. Thank you.” Julian gathered his bag and left the store. He walked faster than usual. Although the sky remained cloudless and the ocean was placid, the thought of bad weather worried him. Greynox was prone to damp but rarely experienced anything severe. And on the few occasions when the wind had raged, Julian had been safe within the thick brick walls of his family’s large house.

Three sprites buzzed past him in a much more straightforward manner than usual, and Julian hurried his steps.

CHAPTER THREE

The shutters rattled. The door shook in its frame. The rain pounded on the roof like an army of goblins trying to get in. Julian huddled on his bed with a quilt wrapped around his shoulders.

He supposed it was daytime, but he couldn't be sure of the hour. He hadn't slept well at all, fearing that every gust of wind would blow his cottage down. When he had managed to doze off, his dreams had been unsettling. He couldn't remember the details, but he was sure they involved pirates and storms and dangerous waves.

He'd eventually given up on sleeping and brewed himself some tea. Since then he'd been trying to read, but his attention kept wandering from the pages. The characters' adventures were less engrossing when his stomach was churning with unease. He wondered if the authors had ever known true danger. Probably they were fat old men who spent their days sitting in overstuffed chairs in the Greynox gentlemen's clubs, scribbling away with their bottles of spirits close at hand.

"This is entirely ridiculous," he said out loud. "It's only a bluster. You're not in mortal danger. You've faced worse scares being nearly run over by omnibuses in the street." But his heart pounded anyway, and he worried at his lower lip until it bled.

Finally he put down his book and lowered his head onto the pillows. Perhaps he could catch a nap and when he woke up, the storm might be over. But he couldn't sleep. So, in desperation, he turned his thoughts as far away from his current predicament as he could imagine. He thought about sex.

He'd *known* about sex—in the abstract, anyway—since he was quite young. His brother Robert was ten years older and fancied himself a ladies' man. He would come home from school and brag in detail to his siblings about his supposed exploits with girls. Julian had listened with morbid curiosity, and had later heard additional stories from his other brothers as well. But Julian

himself had been considered too unwell to be sent away to school; his parents had brought in tutors instead. So if he'd fancied following in his brothers' footsteps, he'd had no opportunity to do so.

And probably, he admitted in the darkest corner of his mind, he would never have had such adventures with girls even if he had gone to school. Because Julian Wade Massey liked boys instead.

As isolated as he was from people outside his household, he had gone a long time not knowing it was possible for a male to desire other males. Not that he hadn't felt vague yearnings, a twist of the heart when he caught sight of a handsome tradesman, perhaps. But he'd told himself it was only envy over their strength.

And then one afternoon when he was eighteen—not so very long ago—he'd visited his favorite bookseller. He liked this one because the shop was enormous, the books immensely varied in content, and the owner generally too busy reading his own books to notice what his customers were up to. Some months earlier, Julian had discovered an entire shelf of explicit books hidden in a dusty corner. Since then he'd been skulking in that corner, reading the salacious words, eyeing the engravings. But shortly after his eighteenth birthday he'd found a volume containing drawings of naked men engaged in sexual activities with one another. That was when he learned there was a name for people like him. Deviants.

He hadn't told anyone, of course. Who would he tell? His mother would be shocked, his brothers outraged. His father would disown him. And, needless to say, Julian had never acted on his inclinations, at least outside the literary realm. He'd found a few similar books, however, and had nearly memorized them.

Now in his bed, with the wind roaring outside, Julian remembered some of the drawings he'd seen. He imagined himself in those scenes: nude and unashamed, with another man nude as well. Touching him. Tasting him. Julian took himself in hand and wondered what it would feel like to be stroked by fingers that were broad where his were slender, hard and calloused where his

were soft. How would another man's sweat taste, licked off skin that stretched over heavy muscles? What was the sound of another man's breaths in his ear? And how would strong arms feel wrapped around him, someone else's body keeping him warm?

Usually when Julian pleased himself, he swallowed his sounds. But today he cried out and his sounds were swallowed by the storm.

He must have dozed a little. Normally he would have been embarrassed by his lewd fantasies, but in this case his bout of weakness had enabled him to overcome his fear of the storm. When he woke up, there were no sounds other than the patient pounding of the waves and the cry of a gull. He opened the door and saw all that remained of the storm were a few tattered clouds. A quick check showed him that the cottage had survived unscathed, as had all the neighboring cabins. Some of them looked ready to fall apart at the faintest puff of wind, so he couldn't imagine how they avoided damage. It seemed unlikely that Mrs. Crabbottom could have afforded paying a sorcerer to place a protective hex on the structures.

His short stroll around the cottages left him wanting more exercise. He smiled. Just a few weeks ago he hadn't minded being cooped up for days on end, but now he was restless after less than a day. Due to the lateness of the hour, he decided on just a short walk around his inlet.

He didn't bother with shoes and stockings. They weren't worth the trouble, considering how they'd inevitably collect sand; and besides, Julian had learned that the beach felt nice against his bare feet. He did throw on a light cloak, however, because the evening chill had already begun to settle.

The storm had wet the sand much farther inland than usual, and it had tossed up piles of debris. He poked his toes at the huge snarls of seaweed and inspected the chunks of driftwood. A few of the pieces of wood were man-made planks with chips of paint still clinging to them. He wondered if they came from a ship. Smaller detritus lay scattered on the sand as well: colored shells, polished stones, bits of glass frosted and worn smooth. He slipped a few

of the prettier pieces in his pocket. Souvenirs. He'd found his own little treasure after all.

And then he caught sight of another pile of debris. He couldn't quite make out what it was because it lay where the waves kept washing over it. It might have been seaweed, but it appeared more brown than green. Perhaps it was an animal of some sort—a beached seal, maybe. With mixed curiosity and trepidation, Julian went to investigate.

When he came close enough to identify the object, his heart caught in his throat and he stumbled, nearly falling. It was a person.

Was it a fisherman drowned in the storm? How long had the body been in the water, and how horrifying would it look up close? Gracious gods, what was he going to do with a *corpse*? He felt as if he might be ill.

But he couldn't just abandon the poor soul. The tide was coming in and would surely wash the dead man away before Julian could fetch help. There was no way around it: Julian was going to have to handle the matter himself. At the very least, he must drag the corpse farther from the sea. And then... well, he couldn't just leave it there until morning, could he? But it was too late to walk to the village. The sun would be setting very soon and the road was too dark to travel at night. Fine then. Perhaps Julian could cover the poor fellow with a blanket—a sort of temporary burial—and then get assistance in the morning.

This was rather more adventure than he'd expected to have.

Julian crouched beside the body, shivering slightly as the sea lapped at his feet. The body was belly-down, barefoot, dressed in torn and sodden rags. Julian wasn't certain, but he thought the person was male. His hair was long and tangled, too wet for its color to be discerned, and the strands covered the man's face.

How terribly sad to die alone and nameless, to be tossed aside like rubbish.

Julian took a deep breath, grasped the corpse's hip and shoulder, and gently turned the body onto its back.

The corpse's eyes fluttered open. Julian shrieked and scrambled away, then lost his footing and fell, wetting himself thoroughly in the wavelets. He remained sprawled there, gasping. Good gods! The man was *alive*.

CHAPTER FOUR

If Julian had been uncertain about what to do with a washed-up corpse, he had even less idea what to do with a living human being. None of his books had prepared him for this.

After a few moments of confused and frantic thought, he realized the man wasn't moving. He might be alive, but he was clearly in no condition to escape the sea's grasp. Soon the tide would be high enough to drown him for good, or to carry him away, which would certainly amount to the same thing. Covering the man with a blanket and leaving him on the beach until morning was probably not the best option.

"Get yourself *moving*, man!" Julian said fiercely to himself. "Stop being such a pathetic ass." He rose unsteadily to his feet and crept closer to the man. The eyes were closed again. He was older than Julian, but not by a great deal. Thirty, perhaps. And even in his poor condition, with his skin gone fish-belly pale and his mouth slack, he was quite beautiful, with full lips (now bluish), fine-drawn brows, and sharply sculpted cheekbones. Gathering all his bravery, Julian grasped him under the armpits and dragged him out of reach of the waves. The man didn't react to this rough treatment.

If one of Julian's brothers had found this man, he could have easily picked him up, heaved him over a shoulder, and carried him to the cottage. But Julian's brothers were far away, and since the stranger undoubtedly weighed more than Julian, lifting him was out of the question.

Julian considered his situation for a minute or two. It really wasn't very far to the cottage, and the entire route was smooth sand. Perhaps he could drag the man instead. So he took off his wet cloak and spread it wide. Then, grunting slightly, he prodded and shoved the inert body onto the cloak, leaving the legs hanging off the end. After gathering fistfuls of cloth, he began to pull.

He'd make a terrible draught dragon. His back ached almost immediately, his arms and legs felt rubbery, and his breaths came in painful rasps. But inch

by inch and foot by foot, he dragged his burden across the beach and all the way to the threshold of his cottage. The threshold itself proved a considerable obstacle—the house's floor was a half-step higher than the sand—but once inside it was relatively simple to tug the body the short distance across the smooth stone to the bed.

During the entire journey, the man showed no signs of waking. Which was perhaps a mercy, because the voyage would have been uncomfortable at best. But when Julian made a last mighty effort and managed to haul him onto the bed, the man groaned deeply and his eyes fluttered but didn't completely open.

Julian stood beside the bed, trying to catch his breath and get his muscles to work properly again. Somehow the man looked more *real*, here inside Julian's cottage, on his bed, even though he was wet, bruised-looking, and beginning to shiver violently. With considerable hesitation, Julian reached forward and felt his forehead. It was shockingly hot.

Well, if there was one thing Julian *was* familiar with, it was treating a fever. He moved quickly. First he threw a large handful of fuelstones in the stove and put the kettle to boil. Then he tore off his own wet clothing—blushing slightly at being naked in front of another man, even if that man was unconscious—and threw on something dry. He'd be of little use to his patient if he caught a chill as well. And then he undressed the man.

Aside from the engravings in books and a few paintings and statues in dusty museums, Julian had never seen another person unclothed. He tried to keep his mind cold and clinical, noting the many bruises and scrapes that marked the man. Some of them were particularly ugly: a deep purple contusion spreading across his chest; bloody indentations at his neck, wrists, and ankles; an angry gash on one thigh. But Julian couldn't help noticing the man's strong muscles and sleek skin, and the soft sex nestled in dark blond curls.

"You are a degenerate," Julian snarled to himself.

By then, the water had heated. Julian grabbed the box containing the considerable store of medicines his mother had packed. When he'd first seen the box, soon after his arrival at Urchin Cove, Julian had been angry at her

assumption that he might take ill again. But now he was grateful for the supplies. He sprinkled a packet of dried herbs into a bowl, added the warm water, and found a soft, clean towel. He then spent a long time dabbing gently at the man's injuries. He paid special attention to the open wounds, some of which looked infected. He smeared on ointment as well, and wrapped what seemed like miles of bandages.

The cottage had become very warm. Sweat dripped down the back of his collar, making his neck itch, and he had to pause often to wipe his face. But the man was still trembling. A harsh rattle shook his lungs with every breath. Julian wasn't sure if that was new, or whether he'd been too preoccupied to notice. It was a worrying sound. He'd made it himself during some of his more serious illnesses. It always caused Dr. Brinkett to frown.

There was a salve that the doctor often used on him. It smelled terrible, but it usually eased Julian's breathing. He was pleased to see that his medicine box contained the ingredients. He required only a few moments to mix them together and then rub the concoction onto the man's chest. He hoped the pressure didn't aggravate the bruising. He hoped he was doing the right thing.

Finally, when he ran out of things he could do for his unconscious patient, Julian bundled him under blankets, took a comb, and unsnarled the man's hair. Dry and free of sand and bits of clinging seaweed, the hair was pale yellow, like freshly churned butter.

Which reminded Julian that he hadn't eaten. He sat at his table, gnawing on bread and cheese, but his attention remained on the man who slept in his bed. Surely he wasn't a local. None of them looked anything like him. While they tended toward the short and stout, he was tall, lean of hips and belly, and broad of shoulders. The locals were ruddy and weather-worn. He was pale, fine-skinned. And Julian was no fool; he realized that some of the man's wounds had been made by bonds of some kind. Ropes or fetters. Whose prisoner had he been, and why?

Julian took his time cleaning up. He'd scattered things everywhere: bits of medicine, dirty towels, wet and sandy clothing. The man's clothes had dried a

bit but were clearly unsalvageable. Still, Julian was loath to throw them away. What if they were literally the only things the man owned? Julian shook them out and left them to dry on a small rack outside his front door.

He sat down with tea and a book, but he couldn't concentrate on the story. What was the point of reading about someone else's mountain-climbing expedition when he had his own mysterious stranger right here in front of him? So Julian fussed instead, checking bandages and blankets, rubbing in more salve, wiping sweat from the man's brow. He reminded himself of his mother and the way she'd hover over him when he was small. Sometimes even when he was quite well, he'd wake up to discover her sitting at his bedside, watching. She'd confided in him once that she was afraid if she didn't keep a close eye on him, he might slip away from her like a dream. She'd stopped keeping vigil when he reached adolescence, but sometimes he caught an odd expression on her face, and he wondered if she didn't worry about him still.

Julian's patient did not disappear. In fact, when yawns overtook Julian and his eyelids grew heavy, he realized that the all-too-real man was taking up his only bed. Sleeping in one of the plain wooden chairs was out of the question. The other cottages might have a mattress he could use, but he was far too sore and weary to consider dragging more heavy burdens. So he sighed unhappily and built himself a nest of blankets on the floor next to the bed. He doused the lanterns and laid his tired body down, feeling the hard stone beneath him. But he realized that the man's breathing had become smooth and even, and when he reached up to touch the stranger's hand, the skin seemed less feverishly hot.

Smiling with satisfaction, Julian fell asleep.

CHAPTER FIVE

“Water.”

At first, Julian’s groggy mind thought he’d dreamt the raspy voice. But when he managed to get his eyes open, the first thing he saw was a face up on his bed, blue eyes looking down at him.

“Water. Please,” the man said. He sounded as if his throat had been scoured with sand.

Julian untangled himself from his nest and found his feet. Oh, he was *sore*! But probably far less so than the other man, he told himself sternly. “Just a moment,” Julian said. He was thankful he’d slept fully clothed instead of in his usual nightshirt.

He filled a glass from the pump and took it to the bedside. But the man didn’t seem able to lift his head very well, and his hands shook too much to hold the cup. Julian held it for him and propped his head so he could swallow a few sips.

“I think... let that settle for a moment.” He gently set the man’s head on the pillow. “If you drink too much at once you’re likely to be sick.” That was something he knew from experience.

The man nodded slightly, then closed his eyes as if the entire interchange had been deeply exhausting. But just when Julian was certain he’d fallen back asleep, the eyes fluttered open again. “Who?” the man whispered.

“Julian Massey. I... I found you on the beach. Who are you?”

The reply was so faint that Julian had to strain his ears. “Kit Archer.”

“Oh. Well... hello, Kit.” *Mr. Archer* was probably too formal an address for someone you’d been intimately attending. “You... You’re quite safe here. I can give you some more medicine for the fever. Perhaps make you some tea or broth. And then I’ll go fetch help. I imagine there is a proper doctor in the village. I shall be back in less than an hour.”

But Kit's eyes had widened and he'd begun breathing fast. "No! Please, don't. Can't let them... Please. Not yet."

Julian didn't know who "they" were, nor what Kit didn't want them to do. But there was no mistaking the fear on his face, and something twisted in Julian to see him distressed.

"All right. I won't go. But only if you're certain. It's just me here, you see, and I'm—"

"Please."

Such a simple request, so heartfelt. Even if Julian's better judgment told him otherwise, he couldn't refuse. He nodded. Relief smoothed Kit's handsome features and his lids fell shut.

Julian regretted not getting Kit to drink more water. But at least he could attend to Kit's wounds. The bruising looked worse, but what worried Julian much more was the deep cut on Kit's leg. The edges of the wound were red and inflamed, and pus had dirtied the bandage. The wound smelled terrible, too.

"All hells!" Julian swore. He didn't feel competent in treating a nasty infection, but what was the alternative? He'd promised Kit not to go for help and had to assume that Kit had a good reason for begging him not to go. But if he didn't go, Kit could die. Either way, Julian would be responsible. He'd never been responsible for anyone but himself, and it was bloody terrifying.

He did the best he could with herbs, salves, and fresh bandages. Only then did he visit the outhouse, change to fresh clothing, and consume some tea and dry bread.

He was just finishing his meal when Kit stirred again. Julian hurried to his side with more water. Kit managed a few swallows, but his brow was hot and dry and his gaze unfocused. "Piss," he whispered.

"Pardon?"

“Have to... piss.” Getting the words out was clearly taking enormous effort.

Julian stood helplessly for a moment, but he didn't want Kit to wet the bed so he improvised. He fetched an empty jar that had once held Mr. Crabbottom's pickled beets. He held the jar toward the bed. “Here. You can... use this.”

But Kit was shivering so violently he could barely grasp the blankets. “Help,” he moaned piteously.

Trying to swallow past the lump in his throat, Julian drew the blankets away. He held the jar firmly in one hand and with the other he gently grasped the other man's organ. Julian was trembling slightly, and it took a bit of maneuvering to get everything properly in place. “Go ahead, please,” he said.

Kit moaned with relief and emptied his bladder. Julian couldn't help but notice that the urine was colored a very deep amber, which probably meant Kit was dehydrated. But Kit fell back into a restless slumber even before Julian could cover him up again.

Julian found himself somewhat at loose ends. He didn't want to leave Kit alone, and so he couldn't go on one of his customary rambles. But he still felt so very odd over his current circumstances that he couldn't possibly attend to his books. He busied himself for a while with a few minor chores, then decided to attempt to cook. He was aiming for something souplike or stewish, but the result was so vile that even the imps refused to eat it.

And so the day dragged on. Kit's fever raged. Sometimes he mumbled incoherently. Sometimes he awoke enough to drink a little water. Sometimes Julian lay cool, damp cloths on his forehead, which he knew would feel soothing. Once when he did this, Kit's eyes focused on him briefly, and a tiny smile tugged at the corners of Kit's mouth.

Night fell, and Kit was no better, but also no worse. Julian helped him urinate again. This time he felt a bit less uneasy over the act, perhaps because he'd now spent twenty-four hours looking at and touching Kit's body. But as

Julian settled into his uncomfortable nest of blankets, he found himself wondering what it would be like to stroke another man's penis, to feel the organ become firm in his grip. His cheeks burned at these thoughts, but then so did his loins. He even briefly considered taking himself in hand. But he couldn't do it, not with another man right next to him—even if that man was unconscious. So instead Julian shifted about restlessly until he fell to sleep.

The next day was very similar, except this time Julian was wise enough not to try cooking stew. He was running low on food, actually, and he was worried about how long Kit could survive on only a few sips of liquid. Julian resolved that the next day he would walk into town to get supplies, and if Kit was not improved by then, he'd fetch help as well.

But by afternoon, Kit *was* better. He was still too warm, very drawn, and weak. But the shivering had stopped, and he was able to swallow several glasses of water. He could even hold the jar steady while he emptied his bladder. Julian could have sworn there was a glint of amusement in Kit's eyes over Julian's obvious discomfort.

“Who are you?”

Julian was standing at the open door, watching the shadows grow long. He turned to look at Kit. “Julian Wade Massey.”

“Are you a doctor?”

Julian laughed. “No. I'm on holiday. I found you on the beach.”

“I'm a strange bit of driftwood, am I not? A true disappointment to a beachcomber, I expect.”

“I... There was a storm.” The humor in Kit's tone flustered Julian. He'd never been good at joking about.

Kit's face turned more solemn. “There was indeed.” He sighed and looked around himself. “Where are we?”

“Near Urchin Cove. It’s a holiday cottage.” And surely Kit must think him a simpleton.

“Who else is here?”

“Nobody. I’m... I’m quite alone.”

Kit’s light brows drew together and he looked about to say something, but then his head fell back on the pillow. “Bloody tired.”

“I... your leg. It is quite bad off. I should get a doctor or some sort of help. If I go to the village—”

“Please don’t.” Kit turned his head to look directly at Julian. “I’ll mend. You’re taking good care of me. Thank you.”

Now Julian was flustered again, and he looked away. “You should eat something.” He walked to the little kitchen area and surveyed his meager pantry, wondering what in heavens he could prepare for Kit. Then he remembered he had a few dragonlet eggs, a gift from Mrs. Crabbottom during his last visit to town. He melted some butter in a pan, cracked the speckled green egg, and cooked until the results were soft and runny. He spooned his masterpiece into a bowl. “I’m afraid I have reached the limits of my culinary skills,” he said as he approached the bed.

Kit smiled at him. “I can barely brew tea.”

Julian had to spoon the food into Kit’s mouth. He should have felt ridiculous over it, but instead an unfamiliar emotion warmed his chest. Pride. He was proud of himself for bringing a desperate man to relative safety, for tending to him so carefully, for feeding him. He’d never before accomplished so much.

Kit didn’t possess the energy to finish the whole egg, but didn’t fall asleep quite yet. “What are you, Julian Massey?”

“I told you. I’m on holiday.”

“And when you are not on holiday?”

Julian shrugged. “I... I’m nothing much.” His brothers had professions. Two of them were barristers like their father. The third was an engineer, helping to build the transport system that would someday soon replace the city’s dragon-pulled carriages. But everyone had always assumed Julian too ill to work—including Julian himself. When he wasn’t unwell, he haunted booksellers.

“You are a bloody miracle, is what you are. My savior.” Kit smiled once more and closed his eyes.

Julian finished eating Kit’s egg and made another for himself. He still had a bit of sausage left, so he finished that off as well and then munched on some large red grapes. He cleaned up. Then he sat at his table, watching Kit sleep.

What kind of man risks his own health—his own life, perhaps—rather than have his presence made known to the locals? Probably not a good man. Certainly not just a fisherman lost in the storm. But Julian’s heart stubbornly refused to believe that Kit was a bad man. Not with those clear blue eyes, and that slightly crooked smile, and—And Julian *was* a simpleton, and a fool as well.

CHAPTER SIX

“I must go to the village,” Julian said.

“No! Please, I beg you. You—”

“I will not tell anyone you are here. I just need to get some food.”

Kit’s shoulders sagged with relief. “Thank you. If I could repay you, I would.”

Julian remembered that all Kit seemed to own were his ruined clothes. “Why don’t you wish me to tell anyone? How did you end up nearly drowned on the beach? Who *are* you?”

“I’m nothing much,” Kit replied with an expression that seemed to mock himself rather than Julian.

Julian glanced out the open door. He’d spent the morning tending to Kit’s wounds, which were looking slightly better, and washing clothing and bedding, and sweeping sand out of the cottage. He wanted to run his errand before the day grew later. “I shall be gone for perhaps an hour. Will you be all right?”

“I’ll be fine.” Kit gestured at the empty jar at his bedside. “I’m prepared for emergencies. I expect I’ll simply sleep. I’ve never been so exhausted in my life, and I’ve done nothing but lie in bed.”

“Illness is very taxing.”

Kit gave him an odd look. “It is.”

Julian hovered uncertainly near the door before doffing his jacket and hat. “An hour then.” Kit didn’t respond. Perhaps he was already asleep.

Although the sun was bright and the temperature warmer than Julian ever experienced in Greynox, he noticed as he walked that it wasn’t *quite* as warm as it had been. Summer had passed its peak already, and in a matter of a few weeks he’d be returning home. Home. The familiar old pile of bricks in

Greynox seemed suddenly a bit alien. But if it wasn't home, what was? Julian couldn't stay in his holiday cottage forever—the winter cold would make it uninhabitable. He would return to his musty, dusty room with the perpetually drawn curtains and the stink of medicine. Instead of walks on the beach or rock-climbing he'd have his books. He'd have the familiar, somewhat bland meals prepared by Cook, the sounds of city bustle outside his wall. He'd have his mother's fussing, his father's and brothers' scorn.

Ah, but at least he'd return with a bit of an adventure behind him. He would have the memories of finding Kit, of nursing him back to health. Of touching him.

The windows and door of the tavern were wide open, and the sounds of conversation and laughter spilled onto the street. Julian wouldn't have minded a meal there, perhaps an hour or two listening to Editha and Samuels and the others spin their tales. But Kit was waiting, so Julian went to the shop instead. He spent quite a bit of time considering what groceries might work best and whether he ought to stock up on more healing herbs.

Mr. Crabbottom raised his bushy eyebrows when he saw the quantity of Julian's purchases. "You must be hungry."

"I've run low on everything since the storm."

"Ah. Was a nice bit of a blow, wasn't it? Now the *proper* winds, they come a few months from now. Winds so fierce they can blow a man over. And the waves! Fiercer'n ogres they are, and twice as deadly." He scribbled in his ledger for a moment, then began to place the items in Julian's burlap bag. "Once when I was a lad, we had a storm so wild it washed all the boats straight through the town. My da's boat ended up at the top of that hill yonder. Took a team of eight dragons to bring it down again."

"That must have been... inconvenient."

"Aye. And another time, just a few years back it was, a storm blew through. And the next day Davey Rakens found a mermaid just outside his front door! Ah, she was dead, o' course. And she weren't no beauty when she

was alive—that’s just a tale they tell. Mouth full o’ pointed little teeth, like a shark.”

“Oh.” Julian reflected that he’d been considerably more fortunate than Davey Rakens in his after-storm discovery. Although as far as he was concerned, Kit Archer seemed every bit as exotic as a dead mermaid.

The bag was heavy. A few weeks earlier, Julian probably wouldn’t have been capable of carrying it all the way to the cottage.

Kit seemed tense when Julian first entered the little house, but then relaxed and gave a small grin. “You haven’t brought anyone back with you.”

“I promised not to.”

“So you did.”

Julian bustled about for several minutes, putting away the food.

“Is that a bottle of wine I see in your hands?” Kit asked. He’d propped himself up a bit with the pillows.

Julian turned around to face him. He didn’t often drink wine, but the bottle had tempted him as he’d been choosing dried fish. “I don’t know that you ought to drink any,” he warned Kit.

“Oh, I definitely ought. It will dull the pain, I reckon. And water becomes so tiresome after a while.”

Julian struggled with the cork, found two clean glasses, and poured a healthy dose for each of them. “I don’t know if it’s any good,” he said, handing over one of the glasses.

“I’m sure it’s awful. I don’t care.” Kit grimaced as he drank, but still emptied the glass.

“You should eat more,” chided Julian. “I’ve bought quite a bit. What do you fancy?”

“Anything fresh would be lovely. I’ve been... at sea for some time.”

Julian waited for Kit to give more details, but he instead remained silent, staring thoughtfully at his blanket-covered lap. Julian noticed that the quilts had fallen away from Kit's upper body, leaving his shoulders and chest bare. The bruising still looked terrible and he still wore a bandage around his neck, yet there was a raw beauty to him that made Julian's pulse pound. Kit looked up and caught Julian staring; but even as Julian's cheeks burned, he couldn't look away.

"You were going to bring me something to eat," Kit said softly after a moment.

"I... yes."

Kit ate an entire egg this time, and a little soft bread, and three of the fireberries Julian had picked as he walked home from the village. Kit drank another glass of wine, then smiled with satisfaction. "That was very good. Thank you." But then he shifted his leg a bit, gasped, and went very pale.

Julian had been sitting at the bedside. As soon as he saw Kit in distress, he helped ease him flat on the mattress. "I ought to check your injury. It's been hours since you've had any medicine."

"Go ahead." Kit gave the blankets a tug. They fell to the floor, leaving him entirely uncovered.

Julian couldn't imagine being that nonchalant about nudity. His frequent illnesses had required a fair amount of... poking and prodding. But Dr. Brinkett had exposed only the necessary bits of Julian's body during his ministrations, and even then Julian had generally stared at the ceiling and pretended he was somewhere else.

But Kit just lay there, and although he was tired and in pain, he seemed otherwise comfortable. He even gave Julian a small encouraging smile. "I'd like to see the leg unbandaged, please. I want to know how bad it is."

"All right." Julian gathered his doctoring supplies. He tried to keep his attention focused solely on his task, on the several square inches of wounded leg. But he could feel Kit's gaze upon him. And he was very aware of the

close proximity of his hands to Kit's manhood—and he remembered well how that flesh had felt against his palm.

“It's not so bad,” Kit said, but his face was still white.

“If I can't stop this infection you could... you could lose the leg. You could die.”

“I have utmost confidence in you.”

Julian blinked at him. Kit's tone was light, yet his face was quite serious. “Why would you have confidence in *me*?” Julian asked. Nobody else did.

“I haven't died yet, thanks to you. I think I'm in excellent hands.”

Julian shook his head. Then he wrapped the leg in fresh bandages and pulled the blankets back up on the bed. “I'll make you some tea. I've some herbs that should help with the fever.”

“My mother used to make me drink chamomile and griffinbane. Tasted awful, and she wouldn't even let me add honey.” Kit's voice sounded weak and faraway, and his eyes had drifted closed. “Made me drink it once a week...”

While Kit's tea steeped, Julian nibbled some cheese and fireberries. He'd never harvested his own food before and he felt quite daring over it, even though any child could have done the same. They tasted sweeter than the ones the servants used to bring him with his breakfast.

He had to wake Kit up to take the tea, and Kit fell back asleep immediately afterwards. Julian took advantage of the opportunity to give Kit a quick bath with a damp towel. He knew how uncomfortable one could get if forced to remain with sweat-streaked, medicine-smearred skin.

And then once again, Julian was at loose ends. He ended up sitting in the doorway of the cottage with a book on his lap. Periodically he'd look up, past the mouth of the inlet, where he could see a boat far away. It didn't appear to be moving. Perhaps the fisherman had dropped anchor to haul in a catch. Or

something like that—he was really rather vague on the details of fishing procedures.

The days were growing noticeably shorter. He waited until the sun set before coming back inside. He went about his evening chores: preparing a meal, helping Kit eat and drink and empty his bladder, tidying up. He used the outhouse and washed his teeth, hands, and face. And then he stripped off his overshirt and lay down in his blanket nest.

“That can’t be comfortable,” Kit said, startling Julian a little. He’d assumed Kit was fast asleep.

“I’m fine.”

“But the bed is much softer.”

Julian frowned into the darkness. The bed *was* much softer, and he’d been waking up terribly sore from the cold, hard floor. He’d been disappointed to discover that none of the other cottages contained any furniture beyond a few scraps of broken wood. But he certainly wasn’t going to have an ill, injured man sleep on the ground. “I have blankets,” he said.

“The mattress is big enough for two. Just take care not to jostle my leg.”

“You want...” Julian swallowed. “I can’t share your bed.”

“It’s your bed, not mine. I won’t bite, Julian. Please. I feel guilty enough as it is, and guilt isn’t an emotion I’m used to. Get off the floor.”

It was silly to be arguing over this. The mattress *was* quite wide, and it wasn’t as if Julian would suddenly lose control of himself and... and molest the other man. He rubbed his face and stood. Kit was near the edge of the bed, so rather than trying to climb over him—which was out of the question—Julian clambered up from the bed’s foot. When he lay down, his left side was touching the smooth wall and his right side was close enough to Kit to feel his body heat.

“Do you always sleep in your clothing?” Kit sounded amused.

Julian huffed instead of answering, and Kit chuckled. Lying in the dark, inches from a naked man, listening to the warm sound of his laughter—Julian was immediately and painfully aroused. *You are sick!* he told himself. *Attracted by a man, and a wounded one at that.* But despite his self-disgust, he remained achingly hard for a very long time.

He was almost asleep when Kit moved slightly. “Where are you from?” Kit asked quietly.

“Greynox.”

“Ah. And you came on holiday all by yourself? Why not bring friends or family?”

“My doctor recommended it. He said the fresh air would do me good. My family members are too busy with their own affairs. I haven’t any friends.” He bit his lip, hard. He hadn’t meant to say that last bit. Somehow it was easier to share confidences in the dark.

“Then I should be very honored if you’d consider me a friend. You’ve certainly earned my gratitude.” Kit sighed noisily. “Not that you should value the friendship of a scoundrel like me.”

“Scoundrel?”

“You don’t strike me as a fool, Julian. Surely you’ve worked out that there’s something amiss with me.”

After a moment of silence, Julian said, “Are you a pirate?” It was a ridiculous question, really. Not one he’d ever expected to utter in earnest. But under the circumstances, it did seem like a real possibility.

He was frozen into immobility when Kit grasped his hand and squeezed it. “I am not a pirate. But I am a man who occasionally consorts with pirates. And I’m a thief. When I am not injured, I am a dangerous man.”

“Oh.”

Kit squeezed his hand again. “But I am also a man of my word, and I promise you that I would *never* harm you.”

For no good reason whatsoever, Julian believed him. In fact, he felt daring enough to squeeze back. “How did you come to be washed up on my beach?”

“I think... I think I owe you my tale at least. But can I tell you tomorrow? I’m very tired.”

“Of course.”

“Thank you, Julian.”

Kit didn’t let go of Julian’s hand and Julian didn’t pull away. They fell asleep like that, side by side.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Waking up next to Kit should have been awkward. Kit had flung his arm out so it was draped across Julian's midsection, and Julian could feel Kit's bare foot against his own. But Kit smiled widely at him and Julian simply felt happy. Strange.

"I'm feeling much better this morning," said Kit. "Your doctoring has wrought miracles. Do you suppose you could help me outside?"

"Outside?"

"You do have an outhouse, don't you? I'd prefer it to the indignity of a chamber pot."

Julian sat up, taking care not to draw the blankets away from Kit. "I don't know if you should be walking yet."

"If I don't move around a bit I shall go mad. Can't we at least try?"

There was something very persuasive about Kit's expression. So after Julian fed them both, and against his better judgment, he helped Kit sit up. Kit swayed a little but didn't fall over. The bruises on his chest had begun to fade to a mottled green-yellow, which Julian took for a good sign. And when Kit pulled the bandages away from his neck and wrists, the marks looked less raw and angry. He pushed the blankets off his lap. "If you would help me stand..."

"You... your clothes were ruined. I'll find something of mine you can wear. I must have something that will fit."

"You've already seen me naked, Julian. Let's skip the bother of clothing."

"But... you're going outside!"

"I think this is hardly central Greynox. There's nobody about to be offended by my dangly bits, is there?"

Julian's face went scarlet. "No."

“Well, then let us go. My business in the outhouse will be easier this way in any case.”

Julian had never blushed as often or as fiercely as he had since he'd rescued Kit. He almost felt as if he'd come upon a fever of his own, especially since he was slightly lightheaded. But he stood next to the bed and helped Kit lever himself upright. Kit grunted and moaned a little, but managed to stand. He was several inches taller than Julian, and more heavily built. His hair fell past his shoulders and tickled against Julian's cheek. “There now,” Kit said. “That was easy.”

They shuffled slowly across the floor, Kit leaning most of his weight on Julian. Once or twice his bad leg almost gave out completely. But he was clearly a stubborn sort, and able to withstand a great deal of pain. They made it to the doorway and down the step to the sand.

“I didn't think... anyone stayed... in these cottages... anymore,” Kit said. He had to speak in short bursts because his breathing had gone harsh.

“Nobody but me.”

“It's... a lovely beach... Private.”

“Quite.”

The outhouse was difficult. Julian had to squeeze inside with him—a very tight fit—and help him sit. Then Julian stood outside with his back to the little building, pretending to admire the surf. He wondered what it would feel like to be nude out of doors. It hadn't occurred to him to try it, despite his secluded beach. Honestly, he was rarely nude *indoors*, except in his house in Greynox, when he bathed in the big copper tub.

Back in the cottage, Kit settled on the bed with a groan. “Well. That was an adventure.”

“It was quite a lot of activity, considering your injuries.”

“I suppose so.”

Kit hadn't bothered to pull up the blankets. Julian told himself he was becoming used to seeing a naked man. But he wasn't sure what to do with himself. He bustled aimlessly around the cottage, moving small items from place to place. He wondered if he were brave enough to attempt another stew. Meanwhile, Kit dozed.

When Kit began to toss and moan, Julian feared that the fever had returned. Perhaps the journey outside had been too much. He stood watching Kit worriedly for a few moments before settling a hand on Kit's brow.

Kit startled and jerked away.

"Oh! I am sorry," Julian said. "I was just checking—"

"It's fine. Just a nightmare. But maybe you could check my leg? It's throbbing terribly."

Julian unwound the bandages. The gash was still ugly-looking, but the telltale pus and stink were gone. "It's looking better, actually. I believe the infection is gone." He sighed. "It requires stitching up."

"Do you know how to do that?"

"I can try. I bought a needle and some silk thread in the village. You'll have a terrible scar, I'm afraid."

Kit grinned. "I've been wanting another scar for some time. Makes one look very manly."

Kit already looked manly, but Julian didn't say so aloud. "It's going to hurt. You might want to drink the rest of the wine first."

"An excellent suggestion. And when I am properly put back together and my tongue has been loosened, I believe I owe you a tale."

The stitching went reasonably well. Kit hissed a few times but was otherwise stoic, and Julian was painstaking in his work. When he was finished, he smeared on some ointment to prevent further infection and applied more bandages. He was almost out of bandages, in fact. His mother had

underestimated his need in that respect, but then she had likely not predicted her son would end up doctoring a nearly drowned man.

“Would you like some food?” he asked when he was finished.

“Just some bread, please.” Kit took the bread and tore off a small piece. He sopped up the last drops of wine before popping the morsel in his mouth. “You make a fine doctor, Julian. I can’t believe you’ve never done this before.”

“I haven’t. But I’ve had ample opportunity to watch a real doctor work. Well, not at stitching, but at treating fevers and the like. I’m... sickly.”

“You look quite well to me.”

All hells. Julian was blushing again. He tried to hide his embarrassment by cutting himself some bread and slathering it with butter. But he could feel Kit’s gaze on him as he worked, and Julian had the impression that Kit was amused by him.

Julian was going to sit in his usual chair beside the bed, but Kit shook his head. “I can share.” He carefully shifted himself closer to the wall, then looked at Julian expectantly.

Well, Julian couldn’t refuse that. Besides, if he were next to Kit he could enjoy being close without the discomfort of trying not to stare at Kit’s body. Instead, he could look at the opposite wall, which was bare and boring.

“Thank you,” Kit said. “And please forgive me. It’s been some time since I’ve had a friendly set of ears at my disposal, and I don’t do as well with solitude as you do.”

“Where are your family and friends?”

“I have no family and my friends are very far away.”

“Farther than Greynox?”

Kit chuckled, but not in a mean sort of way. “Farther even than that. My home is on Sanvia.”

Julian gasped. He had read about Sanvia in some of his books. It was an island far, far to the west, surrounded by unimaginable miles of open ocean. The books said the weather there was always fine, the fauna and flora exotic. The phoenix was native to Sanvia, as were golden-furred fewbats, colorful parrots, and rodents larger than lapdogs. The authors claimed that delicious fruits grew everywhere, free for the taking, but you had to beware the carnivorous flowers that would greedily chomp off your fingers or toes.

“But you speak our language so well,” Julian said.

That brought another laugh. “I wasn’t born there. I was born a half a day’s ride from Greynox, in an exquisitely boring little town called Dungarth. With the emphasis on the *dung*, I assure you.”

“Sorry. I’ve never heard of it.”

“More fortune to you. There is nothing there of interest to anyone. Even the dragons are dull-witted in Dungarth.” Kit moved his shoulders a bit, in the process brushing one of them against Julian. The contact was pleasant.

“How did you get from Dungarth to Sanvia to Urchin Cove?”

“In a very roundabout way. I was a hellion as a boy. Terrible disappointment to my parents, and an only child. They both died before I was fully grown, and I ran away. No farming for me! I was after adventure.” He said it mockingly, as if there were something foolish in such pursuits. But Julian envied his courage.

“You seem to have found what you sought.”

“That I did.” Kit moved again. He couldn’t seem to get comfortable. And then, to Julian’s shock, Kit toppled sideways a bit so he could rest his head on Julian’s shoulder. His hair was very soft against Julian’s cheek. “I moved here and there for a while and ended up in a war. Not one of *our* wars, but that didn’t matter. I didn’t even know what they were fighting about, but when a man offered me a salary to join his soldiers I said yes. And I found that I was skilled at it. I don’t know how—wasn’t as if I’d had much use for knife and

sword in Dungarth. I expect it's just something that came naturally to me, like doctoring does to you."

"But I'm not—" Julian was interrupted by a sharp poke to his leg. Then Kit used the same finger to point to his own long, bare leg with its neatly wrapped bandage. Julian had to concede that he had done a reasonably good job with Kit.

"When that war was over I fought another and then another. Or sometimes wealthy men would hire me to guard them or their families or their cargos. I made quite a bit of money. I thought myself very fortunate. And then..." He paused. His fingers worried at a blanket edge, repeatedly curling it and smoothing it out. "And then someone died. Another mercenary. My partner. My friend. My lover. His name was Alexander Hodgkins. My Lex."

Even though Kit's voice had grown very soft, Julian knew he'd heard correctly. Kit had just admitted to having a man for a lover. Julian knew some men did this, of course—he'd read those books. But he hadn't imagined anyone admitting such a relationship so plainly and openly. And Kit was strong and vital despite his injuries. He clearly was not the weak degenerate that men who loved men were said to be.

"I am very sorry," Julian said.

Kit took his hand and squeezed it. "Thank you. Death was always a risk, of course. I just... until I saw him bleeding before me, I'd somehow thought it could never happen to him. I took my money and found a ship and I sailed far away."

"To Sanvia."

"To Sanvia. Lex and I used to talk about it. We used to say that someday we would retire there. I bought myself a house not much bigger than this one. Spent my days sleeping and my nights at the taverns with the pretty, willing boys. And when I tired of that I took a job as a guard at the little port. I never had to kill anyone there. I simply looked frightening so as to scare away the thieves."

Julian had read enough about Sanvia—and some of the books were illustrated—that he could picture Kit very clearly: lolling naked in bed through a balmy afternoon, carousing in lively inns, walking tall around a harbor with swords on his belt. “And then?” Julian prompted.

“A ship appeared in port. The *Dark Prince*.”

“Pirates!”

“Yes, of course. But pirates are common in those waters. And honestly, the term is a bit relative. Did you know that our own queen authorizes privateers to waylay ships belonging to countries with which we’re squabbling? The privateers keep the cargo after Her Majesty takes her share. Of course, those countries have privateers who do the very same to our ships.”

“I... I thought they were stopping spies.”

“Spies—hah. It’s a wonder that these spies are always carrying the most tempting cargos in their holds. But that’s neither here nor there. The crew of the *Dark Prince* works for no queen—they are concerned solely with their own fortunes. As are the crews of many of the ships that dock in Sanvia. But when they come to our friendly shore, they want to spend their stolen money on ale and whores and pretty trinkets, so we welcome them with open arms.”

Consorting with pirates. It would be a tale impossible to believe, if Julian hadn’t found Kit under such strange circumstances. “Did you meet Captain Booth?”

“I did. I met with him four nights in a row, in fact, in a narrow bed in a room over the White Griffin. He’s a handsome man, whose tastes run a bit more specific than Sanvian boy-whores.”

Julian gasped. “You... you had *relations* with Captain Booth?”

“I *fucked* Captain Booth, Julian. And one time he fucked me. He wasn’t especially good at it.”

Perhaps Kit realized Julian needed some time to process this information, because Kit grew silent. His head remained on Julian’s shoulder. Julian turned

his own face away, towards the door, where a pair of orange imps were nibbling at bread crusts. He liked the imps here. The ones in Greynox always seemed dirty and disreputable, skulking about in shadows and alleys.

“Julian? You *are* attracted to men, aren’t you?”

“I... I...” Julian swallowed. He considered pulling his hand away and removing himself from the bed. Perhaps going for a long walk. But gracious gods, wasn’t it time he admitted his true self to someone? “Yes,” he said.

“Have you ever slept with one?”

“I slept with you just last night,” replied Julian, although he knew what Kit was asking.

“An experience I enjoyed more than any of my times with Booth. You smell much better.”

Julian wasn’t sure whether Kit was joking and didn’t respond. He was blushing *again*.

Kit decided to continue his story. “Booth asked me if I’d join the crew. I expect he admired me more as a bunkmate than a pirate. I refused. But then he told me of a treasure he meant to fetch, a casket of gold and jewels he’d taken from a ship two years earlier and hidden from his crew. He offered to share it with me. He was very drunk at the time, as you might imagine. He even let slip the hiding place. And by morning he’d forgotten all about the conversation. The *Dark Prince* sailed away that day.

“But I kept thinking about the treasure. I didn’t need the money; I had enough to get by. But it was... a temptation. My life had grown so stale, you see. Ever since I lost Lex, I hadn’t been able to find a... a purpose. And there was nothing noble about this. I didn’t intend to distribute the treasure to the poor or return it to grateful owners. I wanted a last adventure, perhaps. So I returned here on the next available ship.”

“You stole Captain Booth’s treasure?” Julian asked, a trifle incredulously.

“I did.” Kit sounded proud of himself. “It wasn’t hidden that cleverly, really. He’d stashed it in an abandoned keep on the cliffs near Croftwell. I took it as easily as I might have picked fireberries. But then I made the mistake of spending a few days in Croftwell. I was a little homesick and fancied... oh, some of the old familiar foods, and the familiar accents, and people complaining endlessly about the weather. Unfortunately, Booth decided to pay a visit to Croftwell as well. And as soon as he caught sight of me, he realized what had happened. He’s not a stupid man.”

“What did you do?”

“I ran.” This time, Kit’s chuckle held little real humor. “A man like me learns early on when to stand his ground and when to flee. Booth couldn’t catch me—I’m taller and faster. But he had two men with him and he sent them after me. I killed them.”

“Oh.” Julian wasn’t sure how he felt about that. Of course Kit had killed men—he’d been a soldier.

“I didn’t enjoy it, if that makes any difference. I never have enjoyed taking lives, even when it was necessary. This time it was necessary. And I knew he’d be sending more after me, so I kept on running. I stole a fishing boat and tried to sail away, but I am a poor sailor. The *Dark Prince* caught up with me and I couldn’t outfight an entire crew. I was taken prisoner.”

Julian glanced down at their entwined hands. He’d removed the bandages from Kit’s wrists, but the nasty lacerations were still quite visible. He imagined Kit bound, struggling. “Why didn’t they just kill you?”

“Because I am also not a stupid man. I didn’t have the blasted treasure with me—I’d hidden it away so that if I were captured, I would have a bargaining chip. I’d have information worth keeping me alive, at least for a while.”

“I don’t think I’d ever be that clever,” said Julian.

“Because *you* would be wise enough not to get yourself in a situation where such cleverness was necessary.” Kit patted Julian’s knee with his free hand. “Booth kept me in irons on board the *Prince*, and he tried to convince

me to reveal the treasure's location. His methods of convincing are... unpleasant. But he and the crew were so distracted with me—by then, the crew had become aware of the existence of the treasure, and they were *quite* interested—that they didn't notice the storm coming in. And when the storm did arrive, well, it took all their efforts to remain afloat. They temporarily forgot about me. I managed to get free of my bonds, which is a skill I'd learned some years earlier. I stole one of the ship's boats and tried to make my way to land. I barely made it. I take it my poor little boat did not."

"I think I may have found some pieces."

"Ah."

Kit shifted again, and Julian realized that he was probably exhausted. That had been a lot of conversation for an injured man. Julian doubted he himself had ever had such a long discussion before—and certainly never about such an unusual subject.

"Why didn't you want me to fetch a doctor from the village?" he asked.

"Because I stole the fishing boat from Urchin Cove. They wouldn't be pleased to see me. And if I make my presence known, Booth will hear of it and come after me. For now, he doesn't even know I'm alive."

"Were you scared, setting off in that storm in a tiny boat?"

Kit raised his head from Julian's shoulder and turned to look at him. "I was terrified. But... I was exhilarated too. Since I lost Lex, I've had no particular reason to live. That was nearly four years ago. But this ridiculous escapade has finally got my heart beating again. It feels good, Julian."

Julian knew what he meant, because his own heart had only recently begun beating. Just now it was beating very hard, with Kit's beautiful face so close to his, his strong hand still clasped tightly with Julian's.

"What will you do now?" asked Julian.

“As soon as I’m able, I’ll head inland. Booth is less likely to find me there. Don’t know precisely where I’ll go or what I’ll do, but I expect I shall find something. Another war, perhaps.”

“You won’t return to Sanvia?”

“No,” Kit replied mournfully. “It’s no longer safe for me.”

“And the treasure?”

“The treasure can rot where it lies. I don’t want it. It’ll only burden me.”

They remained silent for some time after that. Kit lay down flat with his head on the pillow—still holding Julian’s hand. Julian didn’t know why. But he watched as Kit closed his eyes and slipped into sleep. He imagined Kit falling asleep in the arms of another man. What had Lex looked like? How had they met? How did they become lovers? And how did it feel to watch someone you loved die?

Perhaps most importantly, how did it feel to be loved?

CHAPTER EIGHT

Kit dozed for most of the rest of the day, waking only long enough to drink water and tea and nibble a bit of food. Julian knew a healing body required lots of sleep, so he disturbed Kit as little as possible. Mostly Julian read, but he also made a second effort at stew. This one was edible. Not delicious, but probably not toxic.

As the sunset neared, he sat in the doorway, watching a clan of imps gambol in the sand. Sometimes one of them would creep close and peer at him with bright, beady eyes. When he didn't produce any food, it would scamper away. "I am sorry," he said after disappointing the creatures again. "I shall find you something after supper."

"Now that you've fed them you'll never be rid of the little monsters."

Julian turned his head to look inside the cottage. Kit was sitting up in bed, a glass of water in his hands. "Are you hungry?" Julian asked.

Kit laughed. "Do you think I am an imp as well?"

"You are very tall for an imp. And your hair is the wrong color."

"Ah, you *do* have a sense of humor, when you're not preoccupied with saving a fool's life."

"My sense of humor is very rusty." Julian stood and stretched his muscles. He was less sore today, since he'd slept on the mattress the previous night. He walked to the stove and ladled some stew into a bowl. He added a hunk of bread and carried it to the bedside.

Kit set the water down and took the bowl. "Thank you."

"If you don't like it I can give you something else. We've some cheese and—"

"It's fine." Kit swallowed a spoonful and didn't even pull a face. "It'll be nice to have something more substantial in my belly. I haven't had a decent meal since I left Sanvia."

“I wouldn’t call this one decent.” Julian sat beside the bed and watched Kit eat. He couldn’t say why, but it was satisfying to see someone consume food he’d prepared, even if it was hardly a gourmet repast.

“You like to read,” said Kit, waving a hand in the direction of Julian’s pile of books.

“I do.”

“My parents didn’t wish me to learn how. No point in it for a farmer, they said. But after I was grown, I spent several months with a university student who taught me how—and I taught him a thing or two in return.” He winked. “I can read and write a little, but I’ve never become very good at it. No patience.”

“I... I could read to you. If you liked.”

“I’d like that very much. It would give me more chance to hear your voice. It’s a nice voice, but you use it so little.”

“I’m not accustomed to having... companionship.”

“Well, it’s a shame to waste you on imps. And you’re very good at keeping your face expressionless too. Most of the time I haven’t any idea what you’re thinking.”

Nobody had ever been interested in what Julian was thinking. “You have only to ask and I will tell you.”

“Good.” Kit ate a few more bites of his stew and then cocked his head. “After what I told you earlier about me, do I disgust you?”

“I... I told you... I admitted that I am... like you. A deviant.”

Kit shook his head. “I was *not* referring to that. Julian, what Lex and I had, there was *nothing* degenerate about that. What we had was as unstoppable and as natural as an ocean wave. It was as beautiful as the sea itself, when the setting sun dips just below the horizon and sets the water ablaze. Loving Lex was the wisest thing I ever did, the best thing. The only thing of consequence that I have managed.” He set the bowl down and grasped one of Julian’s hands in both of his own. “Do not be ashamed of this, Julian. And for the sake of all the gods, don’t smother what is within you. You are a good man! A charitable

one, a thoughtful one. A beautiful one. Find someone who is worthy of you and allow him to love you.”

“I...” Julian stood abruptly. He took the dirty dishes and carried them to the sink. He pumped enough water to rinse them. He could scrub them more thoroughly later.

“What about the rest, Julian? Does it not disturb you that I have been a sword for hire? A ruffian. A thief. A consorter with pirates. A man of no account.”

Julian didn't turn around. “You have been very kind to me.” Without saying anything else, he went outside to use the outhouse.

Julian read to Kit by lantern light. It had taken some time for Julian to choose a book; surely a man who had lived such adventures as Kit would find Julian's stories silly. Finally he picked a volume with a battered red cover. It was one he'd read so many times he could recite passages by memory. It told of a young man who was cast out by his family and town after being falsely accused of a crime. The man fled to a faraway land where he eventually met a river naiad. He saved her and her sisters from a disaster and in return was allowed to join them in their underwater home forever. The story was meant for children but the language was almost like poetry.

When he came to the end of a chapter—the hero had just caught his first glimpse of the naiad—Julian paused to drink some water. He glanced at the bed and was startled and a bit disturbed by the intensity of Kit's gaze. Then Kit reached up and stroked his fingertips ever so gently across Julian's cheek.

“When you read, you truly come alive,” Kit said, his voice slightly husky. “All those emotions come to the surface. You're beautiful.”

Julian had no notion how to respond to that. His body had frozen even as heat bloomed under his skin. Kit's eyes were like the sea, he thought. A man could drown in them.

Then Kit let his hand drop and gave Julian a wry smile. “Please. One more chapter?”

In fact, Julian read three more. His throat felt raw and he couldn't stop yawning. He put the book aside and helped Kit—still nude—to the outhouse. Kit still had to lean very heavily on him, but was a bit steadier on his feet. Back in the cottage, he helped Kit with nighttime ablutions before conducting his own. And then he hovered uncertainly near the bed.

“You're not thinking of sleeping on the floor again, are you?”

“No.” Actually, Julian had been dithering over what to wear. Feeling daring, he shed his breeches and overshirt, and he climbed under the covers wearing nothing but a soft undershirt and cotton drawers. Which was still, of course, considerably more than what the man beside him wore.

After a long silence, Kit cleared his throat. “May I tell you something?”

“Of course.”

“When I am with you... I feel this sense of peace. It's quite extraordinary. I've never experienced it before.”

“I... I don't... There's nothing special about me.”

“I beg to differ. If you'll forgive the nautical metaphor, you are like the cozy little bay you have here. A bit hidden, so a passerby might not notice it. Might not see how charming it is. But if that passerby were to sail into the bay, he'd feel so very safe.”

“Safe? I have never handled a sword in my life and can barely pare vegetables without cutting myself. I couldn't protect you from a sprite!”

“But you have protected me. You saved my life, remember? And in any case, there's more to safety than wielding a big weapon—as lovely as big weapons can be.” Kit chuckled at his own double entendre, then laughed outright when Julian snorted at him. “You have strengths of your own, Julian Massey. You ought to recognize them.”

Julian didn't answer. But he lay awake for a long time, staring into the darkness, thinking about what Kit had said.

CHAPTER NINE

When Julian woke up, Kit was grinning merrily at him. “You snore.”

“I certainly do not!”

“You do! Like a drunken sailor. Like this.” Kit flopped dramatically back onto the pillow, closed his eyes and dropped his jaw, and emitted a loud, grating sound. He peeked at Julian to judge the effect of his performance.

Julian kissed him.

He didn’t mean to. In fact, he was as surprised as Kit when their lips met. Maybe even more so. And Julian was completely inexperienced at kissing so had no idea whether he was doing it right. But, well, it *felt* right. Kit’s lips were very soft and his cheek was scratchy from beard stubble. And his hand had made its way to Julian’s head, so that Kit’s palm cradled the curve of his skull.

After an eternity, Julian pulled back and looked solemnly at Kit. He wondered how Kit would react. He wasn’t sure what his own reaction was—apart from an aching erection and an urge deep within for *more*.

Kit smiled widely. “Good morning.”

“Erm... good morning to you.”

“Best morning I’ve had in ages, actually. I’m feeling almost lively.” He took Julian’s hand and guided it to his groin, establishing that he too was hard. Julian had touched Kit’s manhood before, but in a clinical sort of way, and then the organ had been soft. Now the skin was still soft, but beneath that was a solid core, hot and vital.

Julian was suddenly taken with the irrational urge to *taste*.

But no. Reluctantly, he drew his hand away. “I... we can’t.”

Kit’s face was serious and a little sad. “You’re right. My stupid leg would get in the way and you... you deserve more than this. *My* first time was a

drunken grope in a barn that smelled of dragon shit. I didn't even know his name. Just a farm boy I met while I was passing through—a farm boy very like me. You should have rose petals and a sirens' choir.”

“I am not a girl!”

Kit reached over and gave Julian's erection a firm squeeze through the fabric of his drawers, making Julian gasp. “No. No question about that.” He moved his hand to Julian's face instead, gently ghosting his fingers along Julian's jaw. “But when you allow yourself to dream, I'll wager you dream something from your books. The bit that happens after the narration fades away, yes? Not sandy bed sheets and a smelly, banged-up ruffian.”

Julian glared at him for a moment before scrambling gracelessly off the bed. He was bloody tired of people telling him what he should do and what he should want. None of them *knew* him. He barely knew himself.

He stomped outside to use the outhouse.

He couldn't avoid Kit altogether, of course. Kit still needed feeding and doctoring, and when he begged for some water and soap, Julian helped him clean himself and comb his hair. At least there was no more sign of fever, and while the stitches were ugly and uneven, the wound appeared to be healing nicely.

“I've always mended quickly,” Kit remarked. “My mother claimed that her great-great-great-grandmother was an elf. Nonsense I'm sure, but that side of the family was remarkably healthy and long-lived. My mother had me at quite an advanced age and was fit as could be until a team of dragons spooked and ran her down.”

“Oh! I am sorry.”

“It was a long time ago.”

“Well, you should be ambulatory soon.”

Kit looked less pleased at this news than Julian would have expected.

Julian walked to the village that afternoon but didn't tarry at the tavern. Inside the shop, he strained his ears to overhear the conversations, just in case someone might discuss the *Dark Prince* or a stolen fishing boat. But Mr. Crabbottom was deep in discussion with two women over the best way to prepare bottlefish, a man was chiding his teenaged son over carelessly-done chores, and an elderly couple was deciding whether they'd buy green fabric or blue for their new curtains. Julian made his purchases, waited for Mr. Crabbottom to scribble in his ledger, and then walked back toward the cottage.

He passed sprites as he walked, and more fireberry bushes. A few people waved at him from yards and fields. But his mind was set firmly on Kit: on the way he'd felt as they kissed, on the sound of his breaths so close to Julian's ear, on the smooth rigidity of his sex against—No. On the smooth rigidity of his *cock* against Julian's palm. Julian blushed just to think the word. But gracious gods, he had kissed another man, and instead of being disgusted the man had been aroused, hard and wanting. If Julian could do *that*, he could bloody well stop using the clinical terms and swooning euphemisms. At least in his mind.

Kit smiled broadly as soon as Julian entered the cottage. "Your imps were looking for you. I expect they'll be pleased to discover you've collected more supplies."

"Yes." Julian frowned as a thought occurred to him. "I haven't made them too dependent on me, have I? I shall be leaving soon and I wouldn't want—"

"They'll be fine. Imps are resourceful little creatures. But this lot will be telling stories for generations to come of the handsome great provider who fed them so very munificently."

"Handsome?"

"Caught that, did you?" Kit's laugh was rich and warm, sending pleasant shivers down Julian's back. "Has nobody ever told you before?"

“My parents complain at my lack of robustness. Mother used to call me her little flower and Father has been known to mutter that I look more like a girl than a man.”

“Devils’ balls! Just because you’re no brute doesn’t mean there’s anything feminine about you. In fact, I can attest from first-hand knowledge that you are decidedly masculine. *Generously* masculine, in fact.” He waggled his eyebrows.

Julian suffered his hottest blush yet, but couldn’t stop his mouth from quirking into a grin.

But Kit wasn’t yet finished. “Julian, you have the sort of face a painter would pay to memorialize. Your hair is the color of glowing embers and your eyes are like deep forest pools. You are on the small side, it’s true, but you’re sublimely put together and when you forget to doubt yourself you move with perfect economy and grace. And your smile! Well, I’ve not seen it often, but when you treat me with it, it’s as if I’ve been given an evanescent jewel. It’s a treasure rarer than anything in that damned box, and a good deal more valuable.”

Julian realized that his mouth had dropped open and he’d been rendered speechless by Kit’s words. He would have accused Kit of jesting, but Kit’s face was set so earnestly—almost fiercely, as if daring anyone to question what he’d said.

“Thank you,” Julian whispered.

Kit nodded as if the matter were settled.

There was supper to be made, dishes to be washed, wounds to be tended to. Julian did all of this, but as he worked Kit talked to him, spinning tales of his many adventures. Julian didn’t know how much of what Kit said was factually accurate, but then that didn’t much matter. It was wonderful to listen to him. And even better, when Julian spoke, Kit *listened*, even if it was nothing but a boring account of his brothers’ drinking habits or a description of his staid neighborhood in Greynox. Very few people had ever listened to Julian before,

or had asked him much of anything beyond the symptoms of his current illness.

Evening fell and Julian read again until his throat was hoarse. Then he stripped to his drawers and climbed into bed beside Kit. It nearly killed him to be so close... and yet not quite touching. He would have skulked away to masturbate, perhaps in one of the empty cottages, but the bed was very comfortable. And besides, he suspected that Kit would know *why* he was leaving and might even tease him about it, which was possibly more than Julian could bear. It took ages for him to fall asleep.

Over the following several days, Kit continued to convalesce. His bruises faded away, the smaller scrapes were replaced with pink new skin, the lacerations from his bonds faded. The wound on his leg began to knit nicely. He was able to move about more, using Julian only for balance as he limped his way to the outhouse. And his appetite returned with a vengeance, so Julian was kept busy preparing them food.

An easy companionship built between them, the sort of camaraderie that permitted fond teasing and comfortable silences. They built their own routine, with Kit sharing his boundless stories and Julian reading to them every night.

Julian touched Kit less often, now that Kit needed little doctoring. But Kit still hadn't asked for clothing and seemed perfectly comfortable lolling nude. Julian didn't mind.

Julian hurried his daily trips into the village. "We haven't seen ya at the tavern lately," Mrs. Crabbottom remarked one afternoon. "Are ya tired of hearing us blather or is it the bad ale's put you off?"

"No, no, you're all... you're lovely. It's only that I've grown so fond of the delights of my cottage and my little bay. I'm afraid I've become selfish of my remaining time there." That was nothing but the truth.

Her mouth split in a wide, slightly snaggle-toothed smile. "See? I told ya, didn't I? Finest holiday home ya could ever want. And yer lookin' as fit as can

be. You've lost some o' that tightness about yer shoulders, if ya don't mind me sayin'. There's nothin' like some time by the sea to cure what ails ya, body or soul."

"Thank you. I am feeling much stronger."

"Maybe ya want to stay longer. That holiday cottage won't be so nice once the winter storms come in, but I can find ya a cozy place right here in town. We've a room right in our own house, in fact. We'll have plenty o' rain 'n bluster, but that's still a long sight better'n spending the season cooped up in that dirty old city."

"That is very kind of you. And tempting. But I must return to Greynox."

She shrugged. "Suit yerself."

He thought about her offer as he walked back. Nothing was waiting for him in Greynox aside from his dreary old room. But he couldn't stay in Urchin Cove indefinitely, not while everyone there bustled about with their fishing boats and their farms and their kitchen gardens. And he would do... what? Lay about like an invalid?

Perhaps when he returned home he would find a purpose—something to do with the rest of his life. He seemed to have a bit of a knack for medicine and he wasn't too old to attend university. He could become a doctor. He could help those in need. His mother would no longer worry over him and it was even possible that, for the first time, his father might be proud of him. Julian might go out in the world more, find acquaintances, even friends. A lover... no, *that* was too much to hope for.

And Julian reached a decision.

CHAPTER TEN

“You have an extra spring in your step,” Kit remarked when Julian returned to the cottage. “Was Urchin Cove particularly fascinating today?”

“There was a fresh catch of squid just arrived in. Mr. Crabbottom showed me how to clean them, and he said I should fry it in a bit of olive oil. He gave me a packet of spices as well, and some vegetables.”

“Sounds delicious. But I didn’t know you found seafood so stimulating.”

Julian tried what he hoped was an enigmatic smile. “You do not know everything about me, Kit Archer. It may be that I have a few surprises in store.”

“Oh. Well, I do like surprises.”

Kit watched carefully as Julian prepared the meal. Julian had become accustomed to Kit’s constant scrutiny. At first it had discomfited him, but now he rather fancied it. It made him feel interesting. Of course, there was little else in the cottage to keep a man’s attention. But Julian was flattered anyway.

Julian brought bowls to the table and Kit made his slow way there, unaided. They sat on the hard wooden chairs. “I suppose you think I have the worst manners ever, coming to a meal naked,” Kit said with a chuckle.

“Well, I do not think we have instituted a dress code here.”

“Maybe you should try it yourself when you return to Greynox. You could tell all those society yobs that it’s the latest thing. It’s really quite practical, you see. Far fewer stains upon one’s clothing this way.”

“But potentially dangerous if one were to spill hot soup in one’s lap.”

“Well, maybe we shall save it for dishes that are less like to drip, then. Like this lovely calamari salad you’ve made.” Kit took a healthy-sized bite, chewed and swallowed, and licked his lips appreciatively. “Wonderful! Mr. Crabbottom deserves a medal and *you* should be knighted.”

Oh, Julian loved to watch Kit eat! There was his obvious enthusiasm, which was a sort of testament to both Julian's doctoring and his cooking. But there was also the way his tongue darted out to swipe at his lips—lips Julian had kissed—and there were the little moaning noises of pleasure he made when he tasted something especially good. Kit's meals would have been sensual activities, *erotic* activities, even had he been attired in the thick layers of cotton and wool required at the Massey family table.

Julian finished his own bowl of squid but barely tasted it.

The washing up seemed to take forever. And then Kit refused to get into bed. "I've been imprisoned long enough," he complained. "A prison with wonderful company and delicious food, but still confining. I miss the *sky*." They ended up sitting side by side in the doorway. Kit leaned a bit on Julian, who'd brought over a lantern so he could read. But even after the book was finished and the lantern doused, they spent a long time watching the waves glow in the moonlight and the stars twinkle overhead. Sometimes a small gust of wind blew a faint snatch of music in their direction, and Julian wondered if there were mermaids singing somewhere nearby.

The night grew chill, and even with Julian's body for warmth, Kit shivered. "I don't want you to take ill again," Julian said sternly.

"Hmm. I suppose not." Kit used the doorframe to pull himself to his feet. Julian remained sitting, watching as Kit made his way to the bed. Julian hadn't had much opportunity to admire Kit's backside, which was as pleasing to look at as his front. His shoulders were so broad, his waist and hips narrow, his buttocks rounded and muscular. His skin showed a few lingering marks, souvenirs of Captain Booth's questioning and the rough rocks in the little bay, but in a way the scars only added to his appeal. They made him more interesting, more *real*. Julian wanted to trace them with his fingertips—not for the purpose of healing Kit, but to learn him, to know him.

Kit got into bed. He spent a few moments adjusting the pillows and blankets, and then settled down. Only then did Julian stand. With his back as straight as possible, his manner as confident as he could manage, he walked

towards the bed. He removed his overshirt and his undershirt, then unbuttoned his breeches. There was nothing unusual in this—it had been his routine for several nights now. But tonight he also took a deep breath and stepped out of his cotton drawers. He knew Kit could see him, backlit by the moonlight through the open door. Julian stood there, waiting.

“Have you decided to follow my fashion?” Kit asked.

“Perhaps.”

“Good. Clothing is so confining. There is nothing better than the sensation of air on bare skin.”

“Nothing?” asked Julian. Then, very quickly, he climbed onto the bed, between the covers—and close against Kit’s long, firm body.

“Julian? What are you—”

Julian kissed him again.

It was better the second time. Perhaps because now Julian was slightly more experienced, perhaps because he’d been anticipating this moment for days. Perhaps because there was nothing at all between him and Kit, their skin pressing together as tightly and intimately as their mouths. And again Kit cupped Julian’s skull—this time with both palms—and again the world dropped away until all that mattered was the two of them.

“You’ll be the death of me, Julian,” Kit whispered. Their lips were no longer quite touching, although he still held Julian’s head very close. “I’m not a man used to resisting temptation, and you are so very tempting.”

“Then why resist?” Daringly, Julian pressed his groin into the hollow of Kit’s hip, knowing Kit would feel the hardness of his cock. Feeling Kit’s hardness grind into his belly.

Kit groaned. “Gracious gods! I told you, your first time should be different. Special.”

“This is not a drunken grope in a barn and I know your name, as you know mine. And this... Kit, this *is* special. To me, at any rate.” He was seized with a

moment of self-doubt. “To you it may be nothing much, and of course I am new to this and probably quite awful at it, but—”

“Awful! Believe me, you are anything but.” Kit moved his hands down to Julian’s shoulders and gently kneaded. “I thought I had convinced you already how extraordinary I find you, but apparently I haven’t spoken often enough of your charms.”

Julian dropped his head and nuzzled against Kit’s neck. Kit’s hair seemed to twine around him like a living thing, stroking him. Kit’s pulse throbbed beneath his mouth so Julian gave into temptation and licked at it.

This time, Kit shuddered beneath him. “Julian... gods, Julian. That’s... You have to stop.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s me! Because I am not the man you deserve. I am only—”

“You are my friend. My first friend, my only friend. I have never desired anyone the way I desire you. Please. We have so little time left together. Be my first lover.” And, quite probably, the only lover Julian would ever have. But Julian didn’t say that bit.

Kit made an animal sound deep in his throat and slid his palms still lower, down Julian’s back and to his ass, where they cupped and squeezed. His palms and fingers were hard with calluses, not soft like Julian’s own. And his hands were large and strong. Julian found himself arching back into their caress and then thrusting forward to slide his cock along Kit’s skin. A drop or two of fluid had escaped already, slicking his movements. One of his hands was fisted in the bedclothes but with the other he gripped Kit’s free hip.

“Are you *certain* you haven’t done this before?” Kit gasped.

“I admit I have been imagining it quite vividly of late.”

“You’re right. You are full of surprises.”

This time, Kit initiated the kiss. And this time his tongue tickled at the seam of Julian’s lips until they parted, and then Julian was being penetrated, which should have been awkward and a little strange but turned out to be

neither. Julian felt as if he were made of three distinct bits—his mouth, his cock, and his ass—and sparks were flying between them as if there were fuelstones in his veins. He squirmed and rocked and tried to remember to breathe—And Kit pushed him gently away.

“What?” That single word was the most Julian could manage.

“Let us... let us slow down a bit. Because if we don't it will all be over quite soon for both of us, and that would be a great pity.”

Julian had to admit the wisdom of Kit's words. “All right. What shall I do?”

Kit brushed his lips against Julian's cheek, then dotted a kiss on the tip of his nose. “Whatever you want, my love. What *do* you want?”

“I... I'm not sure.”

“But you must have some ideas. Are you aware of the possibilities between two men?”

Julian thought briefly of some of the books he'd snuck peeks into. “Not *all* of the possibilities, I daresay, but some of them.”

“Well, then. That should be enough for tonight. What do you dream of?”

“I want... What do *you* fancy?”

“I fancy you, however I can have you. Although we shall have to take some care of my leg.”

“Of course. But what do you prefer?”

Kit seemed to consider for a moment. “Truth be told, I am a man of varied tastes. But all things being equal... I should very much like to fuck you, Julian.”

Julian's breath caught. “Good,” he managed to choke out. Not that he would have minded playing a different role, but ever since he'd held Kit's cock in his hand, he'd been wondering how that hard flesh would feel entering him, filling him.

“Then we are of a mind. We shall need something to ease the way. Have you some kind of lubricant in your medicine kit? That ointment you used on my wounds, perhaps?”

“It’s gone.” Julian thought. “Would oil work? I’ve some left from dinner.”

Julian’s entire body shook when Kit laughed beneath him. “Do you suppose that I am a bit of calamari? Your own fresh catch of the day? Yes, I think that ought to suffice.”

Padding across the floor to fetch the little bottle of oil, Julian could feel Kit’s gaze on him. He was self-conscious about it. Not just about his nudity—although that was bad enough—but also the smallness of his frame; the narrowness of his chest; the pale, freckled expanse of his skin; the lack of muscled bulk. But when he turned back to the bed the moonlight was shining directly on Kit’s face, and what Julian saw there was raw desire. He shed his insecurity like a cloak.

“Here,” he said when he reached the mattress.

Kit took the bottle from him. “Lie beside me, love.”

But Julian had formed an idea. “May I turn on the lantern? I wish to... I want to see you. Please?”

Kit looked as delighted as a leprechaun given a gold coin. He spread his arms and legs wide across the mattress. “Be my guest.”

It wasn’t only that Julian was unlikely to again have the chance to give such close scrutiny to a beautiful, naked man—although that was part of his motive. More than that, however, he wanted to discover every nook and cranny of Kit, to explore him the way an adventurer explores an exotic new land. And not only with his eyes.

Julian lit a single lantern and hung it not too far from the bed. It cast a soft warm glow, an interesting counterpoint to the moon’s sharp light. Little pools of bright and shadow lay across Kit’s skin, shifting slightly as he twitched a muscle here and there. His cock still rested stiffly against his taut belly, and

even as Julian looked, a tiny pearl of liquid appeared at the tip. “You’re looking at me as though you’re starving and I am a feast,” Kit said.

“But that’s it exactly.” Julian climbed beside him and spent a moment or two lightly brushing his fingertips against some of the more tempting bits of skin. He grinned when he saw how Kit reacted with twitches and gasps. It was rather like playing a very sensitive instrument, and very satisfying.

Not *entirely* satisfying, however. Julian wanted more. He straddled Kit on all fours—unmindful of the indignity of the position—and touched his lips to Kit’s neck, right where the pirates’ irons had left their mark. The skin was rough, so he kissed it better before working his way down to the collarbones. Those he licked. He considered nibbling on them as well, just very gently, but then he became distracted by Kit’s nipples, which were tightened into brown buds. When he flicked his tongue against one of them, Kit moaned. “You are a more adept torturer than Booth’s entire crew. Are you sure you have never done this before?”

Julian answered by taking the nubbin of flesh between his lips and sucking lightly. Kit tasted good. Salty like the sea, and warm. And he was thrashing his head on the pillow, his fingers carding through Julian’s tangled hair.

With a final kiss, Julian pulled his mouth away. He skipped the center of Kit’s chest, because although the bruising was now very faint, he suspected there was lingering soreness deep in the muscles and bones. In any case, that meant he could concentrate instead on Kit’s taut belly, which now glistened slightly from the droplets of moisture. Like Julian, Kit was not very hairy. But this close up, Julian could see that Kit’s body was dusted with very fine blond hairs. He blew on them, causing Kit to shiver.

Kit had removed his hands from Julian’s hair and now stroked Julian’s shoulders and the back of his neck. His breathing had gone a bit ragged—but it stopped altogether when Julian kissed the very tip of his cock.

“Gracious gods, Julian! You’ll—I should be the one worshipping you now. You should know how this feels. It’s like all the heavens and hells at once.”

“This is what I want,” Julian said firmly. Then he licked at the rosy head. The skin was slick and saline and smooth. He licked another time, just so he could savor the taste. But Kit was making desperate little noises, and there was still so much left to enjoy. So Julian traced the veins of Kit’s cock with one fingertip. Kit’s erection was slightly less long than his own but had greater girth. It was quite certainly big enough, considering that soon it would somehow fit inside Julian’s body—a notion that both scared and exhilarated him. He stroked it again and it leapt under his touch. He liked that, so he did it a third time.

But then there was the wonder of Kit’s wiry blond curls, so springy to the touch. And his bollocks, sweet and malleable within their lightly furred sack. His thighs were wide with muscle. Julian avoided the bandaged bit, compensating with extra attention to the other leg. He licked Kit’s knees, and when Kit obligingly allowed him to raise one leg, Julian licked the tender skin behind the knee, although stroking it made Kit jerk and laugh. “I’m ticklish.”

Julian would have liked very much to investigate *that*. But there were simply too many choices and too little time, so he petted the hairs on the shins instead, and sucked on both great toes.

“Do not take this the wrong way, Julian, but even the accomplished boy-whores of Sanvia might learn a thing or two from you.”

Julian looked up at him. “I expect that professionals are rather more in a hurry.” And less invested in their subject. They would have no shortage of naked men to explore, whereas Julian had only the one, and that one was so extraordinary.

And now Julian had a decision to make. He wanted to ask Kit to turn over so that Julian might touch and taste his back side. Those glorious muscles, those magnificent buttocks. But the position might be uncomfortable for Kit with his bruises and lacerations. And besides, Julian’s cock was throbbing urgently between his legs, reminding him that there were other pleasures to be shared as well.

He moved around on the mattress until he was again beside Kit. Kit smiled softly at him and reached up to stroke his face. “In all my travels, I have never met anyone as amazing as you.”

That had to be untrue, Julian thought. But he smiled back. “How shall I...?”

“Just... lie flat. Like so. We shall avoid the more gymnastic activities in light of my convalescence and your inexperience. Simply relax.”

Julian did try to relax as Kit caressed his body here and there. But every muscle in Julian’s body felt taut and ready, and his heart was beating very fast. When Kit grasped Julian’s cock and gave it a few long, slow strokes, Julian arched his hips upward, off the mattress.

“Beautiful,” Kit purred. “Now spread your legs for me, my love. Yes, that’s it.” Clever fingers made their way beneath Julian’s scrotum, delving into that most private spot of his body. But when one fingertip nudged ever-so-slightly *inside*, the intrusion proved most welcome.

“Are you all right?” asked Kit.

“I’m... yes. Please.”

Kit chuckled. “Good.” Turned away, but only long enough to reach for the bottle. The fruity scent of olive oil wafted into the air as he poured a bit onto his fingers—and onto the bedclothes besides, but that hardly mattered. He returned his hand between Julian’s legs, and to encourage him, Julian bent his knees and settled his feet flat on the mattress.

After a bit of repositioning, Kit proved himself capable of two tasks at once: one hand moving the length of Julian’s cock, while first one finger and then two from the other hand gradually opened Julian up. Julian didn’t know quite what to do with his hands. They were fisted so tightly that the fingernails were digging into his palms, but the pain didn’t register. It took him some time to realize that the string of inchoate noises was coming from his own mouth, and even then he couldn’t stop it.

“Are you ready for me, love?”

“Yes!”

Julian nearly sobbed when Kit took his hands and fingers away. But then Kit was gently urging him onto his side and was settling himself behind. Kit poured a bit more oil, this time spreading it onto his own cock. “Lift your leg for me, please. Like this. Very nice.”

The tip of Kit’s cock pressed between Julian’s buttocks. It felt enormous. Julian went very still.

“Are you certain now, Julian?” Kit whispered into his ear. “We don’t have to do this. There are many other ways—”

“I’m certain.”

“Oh, thank the gods!”

Kit guided himself into place. At first he was just against Julian’s entrance, and then, slowly but insistently, inside.

There were no words to adequately describe what Julian felt. There was a bit of pain at first, and a brief moment of near panic when it seemed as if he were being stretched impossibly wide. But there was also the sensation of being filled, and more confident strokes of his cock, and Kit’s breathy moans against the nape of his neck.

“Gracious gods, Julian, you feel... It’s as if you were made to fit me. So... gods, so good!”

And by then, Julian had to agree, although he couldn’t make his mouth form coherent words to say so. Then Kit rocked his hips, the slow drag out and—thank the gods—back *in*, and again, and again, and then some part of Julian’s insides was rubbed just so and he cried out.

All at once, Julian wanted more and harder and deeper. He stretched his arm behind himself and settled his hand on Kit’s hip, urging him to keep on doing *that* only more so. For the first time in his life, Julian lost all sense of himself, and all but the most primitive parts of his brain simply shut down. He couldn’t tell whether the pounding he heard was the blood in his body or the surf outside. He writhed and gasped and perhaps even sobbed, and when Kit

called out his name—“Julian!” —a glorious tightness seized Julian’s entire body and then a blessed, blessed release.

Kit must have achieved his own release as well, because he grunted and froze. As they both relaxed—Kit’s softening cock still inside Julian—Kit mouthed tender kisses against Julian’s neck and shoulders.

They had to separate at last, which was a shame. But when Julian rolled over to face him, Kit gathered him in his long, strong arms, and that was bloody wonderful.

“Did I meet your expectations?” Kit asked, nuzzling at Julian’s hair.

“Far exceeded.”

Kit hummed with satisfaction and smoothed a palm over Julian’s buttocks.

Julian was very sleepy. But he had been hit with an epiphany, and he wanted to share. “You were right, you know,” he said.

“About what?”

“You said there was nothing wrong or degenerate about one man loving another. You said it is a beautiful thing. And it is. It is as natural as life itself.”

“I am so glad to hear you say that. Because when I am gone—” His voice caught and he cleared his throat. “When I am gone, you shall find a man to love you, a man who deserves a treasure like you. You shall find this beauty with him, Julian, and you shall be happy.”

The words sounded a bit like a benediction, a prayer. Julian wondered how much of the sentiment was a hope Kit held for himself as well. Julian drifted to sleep in Kit’s embrace, sated and content. But even as the warm blanket of slumber enveloped him, he knew two things. Julian had already found the love Kit spoke of, for he had lost his heart to Kit for good. And no matter how much his attitude had changed, Julian would never again find someone for whom he would have such depth of feeling.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Julian woke up exactly how he'd fallen asleep: in Kit's arms. His head was pillowed on Kit's chest, and Kit was humming to himself while he untangled Julian's hair with his fingers.

"Was I snoring again?" Julian asked sleepily.

"No. But you drooled on me."

"Oh. I am sor—"

"Don't be. I like to watch you sleep."

And, unexpectedly, Julian liked the idea of Kit watching him sleep. It made him feel protected. Which he knew was silly, but emotions were like that. "I never used to sleep very soundly. Not until I came to Urchin Cove."

"The sea air is good for one."

"So everyone keeps saying."

They were silent for a while, Kit playing with Julian's hair and Julian tracing lazy circles on bits of Kit's skin. "Are you sore at all?" Kit asked eventually.

"No." Which wasn't absolutely true. There was a bit of a twinge, but he welcomed it as a souvenir of the previous night. "But I do seem to be rather... messy."

"And you smell like dinner. We both do. Perhaps we ought to bathe today."

"Hmm. And wash the bedclothes."

"But since they are dirty already and so are we, why not take advantage of the situation?"

Julian looked up at him quizzically, just in time to receive a heated kiss.

This morning their movements were slower than the night before, lazier. But although there was less frenzy, there was more passion. They switched roles, with Kit teaching Julian just how exquisitely torturous it was have someone explore one's body, touching every bit carefully but never quite enough. This time it was Julian who prepared Kit's entry, watching his lover gasp and groan, discovering with his fingertip the little bundle of nerves that made Kit plead for more. When Julian sheathed himself inside Kit, he marveled at the heat and tightness and knew that he'd always consider this to be the most intimate of embraces.

They spent the entire day—and the three or four days afterward—making love, cleaning up, eating, talking, making love again. It was decadent and glorious. And it was ephemeral, as they both well knew, but they didn't speak of that. Kit grew stronger. He claimed that all the exercise in bed was the key to his quick convalescence. Soon he was able to go to the outhouse unaided, and he took slow walks with Julian down the beach. Kit still hadn't put on a stitch of clothing, which would have seemed silly except Julian was now spending most of his time barely dressed as well. There were many reasons why Julian dreaded his return to Greynox, and the inevitable layers of scratchy, uncomfortable clothing added to his unhappiness.

“Anything special you'd like for supper?” Julian asked as he readied himself for his walk to the village.

Kit waggled his eyebrows. “More olive oil?”

“I meant something you'd like to eat.”

“So did I.” Kit had the most wonderfully lecherous smile. Just the sight of it and Julian had to adjust his breeches.

“I shall be back in an hour.”

“And I'll be waiting.” Kit returned to reading one of Julian's books. It was a laborious task for him, but he'd been practicing a bit these past days.

Julian walked briskly. Some of the trees had acquired a blush of autumn color, and when he reached the little stone house near the edge of the village, the elderly couple were busily harvesting vegetables. They waved.

Mr. and Mrs. Crabbottom were both in the store today. He was dusting shelves and she was standing behind the counter, working on some broken bit of machinery. “Yer in a hurry again this mornin’,” she said.

“I... I...”

“Ah, it’s fine. Know how it is. A place grows on ya and ya don’t wanna leave it. Tell ya what. I’ll give ya first grab at reservin’ the holiday home for next season. I’ll even give ya a bit of a discount, on account of me likin’ ya so much.” She winked.

“I shall have to discuss the matter with my family.” He wouldn’t, though. Most likely, his parents wouldn’t mind sending him away next summer. But if his plans went well, he’d be at university then. And he knew that a return to Urchin Cove would only stir memories of what he’d had so briefly and could never have again.

He selected a few items, including a small bottle of oil, which made him blush. But when he looked in the case where Mr. Crabbottom normally kept the morning’s catch, it was empty. “No fish today?”

Mr. Crabbottom waddled over and made a sour face. “Ah, there’s plenty o’ fish but no one to catch ’em.”

Julian glanced out the open door. The harbor was full of little boats bobbing peacefully. “Have the fishermen all disappeared?”

“Nah, they’re all in the tavern, drinkin’ and whingin’.”

“Well, why aren’t they fishing?” Perhaps today was some obscure aquatic holiday.

“It’s them hell-blasted pirates.”

A cold chill shivered down Julian’s spine. “Pirates?” he squeaked.

Mrs. Crabbottom made the sign to ward off devils. “The *Dark Prince*. She’s been trolling the waters nearby like a shark since yesterday. Don’t know what that lot’s after, but none o’ us wanna get mixed up in it.”

Julian must have looked as terrified as he felt, because Mr. Crabbottom patted his arm reassuringly. “Don’t ya worry yerself none, boy. Pirates have no truck with a city man from Greynox, I’m sure. They’ll find whatever it is they’re lookin’ for and be on their way quick as a flash. Come back tomorrow and I’ll wager I’ll have all the fish ya could want.”

With a sickly smile, Julian collected his small purchases and placed them in his burlap bag. He might have muttered something to the Crabbottoms; he wasn’t sure. But as soon as he was outside, he fairly ran the entire way home.

He was breathless by the time he reached the cottages, and he had a terrible stitch in his side. He’d half expected to find a ship anchored in the middle of his little bay and was immensely relieved to see nothing but sand and water and a group of gamboling imps.

He burst into the cottage. “Kit!”

Kit was sitting at the table, carving a bit of driftwood with a kitchen knife. He had begun to smile, but as he took in Julian’s face, Kit’s expression turned to alarm. “What is it, love?” he asked, leaping to his feet and dropping the wood and knife on the table.

“Booth!” Julian panted.

“What? Where?” Kit’s hand went to his hip as if he were reaching for a sword. He was still naked, of course, and the action would have been amusing under other circumstances.

“Offshore. The people in the village say the ship appeared yesterday and has been staying nearby.”

“But they haven’t made land?”

“No, I don’t think so.”

“Blast. He may be trying to use a divining spell.”

“Aren’t those terribly expensive? Is the treasure really worth that much?”

Kit shook his head. “At this point, it’s more likely to be me he’s after. I’ve been a blow to his pride, I’m sure.”

“Kit, you must—”

Kit grasped Julian’s shoulders. “I must go at once. I can’t fight them all with kitchen knives. I can’t protect you from them.”

“Protect me?” Julian hadn’t even thought about that issue.

“If they find me with you, do you think they’ll just let you go? At the very least they’ll take you hostage and demand payment from your family. At the worst they’ll realize what you are to me and then...” He tightened his jaw and looked away.

“Come with me to Greynox then. Surely they won’t follow you there.”

“Love, I can’t come with you anywhere. I *told* you! I can’t protect you.” He backed away and looked around. “I’ll need my clothes...”

“You don’t have to protect me! I can—”

“You can what, Julian? Fight a band of pirates? Have you ever fought anyone at all before? Have you any idea how to handle a weapon?”

Julian looked down at his feet. “No.”

“I’ll leave at once, before the spell tracks me here.”

“You’re going to... act as bait? Lure them away?”

“I’m the one they want. You’re a good man who never deserved to be involved in this bloody mess. Now, *please*, love! Where are my clothes?”

Julian tried to think quickly, tried to reach some other solution, but his mind was not used to working in such ways and he could feel his own rising panic. He pushed past Kit and hurried to one of the trunks he’d ignored since his arrival. “Your clothing was nothing but rags,” he said as he opened the clasp. “I threw it away. We shall have to find you something of mine that fits you.”

“Yes. All right.”

They sorted quickly through the luggage. It was simple to find drawers and stockings that worked, but the rest was more of a challenge. But then Julian found a small stash of clothing that must have been put in his bags by accident: finely made breeches, a cotton overshirt, a richly embroidered waistcoat, and a long velvet-lined cloak. It was an outfit that would have been appropriate for an important meeting. “These belong to my brother Robert, I believe. He’s as tall as you, but fatter.”

Kit grabbed the piles of fabric and began pulling them on. “They’ll do. I can cinch the waist with a bit of string.”

“But I don’t have boots for you.”

“I can go barefoot for now.”

Really, Kit looked magnificent in the clothing. He’d have made heads turn at any society event in Greynox. But Julian preferred him naked.

Kit bit his lower lip. “I must—”

“Wait.” Julian went to another bag and fetched a small purse. His mother had pressed it into his hand when he’d left. “For emergencies, dear,” she’d said. It contained several silver coins. Julian hadn’t had a need to spend them before now, but present circumstances certainly counted as an emergency. He tore a blank end page from one of his books—he hadn’t any other paper handy—and scribbled on it with his only pen.

He handed the paper and purse to Kit. “Take these. It’s more than enough money to get you to Greynox comfortably. And that’s my address. I’ll be returning at the end of the week—please meet me there. I’ll tell the servants to expect you.”

“And then what?” Kit asked. His gaze was heavy with sorrow.

“Then... I don’t know. You’ll be safe in the city.”

“Perhaps I would. Or perhaps Booth is angry enough to track me even there. But Julian, even if he did not, what would I do in Greynox? There’s no place for me in a great city.”

“We’ll find a place! I have—my family has money. We can—”

“And your parents would be pleased to support your lover, would they? Your disreputable fugitive male lover?”

Julian wanted to scream with frustration. “I don’t know! But you can’t run forever, Kit. You’re not even fully healed. Please!”

Kit shook his head slowly. “If you want to find that cursed treasure, it’s in one of the caves on the north side of your bay. It’s not really hidden all that well.”

“We could get the treasure and then—”

“And then you’d spend the rest of your life on the run with me? Until we were caught and killed, or until you grew to hate me for stealing you as well.”

Kit tucked away the purse and the bit of paper. Then he closed the space between them and took Julian’s face in his hands. “Oh, love. This is what I am, you see? What I’ve made of myself. I’ll never have a bright future like yours, Julian. Julian. My jewel.” He tried to smile but his eyes glittered. “I’ve never wished so badly that I were a better man. Because if I were, I would love you more fiercely than the moon loves the sea. I would breathe your air into my lungs, I would taste you with every meal. I would tie our hearts together with unbreakable bonds.”

He dropped his hands and took a step backwards. “But I am not a better man.”

Julian held fast to his dignity. He didn’t beg or cry. “I love you just as you are.”

Even as a single tear escaped Kit’s eye, his lips spread into a wide and beautiful smile. “Thank you. I shall remember that.”

And then he turned, walked out the door, and was gone.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Julian did not chase after Kit. He didn't even stand in the door to watch which way Kit went. Instead, he remained inside the cottage, sitting at the table. He felt as gutted as one of Mr. Crabbottom's fish.

He tried to think what he could have done differently, if there had been more time to consider. But even now there were no easy solutions. Kit wouldn't go to Greynox. Julian understood that; he couldn't picture his bright lover trapped in that dreary city. And Kit wouldn't take Julian along with him. He said it was because he feared for Julian's safety, but perhaps he simply didn't want to be weighted down. As Kit had pointed out, Julian would be no use at all in a fight—no use at all for much of anything, as a matter of fact.

He sat at the table until the night crept in. The imps appeared in the doorway a few times, chattered at him, and then went away. His stomach growled but he wasn't hungry. He was simply... empty.

He didn't bother to remove his clothes before climbing into his lonely bed.

The morning dawned bright and warm, and there were dolphins leaping in the bay. He drank some tea, ate a bit of cheese. He scattered some crumbs for the imps.

He'd known this was going to happen, he reminded himself. He and Kit had come together only by sheerest happenstance. Objectively, they had nothing in common. And what would someone like Kit want with someone like Julian? It was like a phoenix falling for a sparrow. Besides, Kit had his very serious problems with the pirates, problems which Julian could in no way ameliorate. Julian had been blessed with his brief days of bliss, and his parting from Kit was inevitable.

That didn't make his heart hurt any less.

And oh, he was worried about Kit. What if Booth had captured him already? Kit's leg was still not fully functional, and he possessed no weapons. And what could Julian possibly do to help him? Yes, he could search for the treasure and, if he found it, find some way to offer it in trade for Kit's life and freedom. But if Kit was correct, Captain Booth's damaged pride was now worth more than the treasure anyway, and he would never give Kit up. For years the entire Royal Navy had been unable to stop Captain Booth and his crew—what possible effect could one small, sickly man hope to have?

Julian was accustomed to feeling useless, but that feeling had never before been so bitter.

The cottage was a mess; clothing and luggage were scattered everywhere. He began to pack everything away. When he was done he would go into the village and see if Mrs. Crabbottom could take him to Bythington in the morning. That was several days ahead of schedule, but Julian could likely exchange his return train ticket or simply buy a new one. There was no longer anything for him in Urchin Cove.

He wasn't skilled at packing and didn't pay much attention to what went where, and so he had a great deal of difficulty fitting everything back into the trunks and bags. He saved his books for last. But after he picked up a few of the well-read volumes, he stood a moment, looking at them, and then put them down again. Those tales of bright adventures with their falsely happy endings had lost their appeal. When he returned to Greynox, he would constrain his reading to medical texts. His father would be very pleased.

A brisk breeze had blown up while he was packing. As he began his walk, he wished he'd worn a coat, but the exercise soon warmed him. When he reached the stone house with the vegetable garden, the old lady was sitting on the front porch, knitting something enormous. There was no sign of her husband. She waved and smiled at Julian as usual, but he thought she looked a bit preoccupied. He hoped her husband hadn't taken ill.

The crowd in the tavern seemed especially raucous this afternoon. He could hear raised voices when he was still well down the road. He went into

the store instead, where Mr. Crabbottom greeted him with a smile. “Fraid there’s still no fish fer ya today, lad.”

A thrill of pure relief washed through Julian. “Are the pirates still here then?”

“Aye. Pesky lot. Whole town’s discussin’ what to do about it. ’Cept for me—I’m just gonna mind my store and that’s it. But yer welcome to join them.”

“Oh. Well, I’m not really a resident...”

“Ah, but we like ya well enough. I know I do, anyway. You’ve been a good customer. Don’t know how a wee thing like you manages to put away all that food you’ve been buyin’.” Mr. Crabbottom patted his own very ample belly.

“Erm... what do you think you’re going to do about the pirates? What can you do?”

“Might could get our wizard after ’em. But he’s old now, says he doesn’t have much magic left in him. Mostly a lot o’ them sparkly doodads, like making colored lights dance or charmin’ pixies into playin’ a song or two. Nice enough fer passin’ a few hours but not much good against pirates.”

Well, that was disappointing, but then Julian hadn’t really expected the villagers to have a miracle solution. At least the *Dark Prince* was still here, which meant Booth hadn’t yet realized that Kit had fled, and so he wasn’t yet in pursuit. With over a day’s lead, maybe Kit stood a real chance of getting away.

“Is Mrs. Crabbottom here?”

Mr. Crabbottom jerked his thumb towards the window. “At the tavern. Yer needin’ somethin’?”

“I was hoping she could drive me to the train tomorrow.”

“Aw, yer not lettin’ them pirates scare ya off, are ya?”

“No. I... I just have to return home.”

“Well, I’m sure it ain’t a problem. Can ya be ready just past dawn? You’ll be wantin’ an early start to get there in time for the train.”

“Of course. That shall not be a problem.”

Mr. Crabbottom nodded and scratched his chin. “And will ya be wantin’ anythin’ fer yer supper tonight?”

“No, thank you. I have enough food to tide me over until tomorrow.”

“Right then. Well, it’s been a real pleasure havin’ ya here.” Mr. Crabbottom stuck out his hand and Julian shook it. “Hope we see ya back next summer. I’m tellin’ ya, just a few weeks here’s worked wonders fer ya. Yer hardly the same man.”

Well, Julian wouldn’t argue with *that*. He mumbled his goodbyes and left the shop.

He was slightly tempted to pop into the tavern, just to listen to the conversation. But he was afraid that his reactions might give away his rather personal interest in the matter, so he walked back to the cottage instead.

There was an unusually large group of imps near his cottage, and they seemed agitated about something. They were running back and forth in short bursts and chattering shrilly. When he approached his door, instead of scattering and then returning after a few moments, they came so close to his feet he nearly tripped over them. Maybe they had seen him packing his things and knew their food source would soon be going away.

“Don’t worry,” he said to them. “I’ll have plenty of leftovers to give you before I leave.” He stepped carefully over a particularly noisy green-haired imp and into his cottage.

He knew food wouldn’t fill the emptiness inside him, but he’d eaten very little today. He prepared himself a meal with his last egg and the last of the fireberries, as well as some tomatoes that might have come from the village wizard’s garden. They were very good tomatoes. After he ate, he spent a very long time sitting in his doorway, tossing crumbs to the imps and watching the waves. The ocean was a marvelous thing: you never knew what surprises

might appear from its depths. Dolphins. Delicious fish. Beautiful shells. Handsome, half-drowned men.

Night arrived and the imps disappeared. Julian wrapped his arms around himself but still shivered. He heard some creature calling, far away. It sounded mournful.

Perhaps he would return to the sea someday. Not *here*. Too many memories. But there was a long, long coastline, and surely he could find someplace hospitable to stay, somewhere he could watch the surf and smell salt in the air.

His eyelids grew heavy and he trudged inside. As he did most nights, he left the door open. He'd have to pile on several blankets—especially now that nobody else was there in bed to keep him warm—but he liked the fresh air and the noise of the pounding waves. Gods, he could still smell Kit on the bedding.

He fell into fitful slumbers full of dark dreams. He kept waking up with the blankets twisted around him like ropes. He would untangle himself, straighten the bedclothes and rearrange the pillows, and fall back to sleep.

At first he thought the voices were part of a dream. But when he blinked his eyes open and cleared a bit of the fog from his brain, he could still hear them. Male voices, rough and loud, and coming closer.

“Oi! Blasted little beastie!”

“Ooh, look at you, afraid of an imp.”

“The little bugger *bit* me!”

“Aw, it was overcome by your many charms, Charlie.”

There was a round of harsh laughter.

Julian scrambled out of bed and darted for a kitchen knife, nearly tripping over his luggage as he ran. There was nowhere to hide in the little cottage, and no way to escape: there was only the one door, and the windows were too tiny even for him. So he did the only thing he *could* do, which was to stand

straight, grip the knife firmly, and wait. His heart was beating a rapid tempo, but his mind felt surprisingly calm.

A number of people burst into the cottage. He couldn't make out the details very well, as they were backlit by the moon, but they were large. Their bodies and their earthy reek filled the little house to bursting.

“Leave at once! You are trespassing.” Julian was proud of the firmness in his voice; it didn't hold a hint of quaver.

“Ah, trespassing we are? Forgive me, your lordship.” The man who spoke executed a deep, mocking bow. “Our invitations must've got lost in the post.”

“Who are you? What do you want?”

“We want t'other one, little man. Where is he?”

“I do not know what you are talking about. I am here alone. I have rented this holiday cottage for myself.”

The man took a step closer, then another, until he could have almost touched Julian. He towered over him, and was twice as wide. “Tell me where he is,” the man said.

“You can see for yourself. There is no one else here.”

The man growled and reached for Julian. Julian tried to slice him with the blade, but the man batted the attack away effortlessly. The knife flew out of Julian's hand and went skittering across the stone tiles. And then the man grabbed a handful of Julian's shirt and lifted him off the floor. “Where!” the man demanded.

Although a part of Julian was terrified, another part was thrilled that they clearly had no idea of Kit's location. And it occurred to him that, although his own chances of survival were now very slim, he might be able to buy Kit a little additional time. “I wish to talk to your captain,” he said, using the precise tone his father used at restaurants when the food was not satisfactory. More than one proud chef had been nearly reduced to tears by Mr. Massey's cold fury.

The pirate was not so easily cowed. He snarled and then threw Julian to the floor. It hurt. Julian sprawled on his back with an enormous boot planted firmly on his chest. The pirate withdrew a sword from his belt and pressed the tip against Julian's neck just barely hard enough to draw a drop or two of blood.

“Tell me or die.”

Julian had never in his life laid a wager. His brothers sometimes went to the gaming house—much to his mother's and their wives' dismay—but Julian had never accompanied them. He hadn't the constitution for it, everyone assumed. But now he realized that he was more than willing to gamble if the stakes were right. And here he had his life, not worth much and likely already forfeit, to wager against Kit's freedom. “I will speak only to your captain. Kill me if you like, but then you shall never find the man you seek. Or the treasure. I know where that is too.”

The other men muttered amongst themselves and the pirate lifted his sword a bit. “You're lying.”

“First you would not believe that I am unaware of your quarry's location, and now you will not believe that I *am* aware. Which is it, sir?”

Julian was heartened when a few of the other men laughed out loud. Better laughter than a blade through his throat.

“If you're lying, I'll gut you meself,” said the pirate.

“Fair enough.”

The man gestured impatiently at him to stand. Julian did, wincing a little at the new ache in his back. He had a small hope of running away from his captors once they got outside, but before he even reached the door, two of the men came forward and wrenched his arms behind his back. His wrists were manacled together. They also clapped irons on his ankles, leaving him barely able to hobble. And then, to his mortification, the biggest pirate heaved Julian up and over his shoulder as if Julian were a sack of turnips.

“Search his bags,” barked the one who seemed to be in charge.

“There’s nothing here but clothing, and none of it will fit any of you.”

The man who carried him hit him hard across the buttocks. “Shut up, you.”

So Julian was dumped on the sand outside the cottage—with one bearded pirate as guard—while the others went through his belongings. He didn’t care about the clothes, but he winced when he heard them tearing his books. He shivered in the cold night air. “Can’t I have a cloak, please? And some stockings and boots?” His guard ignored the request, leaving Julian in the same clothes he was wearing when he fell asleep: his breeches and a tunic. At least he hadn’t decided to sleep nude.

The hunt through his belongings took quite a long time; his mother truly had packed far too much. But Julian didn’t complain. Every minute meant another minute for Kit to get farther away. It meant another minute left of Julian’s short life.

The pirates were not in a good mood when they finished. “Twice-damned poncy bastard, needing more kit than an entire crew o’ men,” one of them grumbled, then spat in the sand beside Julian.

Julian was again hoisted onto a shoulder and had to suffer the indignity of being carried like that across the beach. He was dropped heavily into the bottom of a little boat. Then the men climbed in around him and began to row. He had never been on a boat before. Not even the little rowboats that young lovers liked to paddle about the pond in Jayne Park on a fine summer day. He didn’t much fancy the motion of it, and he hoped he wouldn’t be sick.

The pirates said very little, so the only sounds were the ocean itself and the quiet splash of oars. They passed through the narrow mouth of the inlet, between the towering rocks. Julian didn’t even look up at them, but he couldn’t help but wonder where exactly the treasure was stashed.

Quite a long time passed before the *Dark Prince* loomed over them. Julian couldn’t tell if the ship was flying the famous flag. Someone threw ropes down to the little boat and the men bundled Julian in them like an animal about to be

slaughtered. The process of being lifted onto the ship was uncomfortable and slightly terrifying. He landed with a *thump* on the deck.

A small crowd gathered around him, and he curled into a ball on his side and pretended they weren't there. But he couldn't ignore the boot that kicked him in the back.

“Cap'n says it's too late at night for games,” said the man with the beard. “Says you can stew fer a few hours.”

Julian had to hide a smile. A few hours. Kit could get very far in that span of time.

Two men picked him up, one by the feet and one under his arms. They carried him across the deck and dropped him down a hole, knocking the wind out of him and jarring his arms painfully. He was still trying to catch his breath when someone kicked him into a tiny space—a cupboard that smelled of mildewed cloth—and slammed the door closed. He was left in almost complete darkness, with just a tiny sliver of light through a crack in the door. He couldn't stretch his legs out all the way and could sit but not kneel or stand. His arms and shoulders and back hurt. The rope was still tied around his upper arms, digging into his skin through his thin shirt. He was cold and scared. He was being held captive by pirates! But for now he was alive, and that counted for something.

Despite his discomfort, exhaustion overcame him and Julian fell into a deep and dreamless sleep.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Two men dragged Julian from his cupboard. He couldn't walk—couldn't even stand—so they carried him to a ladder and passed him up through a hole. He was deposited roughly on the deck, squinting in the bright morning sun. His arms ached terribly, but an even more urgent matter was worrying him.

“My bladder is full,” he said to the nearest pirate, a hulking man with a bald head.

“Whassat?”

The man with the long beard—it was braided, Julian could see now—pushed the bald one roughly. “He means he's gotta piss, Charlie.”

Charlie glared at his colleague. “Knew that.” He dragged Julian upright onto his feet and held him until he could stand, albeit unsteadily. Charlie jerked his head at a third man, who brought a bucket over. Julian realized with horror what was about to happen, but could do nothing to stop Charlie from unbuttoning his breeches and pushing them and Julian's drawers down past his knees. An audience of seven or eight men watched curiously as Charlie hiked up Julian's tunic and lifted the bucket to just beneath his cock.

“Piss,” Charlie ordered.

Gracious gods. Well, if Julian could manage captivity and impending death, he could certainly manage to urinate with an audience. He narrowed his eyes and emptied his bladder. Despite the humiliation, it was an enormous relief and he had to suppress a groan.

“I take it that you are enjoying your morning entertainment,” he said to nobody in particular.

Charlie set the bucket down and roughly replaced Julian's clothes. “You'll entertain us plenty today, me lad,” he said, breathing rancid puffs of air into Julian's face. “You'll be dancin' and singin' real soon.” He pushed Julian until

they were near one of the ship's masts, shoved him down to the deck, and affixed his wrists to some rope. Then he walked away.

Nobody brought Julian any food or water, which didn't surprise him. He licked his dry lips and tilted his head up to see the blue, cloudless sky. A very large bird banked and glided far overhead. All around him were boisterous conversations as men engaged in various chores. Chickens were clucking somewhere. Not such a bad life for a man, maybe, aside from the murdering and pillaging. Plenty of fresh sea air.

Julian was thankful that he'd become accustomed to the sun over the past weeks; otherwise he would have ended up with a nasty sunburn because the captain didn't appear for hours. At first Julian was puzzled by this. If the man was so eager to find Kit, why didn't he begin questioning his prisoner at once? But then Julian realized that this must be a tactic to gain his compliance. The captain probably assumed that the longer Julian sat in discomfort and anxiety, the more eager he would be to talk. In fact, although Julian grew increasingly thirsty and sore, his fears eased with each passing minute—another minute for Kit to get farther away.

When the captain finally did make an appearance, the afternoon was well in force and Julian was parched. He could identify the captain at once by his demeanor, although his looks were a surprise. Julian had expected another hulking brute, but in fact Booth was a short man, delicately built, with fine, aristocratic features. He was probably even smaller than Julian. But he kept his back very straight and he wore fine clothes, and he had the air of a minor potentate.

But it was Captain Booth's eyes that made Julian's chest feel tight. They were a deep, clear blue, but they bore little resemblance to a summer sky. They shone with a cold, malevolent intelligence that reminded Julian of the basilisk at the Greynox Zoological Gardens. The basilisk was kept in a special mirrored enclosure so that visitors could safely look at it, but even still, its gaze was mesmerizing and terrifying. When Julian's mother had taken her

young sons to see the creature, even Julian's brothers had fled almost at once, clamoring to see the monkeys instead.

Julian could not flee now.

"Well. Look at this rare find." Booth's accent was as refined and cultured as any lordling's. He peered down at Julian as if Julian were the one on exhibit in the zoo. "I sent my men after a shark and they brought back a doilyfish instead."

Julian's mother kept a doilyfish in a glass bowl in her parlor. It was a colorful little thing with a billowy tail fin, and it was fond of tiny bits of cracker crumbs. She had trained it to stick its head out of the water and sing a song when she snapped her fingers. Perhaps Booth expected Julian to sing as well. But Julian didn't say anything.

"I understood you wished to speak to me," Booth said almost pleasantly. "Do proceed."

"Let me go."

"No, see, it's much too soon to start begging."

"I've never done you harm. I've never done *anyone* harm. I came to Urchin Cove for a holiday, to improve my health. That is all."

"Sometimes our plans change, do they not? I was meant to be an alchemist. Can you imagine? Spending my days in a stuffy laboratory full of reeking chemicals? Not I." Booth gestured expansively, as if indicating that the entire sea was now his instead. "So here I am, and here *you* are, and thus spin the strands of fate. If you would only tell me where Kit Archer is and where my stolen goods are, then our little tale shall be complete."

"I do not know," Julian said.

Booth didn't react with visible anger. "I see. Then the story you told my men was intended only to prolong your life a little longer."

"Yes."

“Yet you seem strangely unaffected by the current imminence of your death. Most men in your position plead desperately, or offer bargains, or simply cry.”

Julian didn't want to think about exactly how many men Booth had witnessed in such straits. He gave a small shrug.

Booth peered at him for a moment. “Are you attempting to demonstrate your bravery and stoicism?”

“I am not brave. I am very frightened.”

“The two are not mutually exclusive. Not at all. But no, there is more to this tale, I think.” He cocked his head and stroked his chin. And then comprehension dawned and his lips widened into a smile. “Ah! Kit captivated you with his charms!”

When Julian didn't respond, Booth nodded. “Of course. He is very beautiful, and I expect even his roguishness would be intriguing to someone like you. He has quite a reputation, our Kit. He fucks every pretty thing he can get his hands on.”

Julian raised his chin. “Like you.”

The captain's smile didn't falter, and he didn't seem to mind that several members of his crew were listening in. “Yes, like me. And he is very skilled. You're not protecting him because you imagine you are in love? Because I can assure you, while he may have enjoyed you when you were nearby, he has certainly already moved on.”

“I never thought he loved me.”

“But you think you love him. You are a romantic. That's delightful... erm, what is your name, doilyfish?”

“Julian Massey.”

“Pleased to meet you. And now that we have the social niceties out of the way, you can tell me where Kit is. And my property.”

“I do not know.” Julian narrowed his eyes. “You said it yourself—he doesn’t love me. Why would he tell me where he’s going or where he put your treasure? He simply left.”

“You do raise an excellent point, Mr. Massey. You are a clever man. And if you are telling the truth, there is no reason for you to remain alive any longer. But if you are lying... Well. I might as well keep you alive a bit longer, just to see if I can persuade you to tell me more. I don’t see any harm in it. In fact, if you are still alive when I find Kit—which will be very soon—I could arrange for some interesting entertainment. You can watch what I do to those who betray me before you experience your own unpleasant end.” Booth nodded. “Yes. That’s perfect.”

If there had been any food in Julian, he would have become ill. As it was, his stomach lurched and he felt his face go pale. “You do not have to do this,” he said quietly. “You do not have to be like this. A man can change.”

Booth laughed. “Are you trying to reform me? Well, that is an original tactic.” Then all traces of humor suddenly disappeared from his face. He looked barely more human than that basilisk. “I do *not* have to be like this. I choose to.” After turning his back on Julian, he pulled one of his men a short distance away and said something to him. The man glanced over at Julian and nodded.

And then... nothing happened, at least not to Julian. The members of the crew moved about on the deck, sometimes nearly stepping over him. It was as if he wasn’t there. He could tell the ship was moving, but to where he couldn’t tell. His arms ached terribly and his mouth felt filled with sand. He was relieved when the sun began to set; the cooling temperatures eased his discomfort a bit. But not for long, because soon he began to shiver. His head swam dizzily.

He might have slept. He wasn’t certain. Sometimes he had moments of lucidity when he could wonder at how fast a body could be weakened, and he could almost smile at the irony of being so very thirsty while surrounded by so much water. He’d lost much of the feeling in his arms and hands, and during

these clear moments he speculated as to whether he should feel worried or blessed by that. But then he'd lose track of his thoughts. He'd hear voices calling his name: his mother, his father. Kit. He'd decide that his entire episode in Urchin Cove was nothing but another fever dream. In reality, he was lying in a sweat-soaked bed in Greynox, Dr. Brinkett fussing with ointments and powders. Outside his curtained window were the calls of hackney drivers and wheels clattering along the cobbles.

During one of his coherent times, he decided that it was better to die tied to the mast of a pirate ship than in his sickbed, and he smiled.

A bit past dawn, someone poured a little water into him. Julian choked and sputtered on it but managed to swallow a bit. Later he was given a few more drops, and this treatment continued for what may have been hours. He was never given enough to slake his thirst—not even close—but, he supposed, just enough to keep him alive. When he was forced to urinate in his clothing, he was both ashamed and surprised that there was any moisture left for his body to give.

Nobody spoke to him. He caught a glimpse of Booth now and then; the captain didn't even glance his way. But there was no sign of Kit, and that was a very good thing.

Julian was so tired. He imagined his body becoming less and less substantial, until it was nothing but a scattering of sand on the *Dark Prince's* deck.

Boots appeared next to him. They were black and very well polished. Julian slowly tipped his head back, allowing his gaze to follow the legs upward.

"Enjoying your holiday?" Booth had a glass of red wine in one hand. He was swirling the liquid slowly.

Julian didn't bother to reply. He wasn't sure his mouth could manage speech, and in any case he was finding Booth tiresome. But perhaps the captain was disappointed with the lack of response, because he crouched and

dribbled some of the wine into Julian's mouth. It was not very good. Too sweet. But Julian licked his lips to catch every droplet.

Booth stood straight again. "I could beat you, you know. I probably shall. I could permit my crew to use you. I could pluck out your eyes and feed them to the gulls."

"You could," Julian rasped. He didn't recognize his own voice. He knew he should be frightened, but he was far too disconnected to feel much of anything.

"Why so much loyalty to a beast who seduced you? Took advantage of you?"

Julian actually laughed a bit. "In point of fact, I seduced him."

"That is ridiculous. He stole from you and you are too much a fool even to realize it."

"He took nothing but what I willingly gave."

"Kit Archer would never do for you what you are doing for him. He would never risk his safety or his freedom or his life for you."

"That does not matter." And it didn't, because his decision to remain silent had little to do with Kit, and much to do with Julian himself.

Booth pursed his lips, and for the first time Julian saw genuine emotion on the man's face. Booth was jealous. Not jealous that Kit had slept with Julian, but rather, Julian suspected, envious of Julian's devotion. And although Julian remained a prisoner, and although he would surely die a miserable death at the pirate's hands, this knowledge of Booth's feelings gave him a kind of power.

"Why are you smiling, doilyfish? I believe you are too much touched by the sun."

Julian hadn't been aware that he was smiling, but now the expression didn't fade. He knew something about himself now. He wasn't a weakling, a deviant, a sickly disappointment. He was a man who was capable of loving another—and capable of seeing the beauty in that love.

“You will never be happy,” Julian said.

“Is that a curse? Or are you an oracle to make such predictions?” Booth was attempting his usual blithe sarcasm, but Julian saw the flash of real pain in his eyes.

“It is a statement of fact. You may torture and terrify and kill, you may fuck, you may steal all the riches in the world. But you will never have what you want.”

“Says the man in rags, who no longer owns even himself!”

Julian shook his head. “I have the greatest treasure a man could want. I have a sure knowledge of my own self-worth.”

“You’re worth *nothing!*” Booth roared. The nearby men took alarmed steps back. But Julian remained calm, not flinching even when Booth tossed the remaining wine in his face. Then the captain whirled and stomped away like a petulant child.

Julian leaned his head against the mast and tried to sleep.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The night was cold and endless. Julian stopped feeling the difference between hunger and thirst and pain, and he lost all sense of time. He saw the stars dancing overhead—complicated waltzes and minuets—and couldn't be sure whether he was hallucinating. Again he heard familiar voices calling his name. His mother was crying over his death. Mr. Crabbottom was telling him how to prepare fish while Mrs. Crabbottom praised her team of dragons. Sprites frolicked in front of him and imps chattered somewhere just out of sight.

The entire world disappeared and all that was left was him and the ship, floating forever.

He heard a hoarse cackle and thought it was a bird. But birds don't fly at night, he realized—the sound was his own laughter. Whoever would have predicted such a fate for Julian Wade Massey?

“Jewel.”

Yes, it all started with jewels, didn't it? Shiny baubles men would kill for, die for. Even had he possessed all the jewels in the world, he would have traded every one of them for his brief time with Kit.

“Ah, jewel, my love.”

Yes, love was the true jewel. He'd had only a taste of it, but enough to know its value.

“Wake up, Julian. Please.”

Only when a hand stroked his face did he realize that the voice he was hearing was real, not a dream or hallucination. He peeled his eyelids open—they were so heavy!—and saw a pair of brown boots.

“Go 'way,” he said. His tongue wasn't working properly. “Bugger off.”

There was nothing cold or cruel about the soft laughter that resulted. “I've been a poor influence on you, I'm afraid. Now, wake up, Jule. We must fly.”

“Not a bird. Not a fish.”

“No, you’re not.” The caress of his cheek became firmer, although still far from harsh. Then the hand moved behind him and fumbled at the rope that attached him to the mast. Julian nearly toppled over when the rope was freed, but the hands caught him.

Finally, Julian looked at the face of the man. “K-Kit?” He must be hallucinating after all.

“Of course. Can you walk, do you think?”

Julian’s brain was as sluggish as his tongue. “Walk?”

“Let’s try, shall we?” Kit tugged Julian to his feet, but Julian would have fallen if his weight hadn’t rested against Kit’s body. “Ah, this is going to be more difficult than I had hoped. Please do your best, Jule. You can rest soon. It will be my turn to doctor you.”

Somehow it was the scent of Kit that convinced Julian this was no figment of his fevered imagination. He’d come to know that personal, wonderful odor so well. Kit Archer was here in the flesh, was holding him and whispering urgently into his ear. But how could that be?

“Kit?” Julian tried to stand, but his legs wouldn’t hold him. “You must go! If Booth finds you—”

“Exactly. That’s what I’ve been saying—we must go. Just let me free your bonds.” Kit maneuvered them both slightly closer to the mast, then leaned Julian back against it.

With considerable effort, Julian managed not to collapse. He blinked his eyes to clear his sight, but still there was Kit in Robert’s fine clothing, only now he wore dun-colored boots and wielded an impressive sword. His face was tight with worry, yet he spared Julian a small smile. “Stand still, love.”

Julian did as ordered. Kit touched the sword to the ropes binding his arms—just touched it, didn’t swing it—and the ropes parted like tissue paper. They fell to the deck with muted thumps. Kit looked as if he were about to

strike Julian's ankle irons, but Julian cried out hoarsely, "Watch out!" Two pirates were approaching fast.

Kit moved so fast Julian couldn't track him. Kit grabbed Julian and dragged him closer. As Julian collapsed, Kit gathered his arm around him and dropped to one knee, holding his sword up protectively. For the first time, Julian got a true sense of what Kit had told him in stories: Kit was a formidable warrior.

The next bit got confusing, especially since most of what Julian could see was the embroidered waistcoat Kit wore. There was a lot of shouting. One of the pirates lunged forward, swinging some kind of heavy blade, but Kit thrust the sword forward and the pirate gave a bloodcurdling scream before falling heavily. The second pirate roared.

"Stand away!" yelled Kit.

"I'll gut ye both!" the pirate shouted back.

This pirate had a throwing knife. But Kit deflected it almost effortlessly with his sword, and when the pirate swung his huge arms to grab at Julian, Kit simply sliced off the man's hands as easily as Mr. Crabbottom gutted a fish.

Julian should have been terrified by the mortal danger he was in. He should have been horrified by the blood spurting from the man's severed stumps. But he was neither. Irrational as it was, he felt perfectly safe in Kit's grip—as well as gratified, surprised, and thrilled that Kit had come to his rescue. He hoped they both survived long enough for Julian to ask him how and why.

More voices were sounding from 'neath decks, and running footsteps were heading their way. Kit seized Julian around the waist, hoisted him over a shoulder, and ran. "Glad you're petite, Jule," he said breathlessly.

Julian was rather wishing people would stop treating him like a sack of turnips. But at least such treatment was vastly preferable when it was Kit doing the carrying.

They came to the ship's hull, the crew still in noisy pursuit. Kit shoved the sword into his belt. "We're going to get wet, Jule. Hold on."

Before Julian could protest that he couldn't possibly hold on to anything—his numb hands still chained behind his back—Kit leapt over the railing. Julian began to scream but got his mouth closed just before they plummeted into the water. He had a moment of sheer, blind panic. He couldn't see anything, he couldn't breathe, and he couldn't move his hands and feet to regain the surface. In fact, the weight of the irons was dragging him downward.

But strong, sure hands seized him under the armpits and pulled him up. He broke the surface of the sea with a noisy gasp. Kit held him close as he treaded water. "All right, my love?"

"I... I think so."

Swimming awkwardly, Kit took them both closer to the *Dark Prince's* hull. They bumped up against a small dinghy that Kit must have tethered there. Getting Julian into the little boat was not an easy task, but somehow Kit managed it. He began to row quickly away while Julian shivered violently at his feet.

"K-K-K-Kit, h-h-how—"

"Shh. Save your strength. I am sorry for the rough treatment. I shall make up for it later." Despite their somewhat desperate situation, there was a note of good humor in Kit's voice. Of course, he was used to life-threatening adventures. He was probably accustomed to nearly dying twice before lunch on Sundays.

Julian was not used to such things. He was dizzy, tired, and cold. He was both sopping wet and desperately thirsty, which wasn't bloody fair. He hurt. And the dinghy seemed to be moving much too fast—he had to bite his parched lip to keep from retching. But Kit was here, and Kit had stolen Julian from the pirates as neatly as he'd stolen the treasure. And if Julian turned his head and squinted up, he could see Kit's beautiful face lit by the full moon.

"You're safe," Kit said.

And Julian believed him.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Julian woke up in his overwarm room, buried under quilts. He ached terribly. His mother was bustling about. He could hear cups rattling on a tray, and she softly sang a ribald tune about a sailor and an octopus, and—

Wait.

His mother would sing no such song.

He peeled his eyes open and discovered Mrs. Crabbottom smiling down at him. She wore her gray hair in neat braids, and if Julian wasn't mistaken, she was sporting her husband's workman's coveralls.

“Ready for some tea and soup?” she asked brightly. “It's some lovely chowder.”

“I... I... How...?”

She shook her head fondly. “Yer all right, lad. Addled yer head a bit. I'll call yer boy fer ya.”

Before Julian could ask her what she meant, she clomped to the doorway. “Kit Archer! He's wantin' ya!” She had a very loud voice.

Julian tried to take in his surroundings. He was in a neat little room with a sloping ceiling and whitewashed walls. A colorful if slightly ragged quilt hung on one wall. The furniture was mismatched and somewhat shabby, yet the overall atmosphere was cheery and warm. Bright sunshine poured through a small round window.

And then he realized two things at once. First, that although his arms were weak and shaky, they were unbound and he could move them a bit. And second, that he wore not a stitch of clothing. He was heavily cocooned in blankets, but blushed anyway when Mrs. Crabbottom turned his way.

“Where—” he began. But he didn't finish because Kit came bounding into the room.

He rushed to the bedside, bent down, and pressed his lips firmly to Julian's sweaty forehead. "What can I get you, Jule?" he asked.

Julian was having trouble finding his voice. He glanced at Mrs. Crabbottom, expecting to find her glowering at them both. Instead, she beamed. "I'll be downstairs if you need me, boys." And then she left.

Julian felt as if his old predictable world had been replaced by a new one, an odd place where pirates kidnapped you, daring and handsome rogues swept you away, and nobody minded if one man kissed another. "Where is this?" he whispered pathetically.

Kit chuckled and sat on the mattress. He cupped Julian's cheek in a warm palm. "Urchin Cove. The Crabbottom estate."

"But..."

"Tea and soup first. I've been pouring things down your throat for days. I wish to see you eat on your own."

But *eating on your own* apparently meant opening and closing one's mouth like a baby bird, while Kit fed him spoonfuls of chowder and sips of strong, medicine-tasting tea. Kit frowned in concentration as he worked, making sure to get every drop inside and stopping now and then to wipe Julian's mouth with a coarse linen napkin. Kit's hair was bound loosely with a leather thong, and he wore a simple tunic and breeches, new but very plain. He wouldn't let Julian ask any questions until the soup bowl and teacup were empty.

"Erm," Julian said. "I have to, erm..."

Kit grinned at him. "Love. I know every inch of your body, as you know of mine. There is nothing to be ashamed of. Do you need to piss?"

"Yes."

Kit's grin widened as he produced an empty jar from the bedside. "Useful, aren't they? All right, love, one moment." He pulled the blankets back, grasped Julian's cock in one hand, and put the jar into place. "Go ahead."

There was nothing sexual about the way Kit was touching him, but Julian couldn't help a small shiver at the feeling of familiar calloused fingers. Then he emptied his bladder, which was a relief. Kit used a damp towel to clean them up before replacing the quilts. "I'm not nearly as good at doctoring as you, I must admit. I've had considerable assistance."

"I don't understand."

"Those bastards captured you, mistreated you. Do you remember that bit?"

"Of course. And then... you came."

Kit stroked Julian's face. "Of course I did. You wouldn't think me so cold-hearted as to leave you in their hands, would you?"

"But you were running away."

"I came back."

"Why? Did you decide you needed the treasure?"

"I needed *my* treasure—my Jule. I was a great fool to leave you in the first place." He shook his head grimly. "Unwisest decision in a lifetime of unwise decisions."

"Why?" asked Julian. He was hoping for a particular sort of answer, but he couldn't quite believe he'd receive it.

"Because I cannot breathe without you. Without you, food has no taste, flowers no color. The morning birds cannot carry a tune. I have never—I loved Lex. I would have traded my life for his. But I never felt the same pull to Lex as I feel to you. It's as if I'm a ship and you're my home port. I'm a snail and you're my shell. I'm an imp—Well, you get the idea. You are my *home*, my heart, my all. I'd rather die than go on without you."

It was a beautiful speech. But Julian couldn't help but ask, "Why? I'm nothing special."

"Of course you're special! Look what you have done! Rescued me. Loved me. Stood up to ferocious pirates. Survived when others might have given up."

“And you came back for me.” Julian was beginning to feel warm, and not from the blankets and soup.

“I did. I came to my senses and returned and I found you gone. Taken. The very thought that they might have harmed you... killed you... But then I hoped they’d kept you alive as a way to find me.”

“I didn’t tell them anything. They don’t know where you hid the treasure.”

“I know, love.” Kit stroked a thumb across Julian’s cheekbone. “And in any case, I’ve retrieved it. After I discovered you were gone, I considered my options. I had no way to find you by myself, to help you. So I got the blasted treasure and took it into Urchin Cove. I hoped they’d hear me out before they hung me.”

“What did you tell them?”

“The truth. That I love you and you’d been kidnapped by Booth. I offered to pay for the boat I’d stolen many times over if they’d just help me rescue you. Offered to give them the entire damned treasure.”

“For me?”

This time, Kit rolled his eyes. “You really do need a great many reassurances. For you. And it turns out that the locals are quite fond of you. ‘A good ’un, for a Noxer,’ they say. They wanted you rescued as well.”

There was something pleasing in knowing that the residents cared about him. Nobody in Greynox ever had. Julian moved his arm—with some difficulty—and grasped Kit’s hand.

Kit continued his story. “They’ve a wizard here, you know.”

“He grows tomatoes.”

“Maybe so. But he also had an enchanted sword to give me, and he did a locating spell for you. He gave me a small cloaking charm as well, so I could sneak up on the ship. He’s not the most powerful wizard I’ve met, but he still has abilities. It took me some time to get to you because the *Prince* had sailed quite a distance down the coast. But I found you and brought you back here.

You've been convalescing for days. I've been doing my best to care for you. You were in poor shape." Kit frowned and squeezed Julian's hand.

"And Mrs. Crabbottom doesn't mind... us?"

"Course not!"

Startled, Julian turned his head to look at the doorway. Mrs. Crabbottom was standing there with a fresh pot of tea steaming in her hand. She entered the room and placed the pot on the bedside table. "I'll fetch more honey if ya like."

"But... but... Kit and I..."

"Lad, there's little enough love in the world. If that boy loves ya enough to brave pirates fer ya, who'm I to say that's wrong? Besides, the two of ya make the prettiest pair I ever saw." She winked.

Despite everything that had happened, Julian still possessed the ability to blush.

He wanted to bask in the heady knowledge that he was worthy, that he was loved. That not everyone would condemn him for loving a man. That even a middle-aged woman from Urchin Cove might see the beauty in that love. But as wonderful as these things were, he was not foolish enough to believe all their problems were solved.

"Booth," he said. "And his crew. They'll keep searching for you, Kit, and if he was angry before—"

"He's seething with rage now. I know."

"You have to leave! At once! You said it's been days already, and—"

"I won't leave you again!" Kit interrupted angrily. "And I won't allow you to spend the rest of your life being dragged along like flotsam, constantly in danger from Booth's wrath. I'm going to stay here, Jule. I'll stay here and make my bloody stand."

"We will," said Julian firmly. "I don't know how to fight, but as soon as I can stand, it'll be at your side. We shall make our stand."

“We all will.” That was Mrs. Crabbottom, and her voice was filled with certainty. “We’ve had enough o’ them now. Bad enough they scare innocent people, and the seaguard not thinkin’ we’re important enough to watch over. Our wizard wore himself out keeping scum like them away. And now they take ya, our own Mr. Massey, and they nearabout kill ya. We’re nothin’ but a lot of fisherfolk and farmers, but we’ll be standin’ with ya.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Julian and Kit's short time in the holiday cottage had been all about the two of them. Now, their world expanded. Not all at once; several more days passed before Julian could spend more than a few moments on his feet. But soon enough he was walking, first around the Crabbottom house and then as far as the tavern. Kit was always at his side, often holding his arm.

Julian sent word to his family in Greynox that he intended to remain in Urchin Cove a while longer. He didn't explain why.

Mrs. Crabbottom drove her wagon to the cottage and retrieved Julian's luggage. But it looked absurd when it arrived in the village, all those trunks and bags for one small man. So Julian chose a few of his most practical outfits—one trunk's worth—and offered the rest to the townspeople. He smiled when he saw bits of his former clothing adorning the residents of Urchin's Cove.

Every night, Kit and Julian shared the bed in the Crabbottoms' top floor room. Oh, that was wonderful! To have thought that he'd be denied the delights of Kit's embrace forever, and now to wake up each morning in those strong arms.

The first several evenings, Julian was too weak to do more than partially drape himself over Kit's solid frame and fall asleep listening to Kit's heartbeat. Kit ran his fingers through Julian's hair and whispered filthy poetry into his ear. That was lovely. And finally, when Julian felt Kit's skin against his, his body was strong enough to respond.

Kit noticed Julian's cock hardening against the hollow of his hip and chuckled. "You recover nearly as quickly as I. Perhaps one of your ancestors was an elf as well." He smoothed his hand over Julian's hip and onto his ass and gave a friendly squeeze.

"Gods," Julian moaned. "Don't."

"And why not?"

“Because we can’t...”

“You’re feeling entirely capable, love. We needn’t do anything particularly exuberant. I’ll take care, as you did for me when my leg was mending.”

As Kit spoke, he continued his firm caresses. Julian had to restrain himself from rutting against him like a wild beast. “But the Crabbottoms.”

“We shall be very quiet. Besides, it was Mrs. Crabbottom who gave me this.” Kit reached for something on the bedside table. Julian couldn’t see the item in the dark, but Kit pressed it into his hand. It was a small glass bottle.

“Is this...? Gracious gods, Kit.”

“Oil,” Kit confirmed cheerfully. “Rose scented. Our nether regions shall smell like a garden.”

Julian was still trying to process the fact that Mrs. Crabbottom not only suspected her two male guests would be having sex, but had actually encouraged it. Floral sex at that. “Are you certain, Kit?”

“Jule, if you’re not comfortable about this, I’m content just to hold you. But gods above, I want you. If you feel the same, then by all means let me know.”

After a few more moments of indecision, Julian made up his mind. But instead of saying so out loud, he simply slithered under the bedclothes, rubbing himself along Kit’s body until his head was even with Kit’s groin. He’d become fascinated with this bit of Kit’s body. He loved the contrast between wiry hairs and smooth skin, between soft flesh and hard. He liked to kiss the wrinkles of his scrotum and tongue gently at the foreskin. He liked to bury his nose in the folds of Kit’s body, drinking in his sweet, musky scent. He liked to ease a fingertip just barely into Kit’s entry, making his lover squirm and gasp. He liked to brush his cheek against Kit’s smooth upper thighs. And he liked to take Kit’s cock into his mouth. He liked that *very* much.

Soon Kit had broken his promise to remain quiet. He thrust gently upwards into Julian’s mouth, groaning and half uttering loving blasphemies. His fingers

tightened in Julian's hair—hard enough to nearly hurt. “J-Jule,” he panted. “I w-won't last...”

Julian was overtaken with the urgency of the moment. He wanted to forget a lifetime of illness and denial, and he wanted them both to erase the pain and fear of their captivities. He wrapped a hand around his cock and fisted himself in rhythm with the motions of Kit's hips. He could feel his orgasm building in his core, a bank of burning coals that would soon burst into flames.

“Julian!” Kit pushed him away. But before Julian could protest, he was being hauled back up Kit's body, damp skin rubbing deliciously against damp skin. When they were face-to-face, Kit grasped Julian's head with both hands and pressed their lips together. Before he'd met Kit, Julian had never imagined how intimate a kiss could be—as intimate as sex, really. And he'd never dreamed that a kiss could send fiery sparks running down his spine, making him shudder and writhe with need.

“You taste like me,” Kit said when their mouths parted. There was a hint of a growl in his voice.

“Yes.”

“And you're truly mine? Even though you know what I am, what I've done?”

“I am yours because I know *exactly* what you are.”

Kit kissed him again, possessing him fully. Gracious gods, to be valued by such a man was far more than Julian had ever hoped for. But Julian moved his head back just a bit so he could speak. “Please. I want you to fill me.”

With a moan, Kit arched up against him. Their cocks were lined up, slick and hard, and Julian very nearly fell over the edge just then. But he managed to just barely control himself, and he reached for the little bottle of oil. It *did* smell of roses, and also of some spices he couldn't place. It was thicker than the olive oil they had used in the cottage, and when Kit slowly—far too slowly!—worked it inside Julian, the oil proved to have slight warming properties.

“Oh,” Julian said as Kit used two fingers to stretch him. He was aware that the sound was more like a whimper than a manly groan, but frankly he didn’t care. Didn’t care about much of anything, really, except hoping that Kit would hurry things along a bit. But Kit was also biting at him, licking and sucking at small patches of skin on Julian’s neck and shoulders and chest. Feasting on him.

Eventually, Julian grew too impatient and decided to take matters into his own hands. He raised up on his knees, straddling Kit, held Kit’s pulsing cock firmly in one hand, and lowered himself down onto it until Kit was completely sheathed. He couldn’t see Kit’s expression—the room was too dark—but he could hear the catch in Kit’s breaths and feel the bruisingly tight grip of Kit’s hands on his hips.

Julian was still slightly weak, yet he had no problem finding the strength to flex his thighs, moving himself slowly up and then more swiftly down. Kit tilted his hips upward, and whether by intent or good luck, with every thrust he angled himself perfectly and rubbed his cock against that delightful bundle of nerves. When he unclenched one of his hands and wrapped it around Julian’s cock, Julian forgot all about Mr. and Mrs. Crabbottom and the entire town of Urchin Cove, and he cried hoarse and garbled declarations of love.

His release rushed through him like wildfire, bringing his loudest shout yet. He was still shuddering when Kit came as well, adding his voice to the din.

Julian collapsed onto Kit like a puppet with its strings cut. They rearranged themselves slightly but never broke contact. Julian could hear Kit’s heart rushing, then gradually slowing.

“Do you forgive me?” Kit whispered.

“I hardly need forgive you for *that*,” Julian said with a laugh. “Although I shall be somewhat sore tomorrow.”

But Kit was quite serious. “I left you, Jule. There you were, a man enjoying his holiday, and I disrupted everything. And although I should have known you were at risk, I left you alone and they *hurt* you and—”

“Kit. First, I was not enjoying my holiday—I was enduring it, just as I’ve endured nearly everything in my life until you. And you brought me the first true happiness I’ve ever experienced. You made me *feel*, Kit! Second, it didn’t occur to either of us that Booth would come after me. But even if it had, I’d have told you to leave. And finally, you came back. You came back for me, and that is all that matters.”

Kit sighed noisily but didn’t argue the matter any longer. Julian realized that although he might appear confident, even brash, deep in his heart Kit doubted himself as deeply as Julian ever had. Well, Julian would just need to work on removing those doubts. He kissed Kit’s cheek. “I love you, Kit Archer.”

It was Kit’s turn to whimper, and he hid his face in the crook of Julian’s neck. His hair was so soft, brushing like strands of silk against Julian’s skin. Julian began to consider whether he might have the energy for a second round. Perhaps if Kit did most of the work.

He ran his fingertips along Kit’s flank. Soft skin and, underneath, hard muscle and bone. So many contrasts in one man. So many surprises.

“He will return,” said Kit.

Julian’s thoughts had been elsewhere. “What?”

“Booth will return. Soon. And now I’d wager his grudge against you is nearly as great as his grudge against me. He must be very angry at having so badly underestimated you.”

“So let him be angry. How many gentlemen in Greynox can boast that they have raised a famous pirate’s ire?”

Kit pushed Julian’s hand away from his hip. “This is not a joking matter. You must have some sense already of what he’s capable of. I do not think he is quite sane.”

“I agree. Kit, you needn’t convince me that he’s dangerous. I am convinced.”

“Good. Then you understand why you must leave.”

Julian’s chest felt tight. “What?”

“Leave. Return to Greynox immediately. First thing in the morning, Mrs. Crabbottom can take you to Bythington in time for the early train.”

“Without you?”

Kit shook his head against Julian’s shoulder. “I’m responsible for bringing the *Dark Prince* here. I won’t abandon the town. We’ve been planning a defense of sorts, and when Booth arrives—”

“When Booth arrives I shall fight at your side.”

“You can’t.”

Furious, Julian pushed Kit hard and scrambled out of bed. He turned the switch on the bedside lantern and didn’t even blink at the sudden pool of warm light. He stood naked, arms lifted at his sides. “Look at me!” he demanded.

Kit sat up slowly and blinked at him. “Yes?”

“What do you see?”

“A beautiful nude man yelling at me.”

Julian stomped his foot. “What do you *see*?” When Kit only frowned in puzzlement, Julian shook his head. “Look at my body. Until recently, I would have been far too shamed to show myself to anyone. But I stand here unblushing. I have my seed on my belly, your seed and scented oil wetting my thighs. I have your teethmarks here and here, and here on my chest you’ve sucked the blood to the surface. See my wrists and my ankles? I still bear the marks of Booth’s chains. I am not the same Julian Massey who first arrived in Urchin Cove. I may not be a warrior like you, but I will not run.”

For several minutes, they both remained still, their gazes locked. Finally, Kit nodded slowly. A tiny smile tugged at the corners of his lips. “You are wrong, my love. I believe you might be the fiercest warrior I have ever met.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Sitting in the Urchin Cove tavern was not so strange. Julian had done it before. But then he had been a bystander, an eavesdropper, the silent man sitting alone. Today he was seated in the center of a long bench, with Kit pressed hard against his right side and Mrs. Crabbottom on his left. And people were talking around him, but they were also speaking *to* him, most definitely including him in the crowd. That was new.

Even stranger, nobody minded that Kit's arm was draped around him, or that Kit had twice in the past hour turned his head to lay a quick kiss on Julian's cheek. Oh, there was a certain amount of laughing and teasing, but it was all good-natured. "Quite a catch you've reeled in," Editha said to Kit with a cackle. "Quite a catch indeed."

Julian didn't really understand why the villagers had taken to him so, not even after Kit had tried to explain. "You're a good man, Jule. Humble and unassuming. They like that you're not greedy. You're kind enough to save a stranger's life and brave enough to stand up to a shipload of pirates. How could anyone *not* fall in love?"

Julian had snorted at him, but was secretly pleased.

Now Samuels waved his tankard in the general direction of the tavern keeper. "M' parched to the bone, man. Parched!"

The tavern keeper was busy ladling bowls of fish chowder. "Ye'll stay dry 'til I'm ready," he answered cheerfully. His business had been booming these past few days.

Actually, the entire village was in a strangely ebullient mood considering pirates were on the way. Kit thought his shared treasure was the explanation, as well as the fashionable clothing Julian had given away. But Julian suspected there was more to it than that. Urchin Cove was a sleepy fishing village in which, as far as anyone could tell, nothing whatsoever of note had happened since the dawn of time. Now, however, the town had been given romance,

adventure, and excitement, not to mention enough gossip to last them for years.

The tavern keeper brought the soup over and set a bowl in front of Julian. It was Julian's third. Kit was insisting that he needed to eat to rebuild his strength, but Julian thought that if he consumed much more, all he'd be good for was rolling into bed.

"I've readied the arsenal," announced a small man named Peters, who was apparently the town constable. "Everything's stored at the harbor."

Kit shook his head slightly. He'd already confided to Julian that the contents of the arsenal hadn't likely been used since the Periwinkle War—over two centuries ago—and had not been well-maintained for many decades. But the villagers clapped Peters on the back and someone bought him a drink, and Kit simply stole a spoonful of Julian's chowder.

Julian was mopping up the last drippings with a hunk of bread when a young man with wild black curls came rushing into the tavern. "They're here!" he yelled breathlessly. "The *Dark Prince* is less than a dozen leagues out and coming in fast!"

Conversation and drinks were instantly abandoned as the villagers sprang to action. The plan had been discussed at great length over the past days, and its implementation began well. Mrs. Crabbottom and two others hurried off to harness their dragons. Julian and a half-dozen villagers ran out into the street. Their task was to go door-to-door, ushering the children, the elderly, and the infirm to the wagons that would carry them to hiding places well away from Urchin Cove. Everyone else headed for the harbor, most of them pausing on the way to gather whatever weapons they could manage.

Kit already had his sword belted at his hip. It was the only decent blade in the entire town, the one the wizard had enchanted to slice through even the thickest metals. He grabbed Julian by the arm just before Julian ducked into a house. "Please, Jule. Be... I love you."

Julian tugged at his hair until he bent down for a kiss. "I know. And we've just found each other, so don't let them take you away from me."

For just a moment, Kit nuzzled at his neck. “Never,” he whispered. And then he was off to the harbor, and Julian was into the house to search for the Carlyle children.

It didn’t take long to collect those who were unable to fight; Urchin Cove was a very small village. Soon Julian was helping the wizard’s wife into a packed wagon, while the dragons snorted and stomped their feet. Once she was settled, Julian turned to give the wizard a hand. But the wizard wouldn’t take it. “I’ll be with you in the battle,” he said firmly. He reached behind his head to tie his long gray hair with a bit of twine.

“But you’re, erm...”

“Ancient. Yes, I know. But I’ve still a bit of magic in me, and I won’t miss this today. I fought at the Battle of Porridge Hill, you know. Killed three dozen trolls. I have a medal.”

The Battle of Porridge Hill had occurred when Julian’s grandparents were infants. He smiled wanly.

The wizard patted Julian’s shoulders with his skinny, gnarled fingers—fingers still stained with soil and tomatoes. “I’ve had a long life, Mr. Massey. I wouldn’t mind a bit more of it. But at this point, I’d rather die quickly in a fight than slowly in my bed.”

Julian could understand that, and he nodded. He waved to the wizard’s wife and the other passengers as the wagon rolled away, then turned and ran to the waterfront.

The entire able-bodied population of Urchin Cove waited at the harbor. They held farmers’ tools—axes, rakes, shovels, and scythes. They clutched fishermen’s gutting knives, hooks, and poles. A few had rusty swords, long spears, or ancient halberds. Kit clasped the wizard’s blade; it glittered dangerously in the afternoon sun.

Kit and Julian had engaged in an extended discussion about Julian’s weapons. They had agreed that a sword would be a bad idea. Julian’s arms

would tire too easily under its weight, and he was as likely to chop off bits of himself as to injure an enemy. Julian had rather fancied a flanged mace he'd found in the town armory. Underneath the grime were elaborate carvings, and Kit said it had once been a fine weapon. But he also insisted that Julian lacked the strength to wield it properly. So in the end, Julian held a short knobby club with a handle worn smooth long before he was born. A pair of daggers were sheathed in his belt. "Your size might actually be an advantage in close fighting," Kit explained. "You can squirm in and do loads of damage with a sharp little knife."

Julian didn't feel like a warrior—he felt faintly ridiculous, in fact. But like the others, he bounced anxiously on the balls of his feet as the sloop came into view. The red flag with the crowned devil flew proudly atop the tallest mast, and the sails bellied with the brisk wind. Julian's hands ached from gripping the club so tightly.

Although the *Dark Prince* was clearly sailing quickly, it seemed to take forever to reach the harbor. It was odd for Julian to realize that he'd been held captive on that very ship, had spent an eternity bound to one of those masts. From here, there was nothing sinister about the craft—it was a jaunty thing, sleek and brightly painted.

The ship pulled alongside the main pier, where it butted against the dowdy little fishing vessels. Very soon, men began to swarm over the sides and land on the dock. Booth was at the forefront in a pair of mirror-shined black boots and a short overcoat that exactly matched his flag. Despite his men towering over him, he managed to seem very large as he marched toward shore.

The villagers didn't back away, so the pirates were confined to the pier. The townfolk outnumbered the pirates two to one, but the pirates were better armed and much more experienced at fighting. Every one of the crew members looked as if he would delight in mayhem. Booth was smiling coldly, the most murderous of all. He stopped at the foot of the dock, nearly within reach of Kit's sword.

“I’m quite disappointed you didn’t pay me a visit when you stopped by my ship.” Booth’s voice carried well, perhaps because he was used to ordering his crew about.

“If I had seen you, you would not have survived the night.”

“Our time together always was exhilarating.”

“Go away, Booth. Never come back.”

Booth laughed like a party-goer pleased with a witty joke. Then he turned his head slightly and raised his voice even more. “I’ve no quarrel with you, the good people of Urchin Cove. Allow me to take Archer and his doilyfish and I shall trouble you no longer.”

Julian felt a brief moment of doubt. Why wouldn’t the townspeople simply walk away?

But nobody did.

In fact, Mr. Crabbottom actually moved a half step closer to the pirates. He carried the long hooked staff that retrieved objects from the top shelves of his shop. “We stand by our own!” he shouted.

Another of those blood-chilling laughs. “Your own? This is a thief and his sniveling little catamite. They have nothing to do with you.”

“They’re ours. And the whole tubload of ya bastards in’t worth an ounce o’ their spit.”

Despite his fear, a warm glow suffused Julian’s body. He was valued by an entire town. He stood up very straight and glowered at Booth. “You shall *never* have what I have,” Julian said, just loud enough for Booth to hear.

And then everything happened very rapidly.

Booth unsheathed his sword and lunged at Kit, who parried neatly. The rest of the pirate crew roared and surged forward, brushing past Kit and Booth and bearing down on the villagers. Julian had been standing quite close to Kit and so took the first rush of the invaders. He swung his club at the nearest pirate, but the pirate deflected him almost effortlessly, knocking Julian off his feet.

Julian's first instinct was to roll away to avoid being trampled. Instead, he dropped the club, drew one of his knives, and sliced deeply into the nearest leg. He was immensely satisfied when the pirate screamed and fell.

But there was no time to celebrate his small victory, because someone kicked viciously at him, causing him to expel all the breath from his lungs in a pained grunt. It hurt terribly to draw in more air. He stumbled to his feet and darted back into the fray.

He'd often read about battles in his books, but none of those stories had accurately portrayed the terrifying confusion, the heart-wrenching screams, the iron smell of blood. Weapons thudded against—and into—bodies, and the mortally injured fell into the sea with sickening splashes. Julian's body seemed at once too slow to react and too fast, and he lost all track of what he was doing.

Later, he would decide that fighting was like the dark reflection of sex: all thought lost in the pure physicality of one's actions.

Now, he simply tried to do as much damage as possible and still remain alive.

Sometimes he caught glimpses of Kit, who seemed caught in an endless duel with Booth. Once he saw Kit stagger when a pirate with a shaved head hit him from behind. Booth struck his sword at Kit, connecting with his shoulder and drawing a fountain of blood. Julian screamed and tried to get closer. But one of the villagers was there first—Peters thumped a staff very solidly into the other pirate's skull. The pirate crumpled, Kit regained his balance, and Booth retreated several feet under his fresh onslaught.

Someone cried out very close to Julian. He spun around to see Editha's tall daughter—whose name escaped him at the moment—trying to fight off an even taller pirate. She was waving a long-handled scythe, but he had a sword. Her tunic was bloody. Julian couldn't tell whether the blood was her own, but she looked to be weakening. So he squished between two men and stabbed the pirate in the back. The pirate roared, spun around, and ran his blade through Julian's body.

It didn't hurt like he thought it might. It was a heavy pain, like a blow, rather than a sharp one. But his legs simply stopped obeying him. He fell to the ground. His blood was rushing loudly in his ears and his limbs were numb, but he wasn't afraid. He tried to catch a last look at Kit, perhaps call out to him one more time, but there was far too much chaos around him, a moving forest of feet and legs.

Other bodies lay on the ground not too far away. One of them was dressed in a fine shirt he remembered his mother buying for him.

The villagers were losing. The battle had moved inland as the pirates gained ground, and the townspeople had lost the small advantage they'd held when the pirates were grouped near the pier. There was a tremendous crash as a window shattered. Was it one of Mr. Crabbottom's shop windows?

There were Kit and Booth, still steel against steel, but both seemed to be tiring. And Kit was distracted, casting his glance around in search of Julian. Booth struck him again, this time on the arm.

"Oh, my love," Julian sighed. He hoped that Booth would not take Kit alive.

Kit caught sight of Julian on the ground and screamed. "Jule!" He started in Julian's direction but then nearly fell when Booth slashed at his leg.

Julian's eyes were wet with tears.

And then the imps appeared.

Julian didn't see where they came from; suddenly they were simply there. A great many of them—swarms of them—all cackling and screeching and chittering at once. Probably the pirates didn't notice them at first. Probably nobody noticed except Julian and the other conscious wounded lying on the ground. Even had the imps been noticed, the pirates likely wouldn't have paused in their actions. Nobody was afraid of imps.

Except now there were hundreds and hundreds of them, and they were armed with what appeared to be oversized thorns. They scrambled up the

pirates' legs, stabbing and biting. When they made it to faces, they went for the eyes.

The villagers fell back in bewilderment as the pirates shrieked in helpless agony.

And as if that weren't enough, just then the wizard bellowed something in a language Julian didn't recognize. The wizard tossed a glowing ball of fire in the direction of the *Dark Prince*. The throw seemed an easy one, like a parent lobbing a ball for a young child. But the fire flew across the water and landed on the ship's deck, and a moment later the entire ship roared into flames.

Kit and Booth had fought all the way to Julian. Kit was flagging and looked badly wounded. "Jule," he panted as he parried another blow. "My love." He fell to one knee.

Booth's lips were spread in a death's head grin. He kicked Julian, who could barely grunt in response. Booth's sword flashed as it came down towards Julian's belly—

Kit sprang to his feet and sliced Booth's head cleanly off his body.

For a frozen moment, the headless body remained upright. The head bounced onto the ground, Booth's eyes and mouth round with astonishment. And then the body toppled.

"Jule? Julian? Gods, answer me!" Kit dropped his sword and clutched hard at Julian's hand.

Julian blinked up at him and tried to smile. "What an adventure!" he whispered.

"By all the demons in hell, don't you die on me! Don't you dare!"

"You'd only come drag me back to life."

Kit pressed his forehead to Julian's and sobbed. "I would at that, my love. I would at that."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

A half-dozen blue-haired imps chattered as they lugged away a particularly large hunk of cheese. The imps were growing fat.

Kit pressed more firmly against Julian's back. He'd carried three quilts onto the beach—one to spread on the sand and two to pull over them, blanketing them against the chill. But it was Kit's body that truly warmed Julian, the entire length of it wrapped around him like the shell on a snail.

Kit's lips were very soft against the nape of Julian's neck. "You haven't fallen asleep, have you?"

Julian yawned and then laughed. "Not yet."

"Good, because I'm not certain I could carry you the whole way back to the cottage."

Wiggling back against him, Julian said, "I have faith in you."

"Hmm. Perhaps we should just sleep here tonight."

"And miss a night in Urchin Cove's finest holiday home? I think not."

They were silent for a while after that. The waves crashed against the beach like the pulse crashing in their bodies, and far overhead the stars spun in a slow, elegant dance.

"We're healed enough to travel," Julian finally said.

He felt Kit tense slightly behind him. "What did you have in mind?"

"Greynox."

A message had arrived from Julian's father that day. It was as unsentimental as expected, mostly demanding an explanation for the broadsheets' insistence that Julian Wade Massey had helped save Urchin Cove from Captain Booth and his men. "Is this some elaborate jest?" his father had written. But instead of sending the message via rail and wagon, Mr. Massey had made the speedy but extravagant choice to post it by wyvern. The

residents of Urchin Cove had gaped in astonishment when it arrived; most of them had never seen a wyvern. But Julian had smiled, knowing his father would only go to such great expense for something he deemed very important.

“What will you do in Greynox?” Kit asked carefully.

“What will *we* do, you mean. You can withstand the dreary place for a time, can’t you?”

“I could withstand all the hells with you at my side.”

“Well, Greynox shouldn’t be so bad as that. Not quite.” Julian laced his fingers with Kit’s, which were splayed across Julian’s bare belly, just below the brand-new scar. “I wish to introduce you to my family.”

“As your friend?”

“Of course. And as the man I love.”

Kit inhaled rapidly, then the air puffed out across Julian’s neck. “What will they do?”

“I do not know. They will be angry, I expect. They may... they may disown me.”

“Why would you take that risk?”

“Because we have endured far too much for me to lie about us. And because I love you too deeply to want to hide it.”

More kisses on his neck and shoulders, each of them searing him like a brand. Julian shivered in Kit’s embrace.

“And how long shall we remain in Greynox?” Kit asked.

“I am not certain. I was thinking... if you were willing... I could study medicine there. It would take two years for me to finish.”

“You will not need a profession, not even if your parents reject you. We’ve plenty to live on from the bits of treasure I kept.”

“I know. But experience suggests that the ability to doctor might prove very useful.” Julian freed his hand and used the fingers to trace the new scar—one of several—on Kit’s thigh.

“You do have a point,” Kit replied with a chuckle. “But what shall I do while you study?”

“Charm everyone in the city with your wit and good looks. Men and women will find you as irresistible as I. They will hang on you like barnacles.”

“Ah, but I will have eyes only for my Jule.”

“And hands only for me.”

Kit gave Julian’s belly a small tickle. “All my body parts, only for you.”

“Good.”

Another group of imps appeared from the direction of the cottage, this one holding a half loaf of bread aloft. They eyed Kit and Julian as they passed, and made a few demanding squeaks before moving on. Possibly they were asking for more ale, but Julian was not eager to do *that* again. Drunken imps outside one’s cottage did not make for a restful sleep.

“We won’t remain in Greynox forever?” asked Kit. He sounded a bit worried.

“No. I think... I might like to build a house here, just as the villagers have been asking. I would enjoy spending our summers here.”

“Ah. I would as well. And the rest of the year?”

“Take me to Sanvia. Take me... take me anywhere.” Julian pushed back even more firmly, feeling the lovely comfort of Kit’s soft cock against his ass, the thudding of Kit’s heart against his back.

“Will you be eager for more adventures by then?”

“I will.”

“And will we be like the people in your books, love? Will we live happily ever after?”

“We will write our own stories, Kit, and we will live happier than any of the people in those books.”

The clean, chilly wind blew across the beach, carrying the scents of salt and life. The moon had the luster of a pearl. And Kit held him tight in his arms, loving him. Treasuring him. Julian closed his eyes and smiled.

THE END

Author Bio

Kim Fielding lives in California and travels as often as she can manage. A professor by day, at night she rushes into a phone booth to change into her author costume (which involves comfy clothes instead of Spandex and is, sadly, lacking a cape). Her superpowers include the ability to write nearly anywhere, often while simultaneously doling out homework assistance to her children. She has published many m/m romance novels, novellas, and short stories. Her favorite word to describe herself is “eclectic” and she’s currently considering whether to get that third tattoo.

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CHERRY BLOSSOMS AND TITANIUM

By Tia Fielding

Photo Description

One man kneels in front of another man, leaning to his midsection. It looks like a submissive pose, but also like they're maybe comforting one another? Both men are dressed casually, and you can't tell if the kneeling man is wearing a collar or not.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

He's been my Master for a long time, the day he collared me was one of the happiest in my life. But lately I have the feeling that there's a distance between us, that he's withdrawing and I don't know why. I'm doing my best to be his perfect boy, I need him to be happy, and serving him and being there for him whenever he needs me are one of the most important things in my life.

But why is he so cold? Why isn't he happy anymore? What did I do wrong? Should I ask him? What if I don't like his answer? What I can do to help?

Losing him would break my heart; if I lose him, I have nothing... But I know it's within his rights to send me away, to take my collar back... but that would kill me. I love him. He knows that. Does he?

Please give this sub and his master a HEA :)

I like BDSM, angst, and whatever you want to write, the only thing I don't like is post-apocalypse (but I don't see it with that pic anyway).

Thank you!

Sincerely,

Kat

Story Letter

Genre: contemporary, D/s

Tags: age gap, tattoo artist, BDSM, sweet no sex, established couples, over age 40, tear jerker, cancer, HFN

Word count: 2,929

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CHERRY BLOSSOMS AND TITANIUM

By Tia Fielding

Hutch leaned his shoulder to the doorframe and couldn't help but smile. His sub, Keenan, was washing the dishes and dancing to the song playing on his docked iPod. The boy was singing too, loudly and beautifully, and Hutch wondered how on earth Keenan could do three things at the same time without flinging soap suds and cutlery everywhere.

He straightened his pose and Keenan saw him from the corner of his eye. The young man whirled around and beamed a smile at Hutch. The smile fell when he didn't get one in return.

"You're early, Sir." Keenan said and wiped his hands on the kitchen towel before turning down the music.

"Yes, the latest client couldn't take more than the outlining today." Hutch explained.

He worked as a tattoo artist downstairs in the redbrick he'd first rented and then eventually bought from his uncle. The upstairs was Hutch's apartment. His and Keenan's. Had been for several years now, but Hutch didn't know how to keep it that way. He was scared, but he couldn't bring himself to speak about his worries with his submissive.

"I was thinking we could order pizza tonight?" Keenan asked, offering Hutch an uncertain little smile.

Hutch hated to see him like this, hated that his handful of a boy had become a timid, almost scared creature who wasn't able to be himself around his Dominant.

"Sure, that's fine by me. Why don't you finish this and order the pizzas while I go and sketch some?" He turned to go and rubbed his chest when he felt the twinge yet again.

“Okay.” The tone of Keenan’s voice told Hutch more than the younger man could ever guess.

Hutch went to the living room and picked up his favorite sketchbook from the coffee table. His box of pencils and the set of Faber-Castell colored pencils were next to the armchair he usually sat in while working on ideas. Today he didn’t have ideas, just worries, and he wondered how his life had gone to shit so fast.

One morning, about a month ago, he felt the strange pull in his left pec. Or so he thought. The pain didn’t go away during his morning shower and he panicked a little. That was the first time he pushed Keenan away. When Keenan, after putting on the coffee maker, had joined him in the shower, he’d left his sub there, looking surprised when Hutch rushed out as soon as he could instead of showering together like they normally did.

He’d thought it was his heart when the pain didn’t go away like a muscle spasm would have. He had always thought that he’d be the first to go since he was fourteen years older than Keenan. He knew he’d have to call his doctor, but he put it off for a day or two just because he was so scared. That, naturally, showed to Keenan who—like any good sub—was finely tuned to his master’s needs and moods.

That had been the second time Hutch pushed him away. He couldn’t help it. If he was dying, wouldn’t it be easier for Keenan to be pushed away now? Set free so that when the time came, he wouldn’t have to grieve so much.

Three weeks ago, he’d finally gone to see his doctor. To his surprise, Doctor Jameson had found a lump in his chest. A lump. Like the one his mother had had. Yes. The two words he’d learned to be afraid of since he was little kid were uttered in his presence again; breast cancer.

“You should tell Keenan. Whatever it is, you’ll need his support to survive this, Hutch,” the doc had said.

Hutch had mumbled something unintelligible and run from the office. The needle biopsy was scheduled for the week after. He managed to sneak away

for it when Keenan was babysitting his niece and nephew in the next town over.

Waiting for those results had been a struggle like no other. He'd lost his temper at everyone from his artists downstairs to a squirmy client to, worst of all, Keenan. Keenan who did nothing but be perfect.

Nothing had changed in his boy's behavior at first. He still wore the titanium collar Hutch had given him in lieu of an engagement ring two years ago. He still did everything he could to anticipate Hutch's every need. He was the best submissive anyone could wish for and Hutch loved him like he'd never thought to love another person.

Gradually, over the course of the last few weeks, things had changed. Keenan smiled less; he began tiptoeing around Hutch as if on eggshells. His confident, gorgeous submissive had become a timid creature who seemed to shrink a little every time Hutch came into the room instead of straightening up and beaming like a flower greeting sunshine.

The first biopsy had been *inconclusive*; that was the word Doctor Jameson had used. They'd needed to do another one, and with the schedule hectic for some reason or another, they'd managed that only four days ago. The results weren't in yet.

"Is something wrong, Sir?" Keenan's tentative voice carried to Hutch's armchair from the doorway.

Another thing Keenan never did before was hover. He knew Hutch hated it, so he never did it, and he had no reason to, before. Now, apparently, he did.

"I..." For a moment, Hutch was lost. He looked at the beautiful man standing there with clear longing in his blue eyes, and he almost cracked.

The impulse went away quickly and Hutch averted his gaze, cleared his throat and shook his head. "No, I'm fine."

"I just came to tell you the pizza is here."

There must've been the doorbell and Keenan talking to the pizza guy... How had Hutch missed that?

"You know what, Sir?" The tone of Keenan's voice, slightly rough, and decidedly firm, shook Hutch out of the odd stupor he'd apparently fallen into again.

"Huh?" Eloquent, especially for a man who prided himself on his dominant nature.

"I say 'bullshit', Sir." Keenan walked closer and stood next to the armchair, staring at Hutch from above.

"W-what...?" Now Hutch, his mind still somewhere else, was completely lost.

Suddenly nothing made sense. This wasn't how his boy behaved! Keenan never cursed, especially not at Hutch. He was too respectful.

"I said *bullshit*, Sir." Keenan repeated, then pointed at the sketchpad on Hutch's lap. "You're drawing cherry blossoms."

Feeling utterly stupid, Hutch looked down and saw that yes, indeed, he'd been drawing cherry blossoms. He hated to tattoo those things, and he certainly never drew them for fun. Keenan had noticed years ago that Hutch only drew them when he was having some sort of inner turmoil about something.

"What's going on, Sir?" Keenan knelt between Hutch's feet, most likely blocking the escape route on purpose.

Hutch cleared his throat again and tried to fend off the panic, the sense of imminent loss, without success. He didn't know what he feared losing, because he'd lose Keenan anyway. Maybe even soon.

"I don't know what you mean, boy."

Keenan closed his eyes and frowned just enough for it to show. The boy swallowed hard and Hutch, being so in tune with this gorgeous person he'd

called his own for years now, could tell Keenan was going through an inner struggle.

“No,” Keenan finally stated, and opened his deep blue eyes that were suddenly brimming with tears. “No. I’ve had enough.” He swallowed again and glanced away from Hutch’s face, giving him enough time to school his own features.

But no anticipating could have prepared him for what came next.

“Carambola.” The word was spoken in a firm tone. Firm enough for it to cut through Hutch’s being, his heart and soul and everything that he was.

The conscientious Master inside the man who was worried sick, scared for his life and feeling so damn alone, jumped to the fore.

Hutch scrambled to move the pad of paper and the pencil he’d been holding to the small table next to the chair, his hands flying to take hold of Keenan’s face.

“What is it? What’s wrong, Keenan?” His whole being reacted to the word much like someone else might have reacted to a hastily called out “Fire!” Hutch was all action now, all for finding out why his submissive had used his safe word.

Whatever it was that bothered his submissive so, it was going to be fixed. Right now. Because his submissive wouldn’t be allowed to be in distress for long, not if it was anything Hutch could repair.

The almost-bitter chuckle from Keenan’s mouth surprised him, though. The blue eyes turning cool in front of him shocked him to the core.

“What’s wrong? *What’s wrong?!*” Hutch’s boy shouted and leaned back, falling to his butt as he scrambled away. “You! *You’re* wrong, you stupid man!” Hutch was opening his mouth, but Keenan stopped him with an angry gesture. “No! For weeks you’ve been acting weird, Hutch. For *weeks!* You’re like a shell of my Master and I don’t know what to do because you don’t even keep me at arm’s length, you keep me on the fucking other side of the room!”

“You barely touch me; you’re in pain and I can see it, yet you don’t talk to me about it! I don’t know what’s going on here, Hutch, but you’ll have to start talking or I will walk out of that door right now!” The anger radiating from Keenan startled Hutch, chilled him to the core.

He looked away from the submissive shaking with rage and worry on the floor, and saw only mementos from their trips around the country, a painting from Hawaii that was corny but had nice shades of purple—Keenan’s favorite color—on it, the tacky statue of a Golden Retriever Hutch had bought from a flea market in Florida... Everything in this room, this whole apartment, screamed their relationship. Everything around them was as much Keenan’s as it was Hutch’s, and more than that, it was *theirs*. Together.

“You know what, obviously you’re not going to talk, so maybe you should get the key right now.” Keenan was holding his collar between his thumb and index finger so that the lock was facing Hutch. “You don’t see me as an equal partner anymore. You hide things from me. I told you that was a deal breaker for me.”

Quietly, Hutch let go of his ego and moved his hands to the collar of his T-shirt. He could hear Keenan inhale sharply, disbelievingly, when Hutch touched the chain on which the key to Keenan’s collar was hanging. Instead of pulling the chain free, Hutch made the decision he now realized he should’ve made weeks ago. He took a hold of the shirt’s collar and pulled it over his head.

Once his curiously tattoo-free skin was visible, he turned his torso so that his left side was facing Keenan. For the first time Keenan could see what he’d been hiding under his clothes. Suddenly a whole new kind of fear invaded Hutch’s mind. He’d kept it hidden, done everything he could not to show himself shirtless in front of Keenan. With the truth out now, shouldn’t he feel relief instead of dread?

It took the boy a few moments to see the tiny Band-Aid over the side of Hutch’s pectoral muscle.

“W-what?” Now it was Keenan who was lost. He let go of his collar and crawled back to Hutch, eyes peeled at the Band-Aid.

“I—” Hutch’s voice was barely a croak and he coughed once, then concentrated his gaze on the garish painting of a Hawaiian sunset. “I found a lump.”

It took a great effort not to move when Keenan touched the bruising that had formed around the spot where the needle had gone in the second time.

“I’m not going to ask why you didn’t tell me. I’m too pissed off to ask.” Keenan stated quietly, still stroking the area around the round piece of plastic.

“I’m so—”

“No you don’t get to say that. Because then I’d have to forgive you for this. For putting us through all this! Hutch, what the hell?” Keenan’s sharp gaze penetrated Hutch’s skull, or so it felt.

“I thought... Don’t have the results yet. If it’s cancer...”

“Let me finish that for you, shall I? You thought that if you have cancer, you’ll die and it’s better for you to drive me away now before I’ll actually be *sad* over you dying?” Hutch had never thought his usually calm and happy submissive was capable of such contempt.

He couldn’t lie. He could omit the truth, but he wouldn’t lie. “Yeah...”

“You stupid, stupid man...” Keenan fell back to sit on the floor and looked up at Hutch. “Do you remember what I wrote in my part of our contract?”

Hutch thought back. They’d written a real contract when he’d collared Keenan. It wasn’t a typical contract between a submissive and his Dominant. It was more like a declaration of what they meant to one another. Almost like wedding vows, but with a few mutually agreed rules about their D/s relationship added to it.

The words of Keenan’s section of their vows came to him easily.

“And even though we didn’t exchange rings, other than the one you put around my neck today, I will be yours in sickness and in health, for richer and for poorer, until you fuck up so badly I can’t forgive you.” Keenan quoted.

“Can you? Just one more time?” Hutch asked, because he’d fucked up before. Keenan had too, after all, they were both just men and they’d been together for years. Until this evening, he’d never fucked up badly enough he’d seriously thought Keenan might walk away.

“As long as you stop drawing cherry blossoms.”

“Okay.” Hutch nodded solemnly.

“It might not be cancer anyway.” The positivity Hutch had been lacking started to radiate from Keenan slowly but surely. “It might be something else. A benign lump.” Suddenly Hutch couldn’t understand why he’d chosen to go through any of this alone. He needed the man in front of him like he needed air. The hope, the love... It was all there for him still and he couldn’t have been more grateful.

His cell phone began to dance across the coffee table’s surface, and Keenan grabbed it.

“Doctor Jameson’s office.” Keenan read the caller ID and moved closer as he held out the phone for Hutch to take.

Hutch cleared his throat and took a deep breath. “They promised to call me as soon as they had the results, night or day.”

“So go ahead, Sir. Let’s see what the future has in store for us.” Keenan smiled gently and leaned forward, placing his head on Hutch’s lap and embracing his waist awkwardly.

Hutch pressed the button and raised the phone to his ear with one hand. The other found the silky strands of his submissive’s, his lover’s, hair.

“Hutch speaking,” he said into the phone, and then he waited.

THE END

Author Bio

Tia Fielding has been writing for as long as she can remember. It was her dream to have a book published before her thirtieth birthday. She missed that date by one day and is still a little bitter, two years later. Never the one to stick to one genre, Tia has written anything from cowboys to vampires, BDSM to shifters and so on. There are still a few genres she wouldn't mind attempting to bring her own flair to. She's been published mainly by Dreamspinner Press and her fourth novel will be published by Dreamspinner in Aug/Sept of 2013.

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SMOKY GLIMPSES

By Nicole Forcine

Photo Description

Eight hunky, half-dressed firemen of assorted nationalities and hair color stand in a parking lot, all looking up at the camera, which is obviously positioned at an elevation well above the group. It looks like the cover for a sexy firefighter calendar, with an attractive bald fireman in the front middle spot. The caption reads “Please excuse me while I light my house on fire.”

Story Letter

Dear Author,

The setup for this scene is a firemen calendar shoot. The photographer knocks on the main character’s apartment door to request shooting some photos from the apartment balcony. The MC follows the photographer out to the balcony and sees the following:

I’m pretty open to whatever the author wants to do with the story beyond the setup. (This doesn’t have to be the beginning of the story. It can be later on in the story. That was just the setup for this image.)

I would really like for it to be a paranormal story. (Pick your paranormal element.) And you can take your pick of the firemen as the other MC.

It does not have to be HEA.

Sincerely,

Adara

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: firemen, sweet, psychic ability, paranormal, humorous

Word count: 7,546

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Author Interpretation:

When I looked at this photo, the first thing I thought was, well, exactly what the caption said - “Excuse me while I set my house on fire” because RAWR. Once I’d calmed down, I had to pick my guy and you know what? Not enough love for dudes with shaved heads. Or blue collar psychics for that matter, so Smoky Glimpses was born.

SMOKY GLIMPSES

By Nicole Forcine

“So, you can’t tell me any lotto numbers?”

Kaden sighed and shook his head. “I told you, I can only see glimpses, and your glimpse didn’t tell me a single thing about the lottery.”

Kaden’s customer, a young punk who paid him with three greasy five dollar bills, sucked on his teeth and stood up. “I want my fucking money back.”

Kaden arched his eyebrow and pointed to the sign he knew was right over and above his shoulder. He also knew it displayed rule number one: No refunds. “Maybe you should actually listen next time someone tells you their limitations.”

The punk shot up and smacked the table that separated them, making the candlesticks on it rock until one tipped over. “This is bullshit!” he roared, storming out of the booth and hitting the purple cloth acting as a door hard enough to make a muffled punch sound.

Kaden managed to catch the other candlestick before it toppled over, and snarled at the boy’s back, “Try buying a lotto ticket, I hear that helps your chances!”

Thank fuck his shift was over. It was time for someone else to take his place entertaining the rubes of the world, one ungrateful hissy-fit at a time.

He picked up the candle that had hit the floor, tossed the broken parts away and carried the brass candleholder out of the room. A row of purple velvet curtains flanked the hallway, each one with a psychic practitioner behind it, plying their trade. Lucky him, he got the room closest to the waiting room and reception.

“That guy was an idiot,” Max, the pink-haired receptionist said derisively, taking all the cash Kaden earned during this four-hour shift. “He won’t be back. I think you were one of the last readers he hadn’t seen yet.”

“Why didn’t you just cut him off before he got to me?” Kaden asked, watching as Max compared the stack of cash against the list of customers and took out the house’s cut.

“Because he was dumb enough to pay up every time.” Max handed Kaden his take with a huge winning grin. “Pity he’s also too dumb to figure out when he’s pissing off the ‘real’ thing.”

“And what if he comes back with more than just a bad attitude? It won’t matter if I’m real or not if he flips out on us.”

Unless he could predict the confrontation. And sadly, that level of detail was beyond Kaden’s own abilities. He only saw random Glimpses, and even that required skin contact and concentration. Which worked perfectly, since he billed himself as a “palm reader”. All he had to do was speak the lingo—life lines, love lines, whatever—deflect the usual questions about life span and future gorgeous partners, and he usually managed to convey what he actually saw. For the most part, it wasn’t a bad gig, even when the news wasn’t all sunshine and happiness.

As for Punky McTantrum, Kaden sure hoped he paid close attention to his nuts next time he wanked off. Testicular cancer was a real bitch if caught too late. Then again, by the time that dipstick found the little lump, it would probably only render him infertile instead of killing him outright, thus benefitting society as a whole. Kaden felt better already.

“Say, Kaden,” Max checked his cell phone. “Teresa’ll be here to take over soon and the Twisted Sister’s doing two-for-one well drinks until ten o’clock. We should have a few and see what fresh meat’s about. When was the last time you got out?”

“I dunno, when was the last time some asshole mooed at me when I offered to buy him a drink? Granted, his hair looked like it had been styled by a cloud of locusts, so what would he know about what was attractive? He really shouldn’t have gotten so mad when I told him that. If he was going to judge on appearance, why couldn’t I? Besides, I’m not looking for another hook-up.”

Max shook his head and tut-tutted, used to Kaden's usual babble. They had been friends for years, after all. "My poor soft-hearted, bitter-tongued little bear cub. You're gonna let one queen bee sting you and that's it? Back to your books and your sports and your Netflix?"

The answer popped out of his mouth before Max had stopped speaking. "Yes. Anyway, it's Thursday, and I'm here all day tomorrow. Rent's due next week. And my books are way more interesting than drunk and rude 'fresh meat'."

"And the guys in your books get laid more." At Kaden's glare, Max held up his hands in defeat. "Fine, then let's go to dinner on Saturday. I'll have my advance for my newest project in my pocket and that means better than well drinks. You can return the favor after this month's rent emergency."

Kaden nodded. Dinners with Max were never dull. It was nice hearing about someone else's love life at the very least. "Sounds like a deal. Call me."

As he turned to leave Mystic Readings, Kaden noticed Max's eyes shift from blue to bright green, the iris long like a cat's. Not surprising coming from the morpher, but it never failed to creep Kaden out just a little when his friend suddenly shifted his look right in front of him. Max could be careless at times, risking some quick explaining should a mundane notice him altering his appearance. Exposed Gifted were never seen again. No one ever knew where they would go, just that occasionally a supposed "real" psychic or miracle worker would just go "poof". Mundanes would talk about them as frauds, but the Gifted would know why. Best to keep their secrets among family and other Gifted.

At least with Kaden's line of work, if a mundane suspected that his readings came from a natural Gift and not just simple cold reading and confirmation bias, it was easy to play it off as a series of lucky guesses. He'd only had to outright make up a reading to shake a mundane off the trail once. Avoiding discovery was the price to pay for being born with a Gift.

Kaden's "weekends" were usually on weekdays, and he found himself curled up in a wingback chair in his bedroom early Tuesday morning. His eyes were bleary but his mind was determined to finish the heavy book in his hands. Once the plot had hooked him around nine that previous evening, he knew he had to finish it. Mysteries did that to him; made him give a damn. He had a need to find out how normal mundanes figured shit out without the blessing and curse that was a Gift.

Loud staccato taps from the door shook Kaden out of his nice warm book bubble and his body promptly reminded him that it had gone nearly twenty-four hours without sleep. It was eight A.M., and he knew who was at his door before he unlocked and opened it. He just wished he had the energy to kill his friend.

"...Max, what the hell?" Kaden grumbled at his friend once the door was opened. Today was apparently Bright Red Day, and Max sported the color in both his hair and eyes. "And no one has red eyes naturally."

"I just tell people I'm wearing those costume contacts. Silly mundanes." Max walked into the apartment, peppy as usual, carting one of his very expensive and very bulky cameras on his shoulder with the matching bag at his side. "I'm thinking I'll go albino next week."

"Lovely. What are you doing here? I was reading."

Max wandered to the living room window that led to the wrought iron fire escape and opened the curtains, allowing early morning light to wash over the sparsely decorated room. "You could really use some fresh air in here. I know you've been practically living indoors for days on end, so it's time to take a break and let the sunshine in."

"Max..."

"Besides, I need your fire escape for a few shots." Max shoved the window open. "I promise I won't get in the way, and it's really very important. For charity, even."

"I'll never understand you artsy types." Kaden stepped closer to the window, not sure what Max could find so interesting out there, other than

rooftops. Maybe the sky, the Poporocki's windowsill flowers, about a dozen shirtless firefighters on the street below...

Wait a minute...

"Is there a fire?" Kaden sputtered, staring at the men who stood in some orderly formation, some talking to their neighbors, and others looking apathetically in their direction. "I didn't hear an alarm go off. And since when did firefighters fight fires bare chested? That can't be safe."

"No, but if you want, we could torch your apartment and yell for help. That would make for some great action shots." Max grinned like a Cheshire cat and hefted the camera off his shoulder, setting it down on the loveseat next to the window. "These boys are from the station down the street, and they're doing a calendar with all the proceeds going to a charity for burn victims. Appropriate, no? I haven't had the chance to get all of them together for a cover shot until today, and I thought the view from here would be perfect." He peeked out again. "And as usual, I was right. So let me get to work so I can let these guys get back to being big damn heroes, okay?"

Kaden could hear Max speaking. But the only thing going through his mind was, *please excuse me while I light my house on fire*. He could even surmise the meaning of the words if he thought about them hard enough. Unfortunately, most of his attention was glued to the miles of smooth, bare flesh of various shades on display below. Damn, it had been a while since he'd gotten laid, and here came Max bearing what would be the newest entry into his spank bank. He guessed that would be thanks enough for allowing Max to use his fire escape, especially since from the sounds of fumbling and clicking next to him, Max was setting up his tripod as if Kaden had already agreed.

To a man, they were all nut-bustingly hot in their bunker pants and big heavy boots, though from the third floor Kaden couldn't see some details, like eye color. That was, until a pair of bright eyes caught and held his gaze. Those blues he could see clearly, staring up at him underneath bushy light brows. Blond? He couldn't tell from where he was, and since the man's head was shaved completely bald, and his chest hairless, Kaden couldn't figure out the color.

The man looked older than the others, mid-thirties if Kaden could guess, and stood like a king, not fidgeting or even speaking to anyone. Waiting patiently, probably for the skinny queer photographer to snap his pics so he could go back to doing more important things like pulling people out of fires. He sure looked equipped for that job, all big and bulgy and cut. The bulky bunker pants did nothing to hide legs as thick as tree trunks. It took monumental will for Kaden to not glance at his package.

This was fortunate, because when Kaden aimed his gaze back on the man's eyes, he was surprised to see him smiling. It was one of those cocky, one corner of the mouth crooked up sort of smiles; the kind that let Kaden know he had been caught checking the man out, and he wasn't completely disgusted. Or maybe he was just so proud, *hey, even the queer's buddy wants me*. For some reason, Kaden didn't really care about the why of that smile—it wasn't like he'd have the balls to ask anyway—it just made the guy look sexier.

Max's voice broke him out of the spell. "Are you done ogling my subjects, because I'm on the clock."

Kaden backed up so fast from the window that he nearly knocked over the tripod. "Guess I could get in another chapter while you're 'working'. Just lock the door on your way out."

With Max cackling at his back, Kaden was running back to the safety of his bedroom. As he heard Max start to give instructions to his "subjects", Kaden couldn't help but recall what Max had told him days ago about this very same thing, hiding in his bedroom, and just what a monkey wrench that threw in his love life.

Whatever. Kaden was very much not the sort of guy that could pick up a firefighter anyway.

After about fifteen minutes of listening to Max, Kaden slipped in earbuds and turned his iPod on for distraction music while he plunged back into the whodunit. That lasted for about fifteen more minutes before Kaden found that he was too tired to keep reading. Besides, he was more interested in peeking out of his bedroom window at the men outside. Max had to be taking his photos, as they were all nice and still, presenting rows and rows of teeth like

sexy sharks. His attention zeroed in on the bald man. Watching him stirred up so much above and below Kaden's equator, but fortunately he could "ogle" in peace from this vantage point.

That is, until the men started moving from one pose to another, clustering close together. Kaden had to lean against the window to keep tracking the bald firefighter which apparently got the man's attention. Kaden jumped back from the window like it was electrified, the curtain swishing shut. *Maybe if I got some sleep, I wouldn't be so insane as to openly drool over a stranger*, Kaden thought, moving to the safety of his bed. He lay there, letting the music distract him from thoughts of the hot firefighter with the blue eyes. Some useful counter-thoughts—"he's probably straight", "he was just being polite", or even "you can jack off when they're gone"—helped calm him down enough before exhaustion took over and his eyes drooped shut.

Maybe an hour later, a car alarm loud enough to permeate the earbuds woke him up way too soon, chasing away traces of a dream involving him bent over the front of a fire truck. He had to be alone in his place by now. It wouldn't have taken Max that long to take a few pictures from out there, but it was a good idea to check things out. Just in case his friend had forgotten to lock the front door. Then he would grab a shower and take care of the erection tenting his sweats.

He stepped out of the bedroom and from down the hall he could hear Max, but he sounded far away. Kaden followed the muted chatter and saw that while his front door was closed, the window was wide open. There was a shadow beyond the window, on the fire escape, partially hidden by the curtains. Couldn't be a burglar, could it? No, Max didn't sound panicked. Maybe he didn't even see the guy and was running his mouth to the horde of bunker-panted hotties. All while this guy crept through the open window with every intention of robbing Kaden blind. The fear caused every muscle in his body to tense except for the one in his pants, which promptly fled for cover.

The shadow shifted, and Kaden took a step back, hand on his pocket. He could pull out his phone and call the cops while running into the closet. But... there was a baseball bat in the hall closet, hidden behind his clothes. Maybe he

could get that instead. Though it would be useless if the burglar had a gun or a knife.

Fuck it, Kaden would go down bravely defending his home. He had the bat in hand by the time the curtain parted and someone climbed backwards into the living room. Heavy boots, bunker pants, nice tight ass, no shirt, bald head.

The man turned around and his hands were up the second he saw the bat. “Whoa, easy there, guy.”

Blond. His eyebrows were blond. So were his eyelashes. From up close, the firefighter he’d been eyeballing an hour ago looked even more devastatingly out of his league. Fuck he was tall, with at least three inches on Kaden—who wasn’t a small guy at about six feet, but he felt small by comparison.

And he felt very much out of shape with his broad shoulders, little belly, pecs that were more hints than actual muscle, and an ass that would be more fitting in a Sir Mix-A-Lot video. His last boyfriend described him as a “cub”, which confused him for two weeks until Max described what the hell that actually was when Barry dumped him for a much hotter gym rat. Apparently being “cuddly” wasn’t enough to keep his attention. And right now, “cuddly” would have been a vast improvement. In a ratty pair of sweatpants, a torn T-shirt, and three days of auburn stubble making his usually close cropped beard look downright unkempt, Kaden knew he couldn’t compare with the man he was mentally dubbing Captain .

And yet, Captain Nice-Ass smiled at him, hands still up, moving slowly towards him. “You gonna put that bat down or what?”

Bat? What bat? Kaden turned to the now unfamiliar piece of wood in his hands and promptly dropped it like it had suddenly caught fire. “Shit, I’m sorry. I thought Max was done, so I wasn’t expecting anyone up here. Not that I’d be able to get a hit on you, of course, ’cause you look like you eat baseball bats for breakfast. I was just surprised, is all.”

“Guess your friend didn’t tell you his plan, huh?” Captain Nice-Ass chuckled and offered his hand. “Lieutenant Jeremy Miller. Thanks for letting us use your place. This calendar really means a lot to my crew.”

Lieutenant Nice-Ass, Kaden mentally corrected as he took Jeremy’s hand and considered cheerfully killing Max for allowing strange hot men to traipse around his living room without warning him first. He could have had time to change pants, maybe shave a little and not look like a hobo. “Kaden Harris, and I’m glad I could help. Anything for burn victims, right? It’s really fitting, you know, with the theme. Firefighters fighting burn injuries with bare chests.” *Shut up*, Kaden thought to himself. *You’re babbling again*. “Are you guys taking turns getting your picture taken up here or something?”

That hand was warm and firm in his, like Jeremy either didn’t notice the elevator eyes earlier or didn’t care about the sudden barrage of sound that just came from Kaden’s mouth. “Nah, I’m the only one with the time for my solo shot, ’cause I’ve got the rest of the day off.”

“Lucky you, huh?” Kaden chuckled, trying to sound relaxed even as his heart threatened to beat out of his chest. He clamped his mouth shut, biting back any more. It was a problem he had, especially in the presence of guys like Jeremy. Hot, confident, completely out of his league. The floodgates would just open up and suddenly Kaden became Chatty-Fucking-Cathy and before he knew it, he’d say something embarrassing. Psychic readings for a rube were more relaxing than this.

“You could say that. I got lucky that this place is owned by somebody so damned cute.” Jeremy’s smile turned into the cocky smirk Kaden found himself liking a whole lot. Cute? Did Jeremy assume the apartment was owned by Max? “Excuse me if I’m being forward here, but do you have plans for lunch? I’d like to thank you for your help and there’s this great little pizza joint down the block.”

It took a few seconds for Kaden to realize the man was actually talking to him. “Uh, yeah Donatello’s, I know the place.” *Look at me, man. I’m very familiar with Donatello’s and every other pizza joint in a ten-mile radius.*

“Good. I gotta go change out of my uniform, so how about we meet there?” Jeremy looked around the apartment. “You’ve got a nice place, you know. I love this neighborhood.”

Oh well, it was just thanks after all. Kaden managed to hide his disappointment as he answered. “Thanks, you’ve got a nice... ah... everything.”

Jeremy threw back his head, exposing his thick neck, and laughed. Kaden wanted to go hide in the bathroom. Was that laugh amusement at the random compliment, or prelude to Kaden being thoroughly shut down. “Shit, my mouth ran away with me on that one. It does that a lot.”

“It’s all right.” Jeremy was looking at him again, the twinkle in his eye making it perfectly clear that the man was—for some fucked-up reason—interested in more than lunch. “Your mouth can run in that direction all it wants, as long as it gives me a yes for lunch.”

Kaden had that “yes” on his tongue, but the sound of Max opening the door kept him from saying it out loud. “All done, Mr. July—oh hi, Kaden, I see you’ve met Lieutenant Miller. We were just finishing up.”

Suddenly, the thought of cheerfully killing Max was gone in the wake of having scored a date. He owed the man flowers or something. Bright red ones. “No worries, man. Didn’t know my fire escape was that photogenic.”

“Well, it made perfect sense to use it.” Max tossed Jeremy a shirt, then went to his camera bag, packing up his equipment. “You’ve got to see some of these shots. Can we get my friend here a copy of the calendar when it’s done, Lieutenant Miller?”

“I’ll deliver it myself,” Jeremy replied, pulling the shirt on over his head. The “Liberty City FD” logo stretched enticingly over his chest, and as far as Kaden was concerned that made up for covering up all that sexy pale skin..

“That’s okay, you don’t have do that.” Max looked up from his packing, paused, and turned from Kaden to Jeremy. Then he turned back to Kaden and gave him a huge *I’m so going to give you shit about this the second we’re*

alone grin. “On second thought, we’ll talk about who gets that honor when it’s released.”

“I’ve got to get back to the firehouse and change out of this before lunch. We doing Donatello’s?” Jeremy pressed his hand on Kaden’s shoulder and instead of the “butterflies slam-dancing in his belly” reaction Kaden was expecting, a completely different and very familiar sensation came over him instead. Fuck, this was a very shitty time for a Glimpse.

His entire body flushed hot, then cold, then a more intense kind of hot. Like fire. Kaden could feel fire and heat surrounding him, but it was so dark that he could barely see. Smoke poured all around him. His lungs burned even as the mask around his nose and mouth fed him precious oxygen. How long would this tank last? They’d been fighting this fire for about an hour and he was already on his second one.

Someone shouted from his radio, “The building’s gonna come down! Get outta there!”

Two directions lay ahead. Right—the way they came in—or left. His captain had gone right, should he follow?

“Hurry!”

“Whoa, Kaden, you all right?”

Max was at his side, pulling him off the wall and smoothly lying for him before Kaden could eke out a word. “He’s fine. Just gets a little lightheaded from time to time. Bet he was reading all night, again. Give him some sunshine, and he falls right over.”

Kaden wanted to say something to ease Jeremy’s concerns, to seem normal, all without revealing his Gift, but once again, his mouth engaged before his brain could fully process what he’d seen. “Go left. Take the left.” That was the last coherent thought he had for a while.

Sometimes a friend can help too much.

The Glimpse left Kaden dizzy and unfocused, and Max got him back to bed. By the time Kaden recovered, Max had sent Jeremy off with assurances that Kaden would be “fine,” “not to worry,” “don’t call him, he’ll call you,” and so on. Problem was that they didn’t exchange numbers and Kaden was way too embarrassed to do anything about that. What would Lieutenant Nice-Ass think if he tried to take him up on the lunch offer after that weird display? Kaden couldn’t remember the last time he’d had a spontaneous Glimpse, and certainly not one that threw him for such a loop. It wasn’t like he did much touching outside of his day job in the first place.

The spontaneous ones were the worst. Life-altering decisions were revealed in front of his very eyes, and there was no way to convey what he’d seen without sounding like a nut—or revealing his Gift.

At the same time, Kaden was worried. As usual, the Glimpse didn’t give him much detail as to when Jeremy would have to make that life-altering choice. He hated those kinds. It wasn’t like the punk with the tumor in his nuts, where he could figure it out at any time. This was specific, and, damn it, useless without any kind of time frame. If Kaden warned Jeremy too soon, he could take the left in the wrong emergency. A warning that was too late was, well, too late.

Which was why Kaden did nothing for the rest of the afternoon. Well, not exactly nothing. He tried to finish his book, then tried to watch some talk shows. He avoided picking up his phone when Max called. The last thing he needed was Max’s concern—not about how he was feeling, and not about the lunch date that didn’t happen.

And he watched the news each time it came on, even switching between channels, looking for anything involving devastating fires in all of Liberty City. He kept looking for signs that his words were too confusing, that he’d lost the chance to connect with Jeremy, much less save his life.

Around three in the afternoon, Kaden actually got off his ass and took the bus to the firehouse. He arrived just in time to see one of the engines pulling

out of the oversized garage, with sirens wailing and men loaded up inside. Off to save lives, no doubt. Dread chewed up Kaden's insides—he was too late. Despite all logic and probability, his mind seemed determined to assume the emergency the crew was roaring off to was the fire in his Glimpse.

And there wasn't a damned thing he could do about it now.

“Breaking news, an inferno at an Eastside apartment complex leaves twenty people homeless and one firefighter fighting for his life.”

The newscaster's voice made Kaden's blood run cold. *One firefighter fighting for his life.*

He had been standing at the stove, adding a pot of meat sauce with extra garlic to a pot of freshly drained spaghetti. A simple dinner for a Tuesday night that had started with torrential rain. He set the empty pan on a cold burner and ran to the TV just in time to see said inferno, burning bright orange and reducing a building into ash.

“The blaze started around two this afternoon, with faulty wiring as the probable cause, pending investigation. Two separate fire departments were on the scene, and even with their joint efforts, the fire took out seven apartments altogether. Were it not for the sudden rainfall, the entire housing complex would have been in danger.”

Kaden sat on the couch, listening to devastated witnesses talk about the speed of the fire, the extreme heat, and the loss of their homes and belongings. He felt like such a heel, because all he wanted to know was the identity of the fallen firefighter. Why didn't he risk the discovery of his Gift and just explain his warning to Jeremy? Was saving his own fat ass more important? Selfish fucker.

“The Liberty City Fire Department is keeping mum on the injured firefighter's identity until his family arrives at Mordin Memorial Hospital.”

Maybe Kaden could go to the hospital, pretend to be a cousin or something. It worked in movies and soap operas, right? Pretending to be a

“brother” or a “cousin” so you could sit at your loved one’s side? It made for great drama, but there was no way he’d be able to pull it off. He was a round fat redhead and Jeremy looked nothing like him.

He sat on the loveseat, ignoring his supper as the five o’clock news came and went. He barely noticed *Wheel of Fortune*, *Jeopardy*, and two syndicated shows while he waited for the ten o’clock newscast in hopes for more details. Dinner went cold, but it wasn’t like he had any appetite anyway. The ten o’clock news had just started when there was a knock on his door, a banging loud enough to make Kaden jump. It didn’t sound like Max’s staccato taps. Maybe they had the wrong door. Kaden considered ignoring it, but the knocks were loud and insistent and if he didn’t see to it, his other neighbors would complain.

“Jeez, I’m coming, lay off the door already!” he grumbled, eying the TV screen as he unfastened the locks and opened the door.

The smell of rain and smoke quickly turned his head. Jeremy stood there, leaning on the door frame, looking the complete opposite of the cocky man Kaden had met just this morning. Soaked, eyes frantic, chest heaving as if he’d been running. His gray T-shirt clung tight and wet against his chest, only half tucked into dark jeans. Water dripped off his nose and chin.

“You’re okay.” Kaden took a step back, letting his eyes rake over Jeremy’s un-scorched body.

“You were right.” Jeremy’s voice was rough and raspy, probably from the smoke.

“What?” *Play dumb, Kaden. You’re good at playing dumb. As long as you don’t start rambling, you can play dumb! Christ, you’re rambling in your own thoughts. Just shut up!*

Jeremy walked past the threshold, dripping water on the carpet. He stared at Kaden in complete wonder as Kaden closed the door. “You were right. About the left, I mean. You said ‘take the left’, and I didn’t know what you were talking until I was in that blaze, and it felt like *déjà vu*. You saved my fucking life.”

That look was filled with a gratitude Kaden was certain he didn't deserve, even if he could cop to his powers. A small part of him—okay, a lot of him—was so happy he could help. Finally his powers actually did someone some good, but he could never tell the man how it worked.

“Look, Jeremy, man, I'm so glad you're all right. I was watching the news just now and when I heard about the guy in the hospital, I was really worried. I was just babbling when I said that before, honestly.” *I'm babbling now, fuck!* “I get tongue-tied in front of very hot guys and it was just the first thing that came out of my—”

Jeremy's mouth slammed over his before he even knew the man had come closer. The scents of smoke and rain filled Kaden's nose with one surprised inhale even as Jeremy's tongue invaded his mouth. It was exactly four heartbeats before Kaden's brain caught up with what was going on, and by then his arms were already tight around Jeremy's narrow waist, pulling him tight. His shirt and the front of his pants were getting wet with the rain Jeremy brought in, but the kiss was so unexpectedly hot that Kaden swore he saw steam when they finally parted.

“I know,” Jeremy whispered against his lips, his fingers rubbing over Kaden's beard, which Kaden had actually managed to neaten up before his pointless walk to the station. Kaden held back the urge to purr outright and beg for another kiss. “My Nan, she always knew what folks were thinking. Had a gift, we'd say, but she'd never cop to it. You had the same look she often did. I couldn't place it at first, since she's been dead for nearly ten years. I wanted to come back earlier and tell you that I got it, but we got the alarm for that fire first. When I was in that building and I had to decide which way was out...” He shook his head and gave Kaden another kiss, this one soft and quick.

Kaden melted into that kiss with relief. Jeremy knew. He KNEW. “I couldn't tell you. I wanted to tell you! I just didn't know how to tell you to be careful without looking like a complete wacko. I walked by your firehouse but your fire truck had just pulled out. We, folks like your Nan and me, we can't tell too many folks. Hell, my family doesn't really know. Your Nan was real

lucky. God, I'm so damned glad you're okay and in one piece." The palms of Kaden's hands pressed into Jeremy's sides and he suppressed the urge to pull the wet fabric up and touch the skin he'd drooled over just that morning, before he worried himself sick about the man's fate. "How'd you get here?"

Jeremy grinned, cupping the back of Kaden's head with both hands. "I ran from the firehouse. I was at the hospital until I was sure my captain was gonna make it. He'll be out of commission for a while. After that, I knew I needed to find you."

"No umbrella, no car?" It was almost five miles to Kaden's apartment and the rain hadn't let up.

"I was running on adrenaline, wasn't really thinking," Jeremy murmured, and Kaden was surprised that the bigger man wasn't shivering. Until he gave a little tremor. "Not the best way to ask you out again, I know."

Kaden laughed and nodded at the stove. "It's not Donatello's, but I've got pasta and red sauce that I haven't touched yet." He moved his hands to Jeremy's arms and started to rub them, trying to warm the man. "And you're freezing. I've got a shower and a dryer, if you want 'em. It would suck if you survived a fire only to catch pneumonia or something."

Jeremy pulled Kaden closer by the back of the neck. "Mmm, food and a shower? Is that all you're offering?"

"You also get all of my babbling that you can stand." Kaden managed around a suddenly dry mouth.

And before he could say another word and ruin the moment, Kaden leaned forward, pressing their lips together once more.

Soft kisses against his shoulder woke Kaden the next morning. Was it morning? The room was still very dark, so he wasn't sure. It took him a minute to remember that he wasn't alone in his bed having a sweet and sexy dream.

Should he lie still and savor Jeremy's kisses on his neck and warm body against his back? Or should he move and press his ass along the very enticing erection and maybe coax the man it was attached to into making use of it?

"...early riser?" Kaden murmured, deciding to lie still and let Jeremy know that his attentions were appreciated.

Jeremy's morning stubble scraped against Kaden's spine as he kept kissing. "Part of the job. Sorry I passed out on you last night. Promise our next date'll end better."

Date? Last night when Jeremy's shivers broke their series of kisses, Kaden had offered Jeremy use of the shower while his clothes tumbled in the dryer. Then they shared his dinner while Jeremy made himself entirely too tempting with just a towel around his waist. They changed the channel from the news to *Criminal Minds*. The conversation wandered from crime procedural shows, to books, then sports, but even before Kaden could switch over to ESPN to catch the highlights, Jeremy's eyelids were drooping. Funny how the combination of hours of fighting a huge blaze, dealing with nearly dying, worrying about his boss in the hospital, and then running five miles in the pouring rain completely drained a man.

Jeremy was so apologetic when Kaden led him to bed, and by the time Kaden returned from his own shower, Jeremy was completely passed out. Kaden thought him dead to the world as he slid next to him between the sheets, but once he was settled, Jeremy reached for him. Two things immediately became obvious. One, the hot firefighter was a cuddler, managing to pull Kaden practically under him while still asleep. Two, they'd forgotten to pull his clothes out of the dryer before going to sleep, leaving Jeremy gloriously nude. Kaden found himself wishing he'd thought to pull off his own sleep pants so they could sleep skin on skin, but that would have required moving from the cozy cave that was Jeremy and the blankets.

It wasn't the first time Kaden managed to fall asleep with a hard-on, but he could vouch that it was probably the most memorable.

The way Jeremy was currently rubbing his cheeks against one of Kaden's soft flanks made Kaden's dick wake up and protest last night's neglect. It definitely made him completely forget about dates, this one or the next. "Fucking hell, how are you into someone like me?"

Great, his mouth was fully engaged in *say the first thing on his mind* mode. While apparently useful in revealing life-saving omens, Kaden feared it was going to fuck up this "thing" if it kept going.

And it kept going. "I mean, damn, you're surrounded by hot-as-fuck dudes all day long! And have you looked in a mirror lately? Shit." He took in a sharp breath as teeth grazed his hip. "I just can't believe you're here, kissing on me. You're not just here out of gratitude, right?"

Jeremy's mouth left his skin, and Kaden felt the firefighter pull on his shoulder, guiding him onto his back while Jeremy loomed over him. Kaden's mouth kept going, because he needed to know before he could allow himself to relax and fully enjoy the attention. "It's not, right? You asked me out of gratitude for letting you guys and my bat-shit crazy best friend use my fire escape, and last night and all the kissing and stuff was because my fucking Gift went haywire. It's usually not spontaneous like that. I usually have to concentrate. I don't even know why I'm even telling you any of this."

"Kaden." Jeremy leaned down and kissed him, giving his bottom lip a bite hard enough to make Kaden stop talking and moan. His hips jerked up to brush his equally needy erection against Jeremy's, and Jeremy chuckled. "I'll have to remember that kissing you is the only way to shut you the hell up long enough for me to get a word in."

Kaden opened his mouth to object to the kiss-him-quiet method, but Jeremy employed that method again, and again, and again, until all Kaden could do was melt into the mattress and listen.

"First of all, I don't know what kind of guy you think I am, but you turned me on the second I saw you in the window. I was so disappointed when at first I didn't see you when I got up here for my solo photo. And after you warned me... well, I've got a serious thing for sweet guys who worry about my hide."

His fingers mapped out the hair on Kaden's chest, lightly scratching and pulling. "Does *this* feel like gratitude to you?"

Kaden tried to speak up again, but this time Jeremy shut him up by grinding their cocks together, his bare and Kaden's covered by flannel sleep pants. Nope, that didn't feel like gratitude at all. That felt like wonderful and the way Jeremy kissed his fuzzy jaw made it so much better.

"Still owe you a proper date, though." Jeremy directed his attention to Kaden's neck while his hips kept rocking and grinding. Fuck, if he kept that up, Kaden was going to come his brains out like a teenager having his first wet dream. And yet, with all that hard muscle sliding against him, he was quickly starting not to care.

"I think we're way past *proper*." Kaden panted, reaching out in the dark to touch Jeremy's smooth back, his neck, the slight prickle of new growth on Jeremy's head.

Normally, Kaden would be just a little worried about falling into bed with a man he'd barely known. It was the kiss of death for any sort of relationship outside of fuck-buddies, and he was pretty damned sure that wasn't what he wanted. Even with a ridiculously hot firefighter who was glad to have survived another inferno. The urge to babble his way into asking Jeremy's intentions nearly outgrew his urge to spill into his pants.

Then that urge to come gave way to the hot-cold flash of another Glimpse.

Dark tan sheets. A soft, warm body spooned against his side. The sun streamed through opened black-out curtains. Kaden gave into the irresistible urge to squeeze the body close and bury his nose into the mass of dark red curls pressed against his cheek. Damn, just lying next to his man turned him on more than anyone ever had before. Maybe if he woke him right now, they could have another go-round before work.

His lover turned his head and Kaden found himself staring into his own sleepy, love-drunk eyes.

"Kaden? Kaden!"

Kaden blinked once, twice, three times as the slight dizziness passed and his vision cleared. The lamp near his bed was on, and he could see Jeremy in all of his naked glory. It helped that the man was sitting up with both hands gripped on Kaden's shoulders. It was a nice up-close view.

“You left me for a second, man.”

Kaden recalled the Glimpse and his lips curled into a calm smile as he leaned into Jeremy's arms, happy to share. “What color are your sheets?”

“According to my fancy-pants sister-in-law, ‘chestnut’. They look brown to me.” Jeremy's breaths blew against Kaden's auburn hair as he spoke. “Why?”

And the smile threatened to split Kaden's face in half. Sure, it had been another spontaneous Glimpse, but it was all he needed to ease his concerns about this so-far unconventional courtship. It didn't matter if what he saw through Jeremy's eyes would happen next week, next month, or ten years from now.

He reached for the lamp to turn it off, plunging the room back into near darkness. “I could babble about that now,” he murmured, gently pushing Jeremy back down on the bed and kissing up his jaw. “Or you could shut me up.”

THE END

Author Bio

Nicole Forcine was born a strange child, probably with composition book and pen in hand (from the hordes that still haunt her trusty trunk), and way too many voices in her head. When two of them talk loud enough to overshadow the rest, a story is born. Currently she resides in Minneapolis with one of the most laid-back men in history and his even more laid-back cat. She's also very excited and nervous about her very first book, This Little Whatever, coming out this Fall from Dreamspinner Press. Send help and gummi worms

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PRIDE OF THE VELD

By LE Franks

Photo Description

This black-and-white photo shows the backs of two men sitting in a Jeep. They're leaning close together with their arms entwined, hands held together to form a heart.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

It was only supposed to be a sexy moment while on the safari, a summer fling, nothing serious between me, the local guide and the only other participant on the safari; a hot nerdy wildlife photographer. The plan was for us to return to our life after that, but through fun and hard moments, it became much more. Now, I don't think I can live without both those men. But how could we, with all of us living in three different corners of the world?

I'm looking for something sexy that's going to send me on a safari. HEA (or a strong HFN) or at least the allusion of one. Some action/adventure would be great but not mandatory.

Sincerely,

MC Houle

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: ménage, South African safari, photographer, kidnapping, multicultural

Content warnings: violence

Word count: 29,634

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PRIDE OF THE VELD

By **LE Franks**

CHAPTER ONE

“Oh God, Danie, fuck! Please, please, ahh...” Danie kept up his slow, deep slide into him, ignoring the pleas. Danie was smiling and Geo was starting to break, whining and bucking up into him, trying to change the slow burn he was being given into a hard, heavy heat. Danie slid his hands up and down Geo’s sides, petting his skin with a soothing stroke.

“Not yet, not yet Geo. Hold on, we’re going to fall off the edge of the world together.” Geo started to shake. Danie’s Afrikaner accent lit the nerves of his spine, sending the hairs on his neck prickling. He gripped Danie’s forearms, holding him near, though Danie was refusing to drop down onto him, refusing to melt into his arms, not until Geo gave him everything. Everything again... except he wouldn’t. Not this time, not today, maybe not ever again. He’d made that mistake once, two summers ago, and had his heart broken by this man. He didn’t want to let him that close, ever again... but it was so hard to resist.

Geo licked up the nearest arm. Danie’s skin was warm and salty from a day of driving across the wildlife reserve, tasting of sun and sky, the brown parched earth, the grasses crushed under boot; there was a flavor of wildflowers and succulents, the rich blood of antelope, the pulse of the veld. Danie tasted of the only home that Geo ever cared about—which of course made the fire they generated between them risky. Too risky to let loose, like a wildfire racing across the plains destroying all life caught in its path. Dear God, Danie was like an anarchist, throwing Molotov cocktails at every single one of his defenses, tearing apart all the careful construction with his body. Geo tightened his hold on the other man.

Danie reared back, ripping himself out of Geo’s hands only to drive himself forward into Geo’s slick heat. The pounding intensified, and Geo

found himself floating as the pleasure ratcheted higher and higher. Danie slid an oily hand along his cock, twisting the head and stroking down the length matching the rhythm of his thrusts, over and over until Geo felt himself fall apart—come spurting across his abdomen and chest.

Danie slammed deep inside once more, following him over the edge, settling onto his forearms to keep from crushing him. “God damn, Geo. You’re going to kill me yet,” Danie murmured into his neck, licking at the sensitive skin behind his ear. “Geo...”

Geo froze. “Shhh! Danie! What’s that?” He slapped his hand over Danie’s mouth, and tried to quiet his breathing so he could hear. They’d stopped in an area of the Christiansen Reserve that was usually out of the range of the known predators, though without fencing it wasn’t uncommon for an animal to wander through from time to time. He listened again. He could hear a rustling in the bushes providing cover on the far side of their camp. There was definitely something moving around outside.

“Hand me my gun Geo. Think it’s next to you,” Danie whispered to him, rolling carefully up into a crouch, his penis, still wet with his release, lying across his thigh. Geo resisted the urge to laugh, as incongruous as this moment was. He strained his hearing, listening in the velvety darkness of the tent for a hint that would identify the creature currently investigating their camp.

“Shit, Danie, don’t shoot anything; just scare it off,” Geo hissed, shoving the rifle stock into his waiting hand. The rustling stopped as Danie carefully moved the tent flap aside, muscles tensed, and slid into the African night.

“Fuck!” The shout was a little muffled through the canvas tenting, but Geo could hear the fear resonating in the voice. He grabbed his pants, yanking them on as fast as he could before searching around by feel for something to cover Danie. Geo flung himself out of the tent, skidding to a halt at the sight before him.

Danie stood in the glow from their campfire; glistening brown skin stretching across his broad shoulders and towering frame reflected the flickering light. Even nude, he commanded respect. The muscles rippled in

Danie's arms as he held his rifle pointed down at the other man's feet. It was a man, their visitor, and not some animal looking for an easy meal. Geo turned and glanced around for any sign of a vehicle, but all he could see was the deep dark night.

“Okay, Danie?” Geo approached carefully, keeping out of his line of sight. The other man half-crouched, hands held out in the universal sign of peace. He wore a camera slung across the chest of a khaki field vest, his chambray shirt hanging half-open, though one rolled up sleeve sported a large tear across the upper arm. Geo could see the fabric was stiff and stained dark around the rip, as though the wound had only recently stopped bleeding. He continued his survey, noting the olive skin of the man's long, long legs sprouting out of a pair of cargo shorts. Nothing about this man screamed dangerous to Geo. He moved to Danie's side.

“Danie,” Geo asked again, touching his back, soothing the warm skin in a gentle circle with his fingertips, “Who's this?” He gestured towards the other man, waving the shorts in his hand. With a recognizable hiss of impatience, Danie pulled him back, letting the shorts drop to the ground.

“Geo, stay back please.” Danie's accent was thicker, a sure sign that he was stressed, so Geo resisted the urge to pick up the shorts and help Danie into them as he held the weapon. They were now moving into theater-of-the-absurd territory, and Geo wasn't sure he wanted to be the one to upset the tenuous balance between these two men locked in a staring battle with one another.

Finally the other man swayed, breaking eye contact with Danie before dropping to his knees. It was enough to send Geo into action. Ignoring Danie's growl of “Stop dammit, Geo!” he pushed past, moving quickly across the dry ground between them, and reaching the other man just as he collapsed. He found himself in a tangle of limbs, gazing into frightened brown eyes, wide with panic and pain. Geo's heart clenched as the man shook in his arms.

“Danie, we need the kit, and that bottle of Coke in my bag... and put some damn pants on—eh?” He frowned at the man, still standing there unrepentantly naked, fixing them both with his best glare. “Stop growling and

move!” he went on. “You’re scaring the poor thing.” Geo was probably smaller than the man with the camera if you stretched him out properly. But for now he reminded Geo of an injured rabbit, almost frantic in terror, unable to recognize help when it was offered to him. Geo would have to work with that. He stroked a hand along the uninjured arm, trying to calm and focus the man who was muttering to himself in unintelligible Italian.

“Shush, you’re safe, you’re safe now. I’m Geo, and the cranky naked guy here is Danie.” He glared up at the man in question. Danie stood stock still, ignoring Geo’s commands for the moment.

“Geo...”

“Later, Danie—he’s going into shock. I need you to trust me... no... wait! Just help me get him up and into the tent. He’s freezing. Everything’s in there anyway.”

Between the two of them they managed to lever him up and carry him into their tent, finally settling him onto their bedrolls. Danie rummaged around in Geo’s pack until he came up with a couple of bottles of Coke, watching Geo carefully remove the man’s shoes and socks before tucking the feet under the covers. Geo checked the long limbs carefully, tugging the shirt open to pull it away from the injured arm.

It was quite an ugly gash, the flesh torn and gouged rather than sliced. It was going to need stitches to close properly and would leave a nasty scar. Well, Geo’s doctoring was definitely going to leave a nasty scar. The shirt was a dead loss.

“Hey, I need to take care of your arm now; it can’t wait, I think. I need you to relax and drink some soda. You need some sugar in your system. So, while Danie gets that, I’m going to cut your shirt off so I don’t hurt you more than I have to. Okay?”

The man gave a brief, sharp nod. He kept his gaze fixed on Danie; the larger man clearly still worried him.

“Look, Danie is just a little over-protective out here. You gave us a bit of a scare...” Geo trailed off as the man’s eyes closed briefly and his muscles started to relax. There wasn’t going to be a better time for this. He pulled out his folding knife, clicking the blade into place. The tip of the blade lifted the blue shirt away from the rich olive skin, already a little pale in the swaying light of the camp lantern. A quick flick and Geo had the sleeve opened up to the wrist.

He was able to tear it the rest of the way, leaving the arm exposed below the cut. He repeated the action until neatly separating the sleeve from the shirt. Danie was now crouching next to him with a bowl of clean, hot water. He had finally decided to help him care for the injured man. He shrugged sheepishly at Geo’s smile—they’d gotten distracted earlier while preparing to make dinner, and they’d left a large pot of water to heat in the coals.

“See if you can get him to drink that Danie.” Geo nodded to the open bottle in Danie’s other hand. The wound was oozing dark blood from the center. It was deep enough that Geo wished they were back at the compound where his grandfather kept a fully-stocked medical suite. All he had now was a standard bush kit. He could clean the wound and stitch it up, but he didn’t have antibiotics with him. They’d have to cut their trip short and head back in the morning.

The kit’s gauze pads were large enough to use for cleaning out the wound. Closer inspection showed dirt and debris embedded throughout the wound. This wasn’t going to be pleasant. He poured a little water into a second bowl that Danie had found for him, washing his hands with some antiseptic soap from the kit, donning a pair of purple gloves. Danie watched him silently, tearing open the blue paper coverings for him as Geo went through half their stock of pads.

“What’s your name? Do you speak English?” Geo asked, saturating another piece of gauze in antiseptic before carefully placing it on the man’s arm, soaking the wound to loosen the dried clots of blood and dirt. Danie had

settled on the man's other side, an arm around his shoulders, helping him take small, steady sips of warm Coke.

The voice rasped "Andrea." Geo glanced up; the man was looking at him, pain still reflected in his hazel eyes.

"Good, that's good Andrea. Danie here is going to keep you still, and as soon as I finish cleaning out this wound I'm going to have to stitch it together. We're pretty far out; otherwise I'd just wrap it and take you back now. It'll take us a few days to work our way around the falls, maybe four altogether to get back to the compound."

"Yesssss..." the Italian hissed, and Geo used that moment to start scrubbing out the wound with a clean piece of gauze. "I was heading there myself."

"Really?" Geo turned to Danie. "We didn't have anyone scheduled. Did we get a call from an independent?" Danie shook his head.

"Probably an indie that wanted to keep the conservation fees for himself," Danie replied, forcing the bottle between Andrea's lips and waiting for him to take several sips before pouncing on him with his questions.

"Andrea, I think it's time to tell us why you stumbled into our campsite without food, or water, or cloth..."

"Danie, this is not the time."

"Geo! Now *is* the time! We have no idea what sort of trouble he's..."

"He's no trouble." Geo cringed as the words left his mouth, kept his eyes on his work so he wouldn't have to see Danie's arched brow. But he knew Danie had a point. "Fine," he said after a pause. "You're right. It's stupid not to know." *And stupid out here gets you killed*, he thought.

Danie was gracious enough to keep his mouth shut. Geo watched him staring down at Andrea, still waiting for the other man to speak.

"My name is Andrea Conte. I'm a professional photographer, mostly wildlife and nature shots. I have a regular freelance gig with some of the better

magazines... though for this trip I'm working on my own project. I'm finishing a book of photographs from each continent.

"I've been on Antarctica, shooting some of the animals and birds for the last month. It went better than expected, so when I got a call from my agent, I was able to hop an early transport to Sydney and fly over here immediately.

"She finally wrangled permission from the Christiansen Reserve to photograph the falls—I'd been trying and trying for years to get the old man to agree to it. I'd even put off shooting the lower African continent because I'd pinned everything on these birds. When permission finally came... it meant I could finish my book. My editor has been threatening to pull the contract if I wasn't done by Christmas..." Andrea trailed off, leaning back against Danie without realizing what he was doing. Geo watched a shadow slide across Andrea's face, speaking volumes.

"She lied to me."

Geo nodded. "Yeah, she lied... or someone else did. I'm Geo Christiansen, and the 'Old Man' is my Grandfather, George. He only allows tourists to visit twice a year in small groups. Occasionally researchers and other scientists get special permission to view the site privately. The area is particularly sensitive: it's a breeding ground for dozens of birds currently classified as threatened or endangered, and two that are extinct outside this range.

"He charges a great deal of money to the tour groups to help pay for security and conservation. Oupa would never allow any groups to come now. The birds are still nesting, and any disruption from outside can cause mated birds to abandon their nests and chicks. We're here to keep an eye on things from a distance."

Andrea looked so devastated that Geo squeezed the man's hand gently. After a sigh Andrea continued. "The men met me at the airfield. I'd been booked on a flight out of Rand, and by this time I was completely done in. I'd been traveling almost continuously for seventy-two hours. Seeing my name on that placard was a relief, I can tell you.

“There were three of them altogether—all kitted out. They grabbed my bags and had me stowed in an old Range Rover before I could even say ‘thank you’; it was only later, thinking back, that I realized the truck was wrong. If the Christiansen Reserve had sent someone to get me, it would have looked... cleaner, a newer model with the Reserve logo on it or something. But I was exhausted. I fell asleep immediately and when I woke up we were already deep in the bushveld.”

Andrea looked off into the distance, remembering. “It was rough going, no roads most of the way...” Danie snorted at the apparent understatement, but Andrea pushed on. “We set up camp that first night, and I was busy going over my notes and maps. They were a little vague about where the base camp would be. They kept telling me that it would depend on what we found there, which seemed to make some sense.

“It’s so vast here—just occasional bluffs and thorn trees to break up the grasslands. I got some great shots, but I was anxious to get to the falls and start photographing the birds. I couldn’t believe my luck at the timing—we’re in the middle of nesting for some of the species...” Andrea trailed off and looked to Geo. “I’m sorry. I wouldn’t have done this unlicensed. You have to believe me. I don’t know why my agent would do this.”

“Money,” Danie injected gruffly. “It’s always money with *them*.”

“Who?” Geo had pulled out fresh gloves and a suture kit from the medical bag.

“Everyone. Everyone but you, Geo.” Danie’s smile had turned warm and golden as he looked at Geo.

Geo smiled and shook his head. “I like money.”

“If you liked money, Geo, you’d agree to sell the Reserve to the hotel group like your uncles want.”

“Oh, well I don’t *love* money. I just want to be close friends with benefits.” Danie rolled his eyes at him and turned back to distract Andrea from Geo’s preparations.

“Tell me about the men, Andrea.”

“Oh, the man who did all the talking was introduced as David Botha. He called the driver Junior. There was another man but he just stayed in the back with his rifle the whole time. Never said a word until yesterday... he, he scared the piss out of me. I heard Botha call him Karl...” He hissed as Geo dug into the torn flesh of his arm.

“Mmm. Sorry,” Geo mumbled.

“This Botha—describe him to me.” Danie used a finger to turn the Italian’s face away from Geo working on his arm.

“He’s late-forties maybe, light-brown hair cut short. Blue eyes, scar on his cheek. Very tan. A little shorter than me, I think, but bulky—going soft around the middle. Broke a few fingers in his day, pinky and ring finger on his left hand are twisted, like they were crushed and not set properly... oh!” Andrea suddenly jerked up, causing Geo and Danie to both shove him back down, Danie keeping his left hand planted firmly in the middle of the man’s chest.

“Shit, don’t fuckin’ move!” Geo cursed. “It’s bleeding again, dammit!”

“Sorry, sorry...” Andrea panted, but his eyes were lit in excitement. “I don’t have to describe them to you, get my camera please.”

One glance at the photograph of three men standing around a battered truck had Danie reaching for their satellite phone. Geo watched him check the phone’s charge before calling the compound.

“Christiansen here!” his grandfather’s rich Afrikaner accent boomed out of the phone. Danie yanked it away from his ear, switching it to speaker instead.

“Ya, it’s me Danie.”

“Is everything all right with Geo, Danie,” the other man burst in. “Let me speak to him now.”

“George, he’s unavailable—”

“Swart!” he growled, cutting off Danie’s explanation. “Get me my grandson or you won’t have an ass to sit on for the rest of your very, very short

life!” Geo rolled his eyes and shrugged. Oupa was always out of control when it came to him.

Sighing, Danie moved the phone closer to Geo. “Hi, Oupa,” Geo began. The sigh coming from the receiver was audible.

“Geo, tell Swart I’m still going to kick his ass. He takes ten years off my life every time he calls. He never leads with the important information. I’m always expecting to hear you’ve been swallowed by one of the river crocs.”

“Not likely. I avoid the river—too muddy. Besides, everyone knows you’ll outlive us all. It’s only fair for Danie to try and even things up by taking a few years off your life.” He waited for his grandfather’s snort before continuing. “I’m fine, Oupa, but my hands are full at this minute; let Danie catch you up, and don’t give him a hard time please?”

The snort came again followed by the inevitable “You’re my only grandson, Geo. I worry when you’re out there alone. I can’t imagine what Danie does to keep himself occupied while you work.” Danie grinned at that, sending the heat into Geo’s cheeks and groin. *Not the time.*

“We’re fine, Oupa. But we have news. Talk to Danie while I finish these stitches, I’m still trying to stop this bleeding...” Geo trailed off realizing his slip.

Danie yanked the phone back. “George, we’re both okay. We do have an injured wildlife photographer here. Geo’s patching him up and we’re breaking camp in the morning, so expect us back at the reserve in four days. We’re going to hustle.”

Geo crooked a finger at Danie, motioning the phone closer. “Oupa, I have a deep laceration to the bicep, about eight inches long. It’s pretty dirty, but I have supplies to clean it. I don’t have antibiotics, so please call Doctor Sigurdsson and have him on hand when we get back, along with transport in case we need to fly him out. I’m going to stitch and wrap it, and we’ll hope for the best.

“We don’t have all the details, but we’re pretty sure this is one of those tourist scams. He was set up by a third party; assumed it was through the reserve. His name is Andrea Conte—you should be able to Google him right now.”

Geo felt Andrea tense under his hand as he spoke, before giving a small shrug and relaxing back against Danie. There was a pause in the conversation, so Geo took his flashlight, shining it on the wound as he poked around one last time, making sure it was clean. They could hear the old man rummaging around rustling papers and muttering under his breath.

“Ah, I have a photo here. There is an Italian photographer, twenty-five or so; brown hair, hazel or green eyes... hard to tell from this shot. He’s sitting down in a café so I can’t tell how tall he is. Looks like he wears glasses... the ones in the shot are black wire rims.”

Geo arched a brow at Andrea. “In my bag, back with... them. I just use them to read.” He looked sad, as if he suddenly remembered all he’d lost.

George Christiansen continued on through the phone’s speaker as if Andrea hadn’t spoken at all. “Looks like he’s worked for *Nature* and *National Geographic*... oh! I think we have that one here in the office somewhere—he took those shots of the Beluga whales that you liked so much...” Geo listened to his grandfather searching around some more, picturing him in his office, leather chairs overflowing with papers and books, the walls covered with maps and charts.

“Ah, yes. I have it here, Geo. Let me just look at the contributor page... oh. It’s the same man from the website. Can you send me his picture? And you might as well take a shot of the wound for Sigurdsson before you stitch it, lad.” Geo smiled. The old man might seem distracted, but he knew exactly what was going on with every last soul working on the reserve, and he wasn’t afraid to tell them where they were going wrong or how to do their jobs better.

Danie sent the shots, and they didn’t have to wait long for the old man’s reply, coming over the phone strong and sure, belying his eighty-three years. “He’s not looking good, Geo. Make some strong tea and wash out the wound

with it before you stitch it closed. Pack in the used tea bags—three should do, and leave it for as long as it takes for him to finish drinking the rest of the cup. Lots of sugar, but only to drink, not in the tea used as a wash. Let Danie get it. He makes a proper cup... not like you, Geo. Your gifts lie elsewhere.” Geo rolled his eyes, biting his tongue. It was an old complaint.

“Is it the same Andrea Conte?” Danie asked.

“Of course!” the old man scoffed. “If he wasn’t, I’d have you open up the wound and toss him out of camp for the big cats to snack on!”

Andrea looked like he was ready to bolt, so Geo started rubbing calming circles on his chest. “Really, Oupa? You went with cats? He thinks you’re serious while I’m trying to keep him from panicking and losing more blood.”

“That’s what the tea’s for. The tannins help coagulate blood and decrease seepage when you finally stitch it.” Geo nodded as if his grandfather could see him. Andrea tensed as Danie ducked into the tent carrying two tin cups of tea.

Handing the one containing four tea bags to Geo, Danie broke into the conversation, settling next to the injured photographer, holding the cup to the man’s lips.

“George,” he said and then paused, urging Andrea to drink before continuing, “we don’t have the full story yet. We found Conte making his way into our camp, pretty beat up. Conte thought he’d been picked up by one of our guides. Apparently he’s been trying to get a spot on one of the reserve’s commercial tours for a few years; when his agent sent him an email about booking the guide, he just assumed it was authentic.

“We have a photo he took of the man, and it’s Ronson. He’s back, calling himself David Botha, but it’s definitely the same man, and he’s got a couple of rough trade working with him. He’s out here looking for something more lucrative than illegal guide fees.

“We need to notify the authorities and send out our security detail to track them from around the falls. It’s too dangerous to let them roam loose. You know Ronson, and the last I heard of him there was a bounty pending. He

won't hesitate to fight his way free if he's cornered. I'll feel better getting Geo out of the area as soon as possible. He wants to get Andrea back anyway, but he'll freak out about leaving the birds if there's a poacher around." Geo stopped working long enough to frown at Danie, who ignored him.

"Frankly I couldn't give a crap about the damn birds at this moment," Danie ground out. "I just want Geo out of Ronson's path; one look and that bastard will be seeing gold. There's no mistaking he's your blood."

"Fine, Swart. You take care of my grandson by whatever means necessary. Consider Conte under my protection too. I guess Geo won't let you do anything else if he's already mothering the lad, eh Geo?"

"What, Oupa?" Geo called over to the phone. "I'm not mothering him. I'm doing field repairs. It's the opposite of mothering, since I keep causing him pain." He was irritated by the direction the conversation had taken. He wasn't a child, and Danie's overprotective bullshit needed to stop.

"How's the arm look now?" His grandfather's tone was placating, which annoyed Geo all the more.

"Bleeding's stopped again, thanks. I'm about to put in a couple of deep stitches. Thank Dr. Sigurdsson for kitting us out well; he put dissolvable sutures in here. Only topical numbing cream, though. We should fix that before anyone else heads out." Geo trailed off, biting his lower lip to stop himself from rambling on.

"Just take the stitch. Danie will hold him down, then you'll be done in no time. You can do it, Geo. You're a Christiansen, and these men are your responsibility."

"I thought we were Danie's," he mocked, laughing at the irritated noise his grandfather made.

"I pay Swart to use a rifle when he needs to. You are born of the land, Geo. Even if your father made the mistake of getting you on an American, the land of your birth doesn't mean as much as the land of your blood, and your blood

is all Afrikaner. You've always made me proud, but today I can't be there. Today you are the Christiansen."

"Oupa!" Geo felt like he was five again. He was going to whine, but then the iron voice was back.

"Danie, should I send the plane out?" It was obvious George Christiansen had made his point and was moving on, assuming everyone would fall in line with his orders, as usual. Geo pushed aside the annoyance.

"We're still a couple days away from the strip at midpoint; we'll head there and assess. If we break camp at daybreak we can make it by midday the next, maybe."

"Stay in touch. I've calls to make." The thrum of the phone was instantly cut and silence filled the tent.

"Okay, Andrea... ready?" The photographer nodded his head and bit his lip until Geo noticed Danie brush a thumb across it in rescue. Interesting. With a deep breath of his own, Geo used the kit's hemostat to slide the first suture into place.

CHAPTER TWO

By the time Geo was finished, Andrea was a wreck. Danie held tight to the Italian, cuddling him into the crook of his arm while he kept his other hand pressed against his chest, keeping him immobile. Danie admired the man's determination to keep his arm steady while Geo worked on closing the wound. The only reaction he allowed were sharp, indrawn breaths, holding them until Geo finished an apparently painful stitch.

Geo was lovely to watch at any time, but this was an altogether new experience. He seemed to swell before him, as if his grandfather's words had struck home. Danie knew that Geo always felt like an outsider in his Grandfather's world. He had two uncles who were constantly undermining his confidence, encouraging him to return to the safety of his American home.

It pissed Danie off to no end, to see him come back from a "family" dinner with his confidence shaken. It was only when they made their annual trip deep into the reserve to watch over the nesting grounds that Geo would blossom under the dark blue African sky, reminding Danie of a wildflower in the veld.

Andrea's eyes were closed and his breathing even. He'd slipped into sleep while Geo was bandaging his arm. Cleaning up after himself and repacking their medical bag, Geo turned to him. "So..." he started, voice low. "What do you think of our guest?"

Danie crossed his arms and stalled. He stared into Geo's beautiful eyes, and for a moment he had no idea what the man expected him to say, wanted him to say, feared he would say. There was nothing in his face pointing the way, and Geo was his world—his beautiful, secret world.

"He's pretty, Geo. You know how much I like pretty things," he began carefully. He watched as Geo began stowing his field journals and equipment, tucking them into the footlocker he used during these trips. It held every personal item he brought to Africa with him. Geo looked up.

"Are you calling me pretty?"

“You are. Don’t deny it.”

“But you think he’s pretty?” There was a slight frown. A swift wave of panic broke over Danie.

“Yes, in a way. But you think he’s pretty, too, don’t you?” he challenged, exhaling in relief at Geo’s nod.

“Umm, he’s hurt though...” Geo said, considering the man lying still on their bed.

“You like taking care of injured birds. Are you asking me if you can keep him?”

“Mmm... maybe. He needs caring for. Look at him.” They did. They looked at the lovely man, resting in their nest of blankets. Sleep had eased the tension that had drawn the face tight since those first harrowing moments. His breathing was slow and deep, and they could see a line of golden skin rise and fall as the shirt parted between breaths.

“Tell me...” Danie moved over to Geo, pulling him into his arms. Geo tilted his head back, looking up at him.

“You know I only want you... but...” Geo began before faltering. Danie froze, afraid of the next words he’d hear.

“No, Danie. I mean I only want *you*. But for you, it’s different, and Andrea is your type... more than I am... But there’s something about him that I like... so maybe I wouldn’t mind... just once? With you?”

Danie drew back, staring at Geo and admiring the blush that now touched his cheeks.

Not sure how to respond, Danie began carefully. “If I even have a type, it’d be you, Geo, but you’re right about Andrea. There’s something there that draws me. Maybe it’s the circumstances; maybe it’s him... regardless, I won’t throw him out of our bed if you decide to bring him into it.”

Geo was silent for a moment. Then he fixed Danie with a look that was almost too much to bear. There was a sadness and resignation that seemed to rise from him.

“Don’t worry, I do understand. You don’t have just me. I know all about the others, Danie. Oupa might not know we’ve been together, but he knows me. He knows my heart. I think he was hoping that by telling me everything you’ve been up to while I’ve been home in America, well—that it would keep me away from you while I’m here.”

“He doesn’t know anything, Geo; he’s just trying to protect you,” Danie whispered.

“He suspects something, Danie. Otherwise he wouldn’t bother. I know he wants to keep me from being hurt, but maybe it’s too late for that... I’m just your annual summer fling, right?”

“No, Geo! God, no! You’re not a fling to me, I swear.” Danie swallowed painfully past the lump in his throat. “But you’re also not mine—not in the long term. You’re not the only one your grandfather talks to Geo. He warned me off you, after your first summer back, making it clear that you’re not available. That you’re too young, and you can’t be in a serious relationship with any man... that you understand your responsibilities here and have agreed to set aside your ‘personal desires’ for the good of the family.

“He told me that the Christiansen Reserve can’t thrive without you at the helm guiding and protecting it for the future. In order to do that, you’ll need a family of your own and a strong relationship with the community. And it’s a very conservative community.

“They might be able to ignore your preferences while you’re away at college ‘experimenting’, but once you come home for good you won’t allow yourself to continue with an ‘alternative lifestyle’... though it sounds like your grandfather would be the one who’s ‘not allowing’.” Danie trailed off at Geo’s look of horror.

“I don’t believe he’d say that!” Geo spat out furiously under his breath. “None of that is true Danie. None of it.”

“Believe me, Geo. He’s a hard man, but he’s not entirely wrong. You can’t be ‘out’ here. Not if you want to take his place.”

“But I’m already out,” Geo protested, trying to keep his voice low.

“You might not deny it if someone was to ask you directly, but you’re not grabbing me in front of the staff, either. You always wait until we’re out here, until we have privacy before you’ll let me kiss you, touch you, hold you...” Danie trailed off, caressing Geo’s face.

“I didn’t want to risk your job by making you look unprofessional, Danie. I’d never risk your livelihood that way.”

“I know, Geo. I know.” Danie bowed his head, trying not to pull the other man closer. Instead he stepped back, dropping his arms and letting Geo turn away.

It didn’t take them long to clear the tent of their loose items, Geo brooding the whole time. They moved in silence, letting the injured man sleep. Another fifteen minutes and they’d be breaking down the tent, and then they’d be on their way.

Danie watched Geo review their food and water supply, stowing some items and leaving others out. It looked like there would be cheese sandwiches for the drive tomorrow. Geo was mixing up a batch of biscuits to bake in their Dutch oven, a cast iron skillet already cooking up the last of their pork belly and potatoes.

The original plan had been to wait another week and arrange for a resupply from the reserve; now, depending on how far they went, they might have to drive through without taking the time to build a fire to cook. At least they’d eat well tomorrow. The next day might be down to the canned pork and beans that Geo also set aside as he packed up their makeshift kitchen.

Danie grimaced at the thought of cold beans, and cold shoulders. Geo hadn’t spoken more than was absolutely necessary. He’d put his “little lord”

face on, the one that made him look like a clone of his grandfather—cool and stern and seemingly unflappable. He'd never used it on Danie before, and that hurt more than he cared to admit.

“Geo,” he murmured softly, coming up behind him at the fire. “I’m sorry, I should never have...”

“What? Should never have wasted your time with me? Never led me on? Let me dream of having more with you?” Geo gulped back a sob, and in an instant Danie had him burrowed against his chest.

“Ah, Geo... no, love, no. Nothing like that. Come on, shush... Geo, sweetling... I have no regrets. We’re good together, and for as long as we have this—whatever this is—I’m happy. But you’re obviously not, and I can’t stand to see you in pain.” Danie crooned softly in his man’s ear, holding onto him as he cried out his unhappiness and fatigue.

Danie wished he had the words to take away the pain and uncertainty, but there’d always been so much unspoken between them, and this was a conversation meant for another lifetime. To think that Geo thought so little of them both, it broke Danie’s heart, just as it had obviously broken Geo’s.

From the very beginning, Danie knew that he could happily spend the rest of his life with the shy teen. But while Geo was only a few years younger than him, their relative stations kept Danie from acting on his attraction.

His job was more important than a casual summer fling with the boss’ grandson. But summer after summer came, and the attraction grew. Geo grew. Tall and slim, always so withdrawn and pale when he arrived on the reserve each year; But within weeks, the joy returned to his eyes and the color to his cheeks. Danie was mad for him, and it was so hard to stay away.

He just couldn’t see a way forward. Hefting an exhausted Geo into his arms and wrapping his legs around his waist, he took him into to the tent, nestling him beside Andrea. Grabbing his rifle and a campstool, Danie settled in front of the tent. He deliberately put thoughts of Geo aside, instead sending

his senses out into the night, opening himself up to the sounds of the savannah and listening for the men that didn't belong there.

CHAPTER THREE

By the time dawn had pinked the African sky, they had Andrea tucked into the back seat of the Range Rover. They also packed a handful of biscuits stuffed with bacon and hard cheese, and a thermos of Geo's favorite dark coffee blend was wedged between his boots as they drove across the veld.

Danie had grumped a bit, watching Geo pulling out his secret stash of coffee from America, just enough to last him for a trip. It was a dark-Italian triple-roast with chocolate. He'd refused to share with Danie after the first time he'd been teased about it.

Seeing him fill the bottle and hand it all to Andrea felt like a slap in the face until Geo pressed a tin cup of the brew into his own hands. Still, he'd never been gifted with an entire thermos before. Geo could apparently read his mind; he got a roll of the eyes and a slap on the back of his head for his trouble.

Geo had checked Andrea's wound, cleaning it again and tossing the old tea bags away. He'd laid them over the stitches last night before wrapping it all up in the bandages. From the looks of it, they'd seemed to do the trick; Danie couldn't see any fresh bleeding. There was frayed skin that Geo couldn't stitch, so the entire area was a combination of Steri-strips, stitches, and ointment. It was going to leave Andrea with a hell of a scar.

"Tell me what happened." Danie didn't wait long once the Italian had stirred this morning.

Danie tried to get a clearer picture from Andrea about the direction he'd come from, though he'd apparently been thoroughly turned around as he fled from his own camp, and Danie didn't want to take the time for more than a cursory check on his tracks into camp.

"Danie," Geo cautioned, taping down the end of the bandage. "Leave it for now. We'll have plenty of time on the trek back." Geo went back to mothering Andrea, sending him off to sit in the Rover until they were packed. It wasn't

until they'd travelled for an hour and everyone had finished their breakfast that Geo finally gave Danie a slight nod to proceed.

“Andrea, how did you get injured?” Danie asked, gazing at the Italian in the back seat. He'd been running various scenarios through his mind, ever since he'd gotten a fresh look at the wound.

“I was running, I heard them, heard them talking. They said they were far enough away from the normal tracks... no one would know. No one would miss me...” his breath started to stutter, sending Geo over the front seat into the back with his patient.

“It's okay, Andrea. We have you. You're safe,” Geo murmured, pulling the man tightly to him, taking care with the injured arm. Danie watched them in the mirror, catching Geo's eyes, looking for his silent approval before asking his next questions. “Just tell us about the camp. Where were you and what were you doing?”

Andrea had calmed enough to continue. “I'd been out for a while, shooting photographs around a ravine, mainly background, landscapes... a few long-range shots of antelope, nothing too exciting. I'd told the others that I'd be out for an hour, and the direction I was headed. I'd done this before at each stop on the trip, so no one made any comment.”

“Without an escort?” Danie was incredulous.

“I suppose that should have clued me in to begin with—eh?” Andrea chuckled darkly, then went on. “I decided to cut it short, there wasn't anything there... you get an instinct after a while. I'd moved in a circle this time, not out and back like I'd done each time before...” He paused again, and Danie could hear the swallow from his seat.

“Andrea, it's okay...” Geo began, locking eyes with Danie in the mirror again. This overprotective streak was not helping.

“*Geo*,” Danie snapped. “He needs to tell us, and you need to back off and let him. You can't shield him from this.”

“Thank you, Danie,” Andrea replied. “He’s right Geo, I’m fine. You’ve already done a brilliant job caring for me. Yes? But you can’t protect me from this.” Geo sighed and nodded, but he stuck close to the Italian with one hand on his knee and the other back around his shoulder.

“So, I am not quite a... a ninja? Yes, not quite as stealthy, but close. So close. To be a good wildlife photographer, you must blend into your environment, you must walk so softly that even the breeze does not touch you. Yes? So from the time I was a little boy, my grandfather would take me into the woods outside Perugia and we would pretend to be great hunters. We would stalk our game and capture them not with a gun, or a bow... but with our old camera. He was a painter, very famous in the area. He painted the woods, and the animals. Soon, it was just me. I would track through the forest and bring him back little snapshots on the Polaroid, and he would paint them.”

“So it is second nature to me. I float over the ground; you will not hear me come unless I make noise on purpose. Around these men, I make lots of noise. But this time I did not. I was maybe twenty-five feet away from the truck. I was behind several thorn trees and some bushes and brush, and I froze. Something that I heard, a word or a tone, alerted me—I’m not sure which, but I dropped down and took that picture that I showed you.

“I stayed there and the wind shifted and I could hear them clearly. They were talking about... about killing me there and leaving me for the animals...” Danie winced, remembering Christiansen’s joke from the night before. Andrea continued: “I backed away; I was opposite from the direction I’d originally left camp. When I was sure I was far enough away, I ran.”

“How did you get hurt?” Geo pressed closer to him, and lightly touched the bandage on his arm.

“I ran on and off for the first three hours. I keep fit, I run in my spare time, and truthfully, this isn’t the first time my feet have saved me in the wild. I can also climb most trees. That is a very useful skill, I must say. I practice that at home as well.”

Andrea’s mood seemed to lighten.

“It was dusk and I was worried about being out all night on the savannah. All I had on me was my camera, my pocketknife, my documents, and a couple of energy bars. I also had an empty water bottle still clipped to my belt.

“I finally reached a ravine. It looked about forty, forty-five feet down, with a fairly steep bank. At the bottom was some running water. It was the first I’d seen since I started to run. My bottle was empty, and I hoped there would be shelter among the boulders...” Danie raised a brow in disbelief. Andrea shrugged and grimaced in pain.

“The short answer is... half-way down I slipped and fell, landing in the rocks. Something had my arm pinned and I yanked it loose, which was a bad idea as you can see. I managed to slide down the rest of the way... by the time I reached the bottom my bottle was gone, and there was no way back up the banks.”

“You’re damned lucky there wasn’t a cloud burst upstream. That ravine can turn into a washer within minutes. You wouldn’t have survived. Stay out of any wash or ravine... even dry as a bone and with a clear-blue sky, they’re deadly under the right conditions,” Danie lectured their guest from the front as Geo nodded vigorously in agreement.

“Uh, okay—next time, eh?” Andrea agreed before resuming his story. “I tried to clean myself up, and the bleeding slowed—though I didn’t realize it was so deep until you started poking around in it...”

“Probably the mud helped with the bleeding. What a mess.” Geo grimaced at the memory.

“Thank you, Geo, truly. You saved my arm, I’m sure.” Danie caught the reflection of Andrea smiling his glorious, sweet smile at Geo. It made him wish... wish so many things. None of them right; not right now. He turned and concentrated on driving while listening to the tale in back.

“Right, so—I couldn’t get up the way I came, and at least I had water to drink. I still had everything else, and my camera was perfect, which I bless the

angels for protecting.” Andrea kissed the tips of his fingers and sent the kisses upwards towards heaven.

“So I felt better. But by nightfall it was so dark, and getting cold by the water, so I just kept moving. Eventually the ravine leveled out a little and I was able to crawl my way out. Once I spotted your fire in the distance, it took another two hours before I made it there; I was terrified it would go out or that there were big cats in the area and I wouldn’t reach it in time.”

“Weren’t you afraid that it was Ronson and the others waiting for you?” Geo asked. His eyes were wide in alarm for the other man.

“Yes, actually. So I did my best not to be seen or heard. When I saw that your truck was different, I almost collapsed on the spot. I must have made more noise than I thought, because the next thing I knew there was an angry, *naked* man threatening to shoot me!”

Geo snorted out a laugh, and Danie knew he was remembering him standing over the smaller man with all his piel hanging in the breeze. It was serious at the time, not knowing whether or not Andrea was a danger to any of them, but still... he smiled in agreement.

Geo groaned and stretched in the driver’s seat. They were making good time on the first leg of their journey, paralleling the river; driving straight through, eating the sandwiches he’d made up last night. Andrea was watching him in the mirror while Danie slept in the passenger seat. Geo knew that Danie had kept guard over the two of them through what little was left of the night and early morning. Geo had awoken cuddled next to the Italian, a leg wedged between Andrea’s and a severe case of morning wood.

Thoughts of makeup sex with Danie crossed his mind. He’d really gone and done it this time. He could see how much his accusations had hurt Danie. It didn’t mean they weren’t true... it’s just that they’d never talked about being anything more than what they were. Inseparable, each and every school break since he’d turned nineteen.

He'd gently extracted himself from the bed and gone in search of Danie, vaguely wondering how many blowjobs it would take to get the man to forgive him.

None, as it turned out. Danie had just pulled him onto his lap without a word and kissed him breathless. They'd sat that way, holding each other and listening to the savannah stir with the first whispers of dawn.

They didn't have long to linger. Neither said the actual words of apology, or any words at all, but the connection they'd always shared was still there, unbroken. Geo sighed in relief. Then, glancing at the mirror, he gazed straight into the eyes of Andrea Conte. His breath faltered and his cock hardened and his heart spasmed.

He glanced over at Danie and flushed. Embarrassment chased away his libido, but the look in the mirror from the backseat was full of regret, and also interest and a hint of something else. Geo thought back to his conversation with Danie, before they got sidetracked with painful revelations. The idea of sharing the Italian with Danie sent a thrill through him. It wasn't cheating if they were together—right?

CHAPTER FOUR

They were eight hours into the first leg of their journey when it happened. A sharp jolt and the scream of metal tore through the cab, jerking the Rover to a halt. Geo groaned. Danie had snapped upright, and Andrea was thrown into the window, howling in pain from the impact on his arm. Geo could see a patch of crimson blooming on the far edge of the bandage where there hadn't been any stitches. He hoped that was the case, since it seemed unlikely they were going anywhere soon.

“Are you okay?” Danie had snapped open his seat belt and leaned into the backseat to check on Andrea.

“Hurts like hell” Andrea gritted through clenched teeth. “What happened?”

“Felt like something broke in the undercarriage...” Geo muttered then hopped out to check.

“Axle,” muttered Danie.

Geo knew they weren't going anywhere in the Rover, but he needed to check everything out himself, maybe more than once, before he admitted defeat.

“Geo,” Danie called, stepping out into the hot afternoon sun, “Andrea needs you to check his arm, and we need to set up camp. I'll call George and have him send out a rescue party. It's at least a day's hike to the airfield on foot—wiser just to stay put and let them come to us. We have the supplies.”

“What if?” Geo couldn't say the words.

“He's fine, Geo. Go see, and let me call the old man?” Just a quick nod to Danie and Geo was all business again. The strong, hard illusion he'd hide behind in public was back, and he could see Danie's approval. He needed Geo to be tough right now.

By the time Danie finished his call into the reserve, Geo had checked and rebandaged Andrea's arm, started laying out their supplies, and unpacking the tent before heading into the bush to look for fuel.

A campfire would be more critical out here; there were at least two lion prides that included this area in their range. According to Danie, George was sending out trackers, a mechanic, and a spare axle. They were expected to rendezvous with them in three days if lucky. Four was more likely if they were sticking together in a caravan.

He was sure they'd be seeing Oupa himself. This was one incident of bad luck too many and the old man would be blaming Danie for all of it. Oupa was never fair where he was concerned.

Geo moved next to checking their water supplies, pulling out a roll of charts for the reserve. He found their quadrant, looking for the closest spring or creek. It looked like they had a little luck. There was a year-round spring a short distance away. That also meant there'd be game, and with the game, predators wouldn't be far behind. He pulled out their second rifle and a box of shells and laid both on the hood of the Rover.

"Andy, do you know how to shoot?" Geo tossed over his shoulder to the Italian.

Andrea had been casually taking pictures of them working since neither of them would allow him to help.

"Just photos, caro," he replied softly, taking another shot of Geo, smiling.

"Okay, just checking." Geo tucked his head back into the hatch of the Rover. They had enough water for all four days if they rationed it. That meant canned food. Geo pulled out the boxed food, setting it on the ground.

Danie circled through the grass, checking lines of sight into their camp. They were a little exposed to the south, but there was a ridge rising up that would give the advantage of high ground if someone approached from that direction. He shifted the full water jugs on his back, scouting closer.

It was a scramble to get to the top of the rocky outcropping one-handed, but he managed it. Peering around for cover, thinking like a hunter, he abandoned his cargo and eased forward on his belly, looking out and into their camp.

Andrea was sitting on a campstool close to the tent, fiddling with his camera again. Geo was working on the fire. Flashes of steel from his knife blade kept catching the sun, and Danie made a note of it. No point in bringing unwanted attention to any of them. Though by the time night fell, they'd have no choice. Their fire would shine like a beacon, but the four-legged predators were more likely to find them without it.

He watched as the Italian got up from his seat, sauntering over to Geo. The hand he placed on the small of Geo's back set his teeth on edge. *Drop it.* He willed the Italian to move away. Instead, Andrea moved it slowly across his back until draping it over Geo's shoulder, bringing their heads together.

He thought he would see Geo's smile, shy and flirty, if he pulled out his binoculars. Geo wasn't pulling away; even from this distance he could read the man's body language, could feel the imprint of Geo's warmth from all the times he leaned back into him; watching him lean into the photographer brought a stab of pain.

He really couldn't blame Geo, not after the other night, especially since he had practically offered up the man to Geo, on a silver platter. But that was before he revealed so much. More than he'd intended, but not everything. Probably not enough. And maybe it was too late; he'd seen the glances between Andrea and Geo. After their argument, how could he expect Geo not to jump at the chance to be with the Italian?

Danie lay there, letting the late afternoon sun heat the skin of his back through his shirt, just watching the two men. Andrea was almost as pretty as Geo. He had a similar slender build, a head of messy brown hair, and olive skin; as a pair they would be quite stunning. The Italian had a few inches and a handful of years on Geo. He had an established career that took him all over the world. He certainly sounded like he was a better fit, at least on paper.

Danie didn't have much to offer Geo except for his companionship and protection in the bush for a few months each year. But at the end of the day, he was just an employee.

Danie picked up the satellite phone and called Geo, watching him break away from the other man—*does he look guilty?*

“Geo, can you spot me?” Danie was all business again, shoving away his impending heartbreak for another time.

“Where are you?” He watched as Geo spun in a tight circle, before moving out to get a clear view of the surrounding area. He quickly fixed on the rise, peering at his location under a hand, shielding his eyes from the glare.

“Can you see me yet?” Danie moved on his belly a little closer to the edge.

“You're up on that ridge, yeah?” Geo asked.

“Can you *see* me?”

“No. That's not good is it?” As Danie watched Geo, he imagined that he could see Geo worry his bottom lip, like he always did when he sorted out a problem.

“Not if you're the one looking, Geo.” He disconnected the call and stood, waving and waiting for Geo to wave back before scrambling back down to ground level.

His walk back to camp was a thoughtful one.

They ate beans from cans set into the coals to heat. The labels curled from the fire and blacked with soot, the metal almost too hot to touch. Geo kept up a patter that masked the silence from the rest of them. Andrea kept sending glances over the fire at both of them, which was confusing.

Earlier, when he'd returned with the water, Danie had found the pair huddled together over the man's viewfinder, Geo marveling over photographs from wherever. They didn't even have the decency to pull apart when he entered the camp. Instead, Geo just waved him over, as if it was the most

natural thing in the world to have the Italian draped all over him. Maybe it was.

The photographs were spectacular—even in a three-inch format. Danie hated them.

Andrea pulled the camera back for a moment, searching through shots for a moment, and then, crossing the camp, slid next to him. Danie felt the warmth and the spicy scent coming from the man.

After so many days in the bush without more than cursory bathing, Danie had become used to the musky, pungent smells he shared with Geo. But this man, this man with olive skin and lashes longer than any he'd ever seen on a man before, smelled like sunshine and bergamot.

He shivered and willed himself not to respond further. He could feel Geo's eyes on them as he watched Andrea scroll through the shots for him.

He settled on a series of shots of Geo, following him as he moved through the camp settling them in for a long wait. The photographs elevated the mundane activities to art. The sunlight setting Geo's hair into a blazing halo of gold, making his eyes shine with ethereal light—a fallen angel amid kindling as he knelt before the stone circle, building their fire. There were more. Close-ups of Geo, his shy smile, his raucous laughter, his worry reflected as he pulled on his lower lip with his teeth.

“This, this is the one.” Andrea pointed to the next shot. Geo was standing, arms at ease across his chest, and there was such a look of love and peace on his face, that Danie had to look twice. He looked up at Andrea, confused.

“He was looking at you. You were busy across the way, and he just stopped to watch you.” He scrolled through several more shots of Geo with a dreamy look on his face.

“You are a couple, yes?” Andrea persisted, his hazel eyes shining in the twilight.

“Mmm...” Danie wouldn't commit to anything that would ruin Geo's chance of happiness if he really wanted the Italian.

“I think maybe that’s a yes. I asked this to Geo, and he made the same noise. It must be a special Afrikaner slang that means ‘I’m in love with my partner’?” The Italian laughed at Danie’s expression.

“He made that same face, too! You both are so...? Cute? No... I think the word is... Yes! Stupid. If I was in either of your shoes, I wouldn’t let some stranger come this close to my man.”

Andrea moved all the way into him, pressing himself into Danie’s side. Danie felt the breath against his neck, lips hovering over his ear as the man whispered, “I like you Danie. You are exactly my type. You are all gruff on the outside, so strong and quiet. But when I needed you last night, there you were—wrapping me up in your arms, protecting me. I felt it Danie. Did you feel it?”

Danie shuddered. Looking up he saw Geo watching them with hooded eyes, all expression gone from his face. Andrea smiled broadly and eased back slightly.

“I think that Geo is reconsidering what he wants. Shall we give him more material?” Andrea moved again, and Danie threw out his hand, halting the man’s forward progress before he could cause more harm.

The man leaned into his touch, and Danie closed his eyes, playing with the idea of pulling his hand back and letting Andrea fall all the way forward, into him. With a wink and another wicked smile, the Italian moved away to sit by the fire, still playing with his camera, leaving Danie wondering.

Geo cursed himself for a fool. He’d pushed Danie away last night and this was the result: a horny Italian crawling all over his man, and Danie just letting him. They should have left him in the bush for the lions to eat. Danie was the worst kind of idiot if he thought Geo cared about what he did for a living.

Danie *had* finally pushed the photographer back, but Geo could see it was only because he was there watching the pair. Andrea moved around the fire to drop into the canvas chair next to him.

“He’s beautiful... your Danie,” Andrea leaned over whispering. “I wouldn’t mind a man like that in my bed every night. You’re a lucky man, Geo.” He pulled the lens cap off the camera and started framing shots in the lilac haze of twilight. It really was beautiful here. The thorn trees stood in silhouette against a lavender sky still slightly-pink where the clouds drifted, and the grasslands had turned an antique-gold color glowing with the last kiss of daylight.

Andrea turned the camera on him, letting the shutter fly in a quick burst. Geo could feel himself frown.

“Why do you do that?”

“Do what, caro?” Andrea had turned his lens back across the vast savannah.

“Take my picture all the time.” Geo leaned back in his chair, his tin cup cradled in his hands.

“You won’t let me help, caro. So I practice my shots. You never know when a wild animal will walk across your path. Or an exotic bird.” He purred the last and stroked a finger down Geo’s arm, sending shivers across his skin.

“I’m anything but exotic,” Geo protested, folding his arms on his chest.

“If I brought you to my home, all the boys would follow you down the street begging for your attention.”

Geo snorted in disbelief. “Unlikely. They might follow me down the street just to pull me in an alley and beat the crap out of me. That I’d believe.”

“No, I’d never let that happen, caro. You will always be safe with me. You just need to trust me, like you trust Danie. But maybe you don’t trust Danie?”

“Danie? Of course I trust Danie. I lo—” he began, stopping himself, but not in time to avoid the self-satisfied smirk from the other man. Andrea lifted the camera to his face and squeezed off another shot of Geo.

“So Danie is wrong. He says there is nothing between you.”

“There isn’t!” Geo snapped back

“Well, then, you won’t mind if I keep you company tonight while Danie stands guard and keeps us safe? That’s all he does for you, right, Geo? He’s just here to keep you safe?”

Geo froze, unsure how to respond. He looked over at Danie, who was now leaning against their disabled Rover, glaring at them.

“So we’ll let him keep your body safe while I keep your heart.”

Geo stiffened. “Why would you say that?” he demanded.

“Because, caro, I have spent years travelling from place to place, and I can recognize the rare and valuable treasures found only in the most remote places. I’ve made a career on my luck, and guts. It’s only fitting that I find love the same way.”

“You’re insane!” Geo was pissed.

“Why? Because I can see a lifetime when I look at you?”

“Because you don’t know me, Andrea! How can you know a man in a day? Not even a day?”

“You can know a man’s heart, Geo. You showed me yours last night, and I want it. Danie showed me his as well.”

“But you don’t want his?” Geo was horrified at the thought that anyone wouldn’t value Danie. Danie was perfect.

“Did I say that, Geo?” Andrea cocked his brow. “Danie might be the only man whose heart could come close to your own. But his is closed, and yours is as open as the African sky at dawn.

“I’m drawn to beauty, caro, and your heart is the most beautiful thing I’ve seen in a very long time.”

“You’re delirious,” Geo huffed through the heat in his cheeks. Wide African sky or not, he felt closed in and cornered at the moment. Rising, he walked over to Danie.

“Make me feel better, Danie.” He leaned against the Rover, brushing shoulders with the man.

Danie stared at him for a few moments. “We’ll be fine, Geo. We always are. This is just a temporary thing. Christiansen will be here in a couple of days. It’s just like we’ve moved base camp. We’ve done it a million times, Geo. More than a million times.”

Geo pondered that. “It doesn’t feel the same without you, Danie,” he muttered under his breath.

Danie drew back. “You’ll always have me, Geo. You’ve always had me.”

“Maybe.” Geo shrugged and pushed off the fender. He picked up his rifle and moved to the perimeter of their camp. “One last check around. I’ll see if there’s more wood. Back in fifteen.” He didn’t wait for Danie’s approval, just slipped into the grass, letting his attention focus on the environment around him instead of the two men playing havoc with his mind back at camp.

As soon as Geo slipped out of sight, Danie turned on the Italian.

“I want to know what you told him that made him so upset,” Danie snarled, yanking the man out of the chair by his shirt. And it *was* his shirt. Danie and Geo had both leant him clothes to wear. Andrea was broader and taller than Geo, so Danie’s shirts were a better fit, though still loose across the chest and shoulders. But Geo preferred his cargo shorts baggy and slung low across his hips. On Andrea they fit perfectly across his ass and modeled his package nicely. Not that Danie had been noticing that. Much.

“I simply told him that the two of you seemed to be in agreement. And since neither of you has claimed the other, there is no reason for me not to make the most of a very pleasant opportunity in the middle of a very unpleasant situation. I haven’t lied to anyone here.”

“What did you say, exactly,” Danie hissed with a shake.

“I said that I have waited my whole life to meet a man as beautiful and lovely as he is, and, as I am not a fool, I would do anything to have a chance at the heart of one of the two best men I’ve ever met at home or in my travels. I want Geo, Danie. And since you don’t seem to care beyond the duties of your employment with his grandfather, I suggested that I was the better person to keep his heart not only safe, but singing.”

Danie stumbled back as if struck.

“You can’t have him!” Danie snarled, jerking the man forward again. “What right do you have to stumble into our lives and take over? All we’ve done is help you. All I’ve done is try and protect you! Why?” Danie felt tears forming in his eyes. Releasing Andrea to wipe a hand across his face, he almost missed the whispered response.

“Because, Danie—I want you, too. You *are* the second man whose heart I’ve fallen for. I want you, I want Geo... God, I want you both. And I know that you want me too. I wasn’t quite asleep last night when you and Geo had your talk. It’s a very small tent to have very private conversations in.”

The confession wrapped itself around Danie’s chest, squeezing the breath out of him. He opened his eyes to stare into Andrea’s hazel pair. There was no humor, no smirk, just a deep intensity that made his mouth dry and sent shivers down his spine. Dear God. *Forgive me Geo.*

Danie raised a hand to cup Andrea’s jaw, rubbing his thumb across a perfect sculpted cheekbone. The man shuddered, letting his lashes sweep closed as Danie yanked him close enough to cover the man’s mouth with his own.

CHAPTER FIVE

The campsite was empty of life when Geo finished his check of the surrounding area, night following swiftly on the heels of the setting sun. Wandering over to the fire to dump a final load of dead wood next to the blaze, he poked at the flames and considered making a fresh pot of coffee for the long night ahead.

A low moaning broke the silence of the camp, raising the hairs on the back of Geo's neck. *Andrea*. Geo tore across the packed earth of their camp and tore open the flap of the tent. *Fucking God*.

The bastards hadn't even noticed him. They could be fucking *dead*. Geo looked down at the rifle still clutched in his hand and then back to the pallet they'd made on the floor of the tent. He could just make them out in the gloom. Andrea was all naked olive skin, while Danie was shirtless with just a pair of shorts riding low on his hips. From this angle, Geo couldn't tell if they were unbuttoned or not, since Danie was currently curled around the photographer, sucking the man's cock!

God. Danie was slowly working Andrea's prick in long, slow, strokes of his tongue and hand. He knew what that felt like, and his own cock hardened in protest at being left out. He reached down, adjusting himself automatically. Seeing Danie with another man was like watching a train wreck in slow motion. Andrea moaned again, reaching his long fingers into Danie's hair, keeping him close. Geo almost lost it when Danie slid over the Italian's length until he'd buried his face into the man's dark curls. There was no holding Andrea back now, he was groaning and writhing across the blankets, muttering in Italian.

Geo watched Danie speed up, bobbing over the glistening member. His mouth was dry and his head hurt. They were beautiful together, moving against each other with such passion. Geo could see the connection of body and soul. He'd thought Danie's passion had belonged to him alone, even during the periods of time when they were apart; he had never believed Danie

had managed to replace him. He would have seen it in Danie's eyes when he stepped off the plane after a long school year away.

But this was different. The grip of Andrea's hands in Danie's own, the stroking fingers on Danie's face, the kisses Danie laid on the tender skin of Andrea's groin. They all spoke of a connection that was burning hot and bright with the speed of a South African grass fire.

"Ah, Danie! I need... I need... more! Please Danie." Danie grunted and rolled off the other man, reaching around for his pack. Geo knew.

"Need help finding something?" Geo couldn't stop himself. The bitter words tumbling over his lips were gone before he realized they were there.

Danie reared back like he'd been stabbed, and Geo considered it for a moment.

"Geo..." Danie's plea was shocked and a little desperate.

"Don't bother." Geo gripped the rifle in his hand, closing his eyes against the scene before him. Andrea was still stretched out in front of him, his cock still hard and glistening from Danie's mouth. Geo was sure there'd be a look of smug triumph in that bastard's face, so he avoided looking there.

"I'll take first watch. You two... Carry on." Geo yanked the flap back trying to maintain a dignified exit. "Fuck!" he screamed in the next second, finding himself yanked backwards onto the floor.

Andrea had him wrapped up, arms and legs entwined with his, keeping him from escaping. He'd rolled them over in his struggles to get free, and now he was completely pinned under the Italian.

"Don't struggle, caro," the man whispered in his ear, sending him into another frenzy of motion, trying to buck all that nakedness off his back.

"Geo, love. Stop." It was Danie kneeling next to his head that got him to stop. Danie was the one he wanted to fucking kill.

"Fuck off, Danie," he muttered into the bedding now soaked with his spit.

“Let him up, Andrea,” Danie murmured, and instantly Geo was released, which pissed him off further.

“You. Fucking. Ass. Hole. Danie Swart!” Free of the Italian, he rose to his knees, launching himself at Danie who was balancing on only his toes, squatting next to him. It was no contest, and Geo had a hand wrapped around Danie’s throat, tumbling him backwards. Using it to steady himself, he punched the man dead-on.

Andrea scrambled, throwing an arm across Geo’s chest to drag him away from a howling Danie, blood gushing from his nose. “Let me go, you fuckin’ snake!” Geo snarled, writhing in the photographer’s arms once more.

“Hush, caro. It’s okay... you don’t understand. We were waiting for you to join us... we just got... carried away...” Andrea winced, as if realizing he wasn’t helping.

“Ass. Holes. Both of you! Let me go, Andrea,” Geo cried out, furious. The entire situation was out of control, and now he was stuck out here between one cheating bastard of a boyfriend and his new squeeze.

“Dammit, Geo,” Danie cursed as he pressed a T-shirt against his nose. “I keep forgetting how fucking hard you punch. Shit, just settle down, okay?” He gingerly tested the cartilage in his nose and sighed in relief.

Geo wasn’t sure whether to be relieved or sorry that Danie’s nose wasn’t broken. He’d have to be content with enhancing Danie’s good looks with a set of raccoon eyes. The thought made him smile, which in turn made Danie look at him with suspicion.

“You always treat me like I’m a flower, Danie. But I’m a man. Apparently not man enough for you, but I’m certainly man enough for me.

“You know, I never believed Oupa when he told me all the tales of you running around with the tourists and staff. It never fit with what I knew about you... guess the joke’s on me.” Geo’s bravado failed him at the end, and his voice cracked.

“I guess for you I’m just a nice way to while away the afternoons out in the middle of the bush. But for *me* it was always more. I haven’t been with another man since I met you. So maybe I should thank you for presenting me with a front row seat to the Danie Swart show!”

Danie dropped the shirt, wiping his hand across his face, smearing a line of blood across one tan, impossibly beautiful cheek. Geo was on his side, Andrea curled around him, trapping his arms and legs with his own, so when Danie knelt down to lay in front of him, he had no defense. Not against the hand that cradled his face, stroked his hair, wiped away the tears as they formed in the corner of his eyes.

“Don’t be dof, Geo! You’re dead wrong about me, and we both know that this has nothing to do with us. I won’t say that the timing was perfect, but you wouldn’t be complaining if you were the one under Andrea, and I was walking in on you. Fuck, Geo, if that was the case, I’d have stripped down and be halfway to heaven right now.

“I thought we talked about this already, or did I just imagine you saying you wanted Andrea, too?” Danie stared at him intently, and Geo felt himself flush again.

“I think you...” he started to push back from Danie, but Geo couldn’t think; that was the problem. He let out a shuddering breath, and the arms around him tightened, pulling him closer.

Andrea whispered into his ear. “Caro, let it go for one night. You might say that the milk has been spilt, but is it so terrible to be desired by both of us?” He used Geo’s stillness to take advantage, stroking his stomach and working his finger under the cotton of his khaki button-up. Geo shivered, and Andrea’s lips joined in planting delicate kisses behind his right ear.

Danie used his distraction to come close once more. He cupped Geo’s face, gently kissing him, slipping a tongue between his lips. It was unfair. Geo never had any defense against Danie once his mouth came into play. He knew every single sensitive spot on Geo’s body by now, and he was happy to spend the long afternoons searching for more.

Andrea's lips had slid down his neck during Danie's assault on his senses, and were now worrying the skin at his throat, alternating between biting and sucking. Geo writhed, though for a thoroughly more pleasurable reason than just wanting to kill Danie. Geo followed that skittering thought, and was satisfied. The desire to kill was still there... he'd finish Danie off... later.

Somehow Danie had worked his shirt loose. One second it was unbuttoned with Danie's hands stroking his sides underneath the cotton, the next it was gone and he could feel Andrea's trailing fingers on his bare stomach. His gut clenched and he moaned into Danie's mouth.

Andrea shifted away, and Geo was suddenly on his back under both of them.

"Tell me now, caro, if you want me to stop," Andrea purred, gazing down at him with eyes shiny in the low light.

"Geo, tell us to stop, or let us go." Danie broke off his kissing and was gazing down at him with such a look of intensity that Geo's throat closed. He couldn't make a sound, only just managing a short nod. It was enough. The other men, obviously waiting to take advantage of his permission, leapt on his acquiescence. Suddenly it felt like there were multiples of four hands, two tongues, and two mouths.

Geo was in sensory overload. Teeth dragged across the skin of his belly while someone's tongue teased his left nipple. Hands first on his chest, then on a thigh, then running down his arms; he lost track of who they belonged to. Was it Danie easing his shorts off, or Andrea? Time was stuttering, slowing down, speeding up, then stopping completely when a warm, wet mouth covered the head of his penis, working its way down while a tongue painted the rim of his taint, probing his hole with the tip before moving upwards. The tongue disappeared long enough for the mouth to ease around his ball sac.

The fire racing over Geo stole his breath, stole his mind. He levered himself up enough to gaze down at the two heads working him over. It was Danie working his cock while keeping one hand rubbing a small circle over his

heart. Geo gulped. Andrea had moved between his legs at some point, hooking his knees over his shoulders.

He could have missed all of this was the last coherent thought for some time. It felt... oh, he felt so much.

A wave of raw emotion broke over him, and tears flooded his eyes. The attention from these two men felt like more than just sex. The tenderness in their touching, the intensity of their focus, all worked together to make Geo's heart hurt. He closed his eyes and let go.

CHAPTER SIX

Danie held Geo in his arms. Andrea lay snuggled up to both of them, wrapping one arm around Danie's shoulders and putting the other hand on Geo's hip, keeping them all connected. He felt the Italian nuzzle his neck and Danie turned to face him.

"Drea."

"Mmm. I like that," he murmured back. Danie smiled, kissing the other man's lips gently. The passion they'd unleashed over Geo spilled over and caught them all by surprise. Taking Geo apart, getting him to drop his walls, bringing him off twice before they'd finished with him, leaving him limp and exhausted before turning to each other... that was the obvious plan. But when Andrea rolled on top of him with unexpected strength and determination, frothing against him until they both needed more...

Danie could feel the burn of that hurried penetration, even now. Andrea had taken him at his word. Danie barely allowing any stretching before begging the Italian to take him. It had been years since Danie had bottomed for anyone. Geo's bottoming was a natural preference, and since they'd been together, Danie had kept his desires as a switch hidden from the younger man, not wanting him to feel like he wasn't giving Danie everything he needed. But Andrea knew just how to work him, hitting every button he had, finding new ones with every thrust of his elegant cock and the grip on his wrists.

Geo had just rolled over, curling up next to Danie, kissing him deeply as Andrea fucked him. It had been perfect. He was still hard when Andrea pulled out, rolling them over until he was on top, still groaning with displeasure until Andrea pushed lube and another condom into his hands. Those long hands had just pulled his legs back to his chest, presenting himself to Danie.

It was Geo who slid a finger into the man, working and stretching him until he was hard and leaking once more. And while Danie had eased himself into that velvety heat, Geo was matching him with his tongue and mouth, sucking

down the man's length as Danie stroked in, pulling back off as Danie's cock retreated. They'd made the man a writhing mess by the time they'd both come, collapsing in a tangled heap, Geo hovering above them stroking himself to his own finish, spraying them with his come.

Geo had found the bloody shirt, wiping them all down before wedging himself between Danie and Andrea, taking his customary spot in Danie's arms, where he still slept.

"Drea," he began again, pulling himself out of his reveries.

"Yes Danie?" There was just a tiny lilt of teasing in his voice.

"Do you do this... a lot?" Danie tried to keep his tone neutral and quiet.

"Ah... no, Danie. Like you, I tend to lead with my heart, so no. I don't. Never, actually." His fingers gently stroked Danie's shoulder as he spoke.

"How do you know that? That I don't?" It was completely dark in the tent now, and Danie was grateful for the cover that hid his face from the Italian. He could feel the intensity coming from the other man.

Andrea scoffed quietly, "You and Geo wear your hearts on your sleeves. No wonder his grandfather has been working you both over. It's as plain as the sun in the sky and the dirt under your feet that you're both mad for each other. I assume that if everyone isn't convinced you're already lovers, they believe it's just a matter of time.

He continued more softly. "It's a beautiful thing to see, Danie. I would give anything to see that look directed at me."

Danie couldn't resist. He reached across Geo to the other man, pulling Andrea's head close enough to kiss him deeply. Andrea sighed, relaxing into him. Danie felt waves of tenderness for the other man. He pulled back.

Andrea sighed. "It's okay Danie, you don't have to worry about me. I'm not as pathetic as this must seem. I'm really very happy with my life..."

Danie scoffed and pulled Andrea closer than before, his kiss demanding.

“Ge’roff!” The muffled protest from Geo, who was struggling to get out from underneath and between them, made them both laugh. They turned their attention instead to the younger man, covering him with kisses and gentle bites until he was breathless, swatting at them both. “Stop, stop, stop!” he swore.

“Geo, caro...” Andrea purred. Danie was amused. He was now on the bottom of the pile, and Andrea had Geo pinned up against him, rubbing his rather nice erection along the top of Geo’s thigh. Geo was panting, and Danie could only assume that Andrea had put his talented fingers to use. He could just hook the strap of his pack with a pinky finger, carefully pulling it close enough to grab the supplies that Andrea would soon need.

Geo wiggled in his lap, sending Danie into orbit. God, if they kept that up he’d be finished before the pair even started.

“Danie,” Andrea whispered, “I think Geo is ready to learn what being with two men is really all about.” He grabbed the lube from Danie, and Geo arched backwards, clipping Danie on the chin with his head, and Danie laughed, throwing his arms around his beautiful man as Andrea worked him over with his mouth and fingers.

Geo’s moaning became frantic, morphing into whiny, incoherent pleas for Andrea to stop, to start, to go... he started howling when the other man popped up to give Danie a smirk before burying his face in Geo’s lap. He flipped a condom blindly in Danie’s general direction. *Lovely.*

It wasn’t the easiest thing to do with Geo surfing his chest, but he managed, rolling the rubber down and finding the slick rolling around next to them.

“Ready, Drea...” God, was he ready. They worked in tandem, flipping Geo over onto his chest. Geo immediately latched onto his mouth, biting Danie’s lips, invading his mouth with his tongue. Danie was distracted enough that he hadn’t felt Andrea’s hand on his cock, guiding the head of his penis to Geo’s entrance. It was soft and wet with lube, and he slid in easily, eliciting another moan from the man in his arms.

Geo struggled to sit up, drawing him in deeper. He let him take control for a moment, getting comfortable around Danie's prick. God he loved this man. Danie pulled him back down on his chest, giving him short little thrusts that were driving Geo mad with frustration.

"Don't worry, caro, we'll give you what you need," Andrea whispered in Geo's ear. Danie watched him stroke along Geo's sweaty back before picking up his own condom. He lubed two fingers and gently inserted them next to Danie's imbedded penis, gently loosening the muscle of Geo's entrance further.

"So tight," worried Geo, freezing until Danie resumed the soothing strokes down his back.

"We won't hurt you, caro. We'll take this slow, but one word and we stop, okay?" Andrea had slipped next to Geo, so he could look into his face and plant gentle kisses on his shoulder.

"No, don't. I want... this," Geo confessed, and Danie could imagine the blush that must have risen on Geo's cheeks with his confession.

"No, caro. I won't stop, not until we're done with you and you're begging for your release. We can keep you on edge all night long. Is that what you want, caro? Is that what you need from us?" The tone of Andrea's voice had gone from solicitous to seductive to flat out wicked, and Danie could feel himself swept along with Geo.

Andrea moved back, a hand pushing Geo back down to lie against Danie's chest, leaving the man's ass fully exposed to Andrea's ministrations. Danie slid his hand between them, wrapping it around Geo's cock as a distraction. He felt Andrea's prick slide over his hole and gently nudge his sac as Andrea added more lube to Geo's hole, stretching it a final time before moving the head of his penis in position and giving it a little thrust.

Geo keened, rearing up as Andrea breached his entrance and slid deep alongside Danie. Danie couldn't imagine what Geo was feeling. He'd never felt anything quite like this before. The heat and the pressure were lighting up

all his nerve endings, and he vaguely wondered if he could talk Geo into topping him along with Andrea.

The thought that there should obviously be more opportunities with the Italian surprised him before slithering away as Andrea slid all the way in, chasing the breath from his lungs.

“Oh, Danie,” Andrea crooned, “our Geo feels so good, so tight, with you alongside me. How are you, caro?” He leaned into Geo, planting kisses wherever he could reach without moving too much.

“Move, move, move...” groaned Geo. His body was limp, draped across Danie’s chest, but his own cock was hard and twitching in Danie’s hand. Danie started slowly, stroking Geo’s shaft, relishing the silky skin, the spongy resistance as his thumb slid over the head, dipping into his slit to paint pre-come over the helmet. He could taste Geo on his tongue without much trouble; he’d had the real thing so many times in his mouth that his imagination wasn’t taxed. He loved this man, loved his body, and loved his heart. But in all the time they’d been together he’d never experienced this shaking, shuddering Geo, calling out to them, begging for their hands and pricks.

With his free hand, Danie stroked through Geo’s hair, pushing the sweaty strands from his face. He relaxed and let Andrea drive the sensations into his body, opening up to both men, playing the anchor for their pleasure. Geo groaned and whined, writhing against Danie until he started thrusting in counterpoint to Andrea. Geo really would make a lovely switch; he was certainly trying to top from the bottom here... well, maybe from the middle. Maybe that’s what it took for Geo to take charge.

They couldn’t last much longer. Geo was the first to spill his release, thrusting into Danie’s hand until his come spurted over Danie’s belly. The clenching of his pelvic muscles set off a chain reaction, spurring Andrea faster until his friction sent Danie over the edge. Andrea followed along seconds later.

Danie was so elated in the afterglow of his orgasm he started laughing, setting them all off.

“Holy fuck, Drea—that was glorious!” Danie, laughing, eased himself carefully out of Geo. Andrea was stripping them of used condoms and cleaning them all up.

“Oh, God,” Geo groaned. “Good thing there’s two of you and we don’t have to go anywhere tomorrow. I’m going to be closed for business for the foreseeable future, and you two are going to have to carry me around.”

“Caro, it will be a pleasure. And I promise, whenever you’re ready, Danie and I will be on our knees ready to service you, any way we can.”

“Oh, sounds nice. But not now. Sleep now. Blowjobs later. Much, much later.” Geo barely had the words out of his mouth before his breathing changed, Danie recognizing it as the first stages of sleep. Andrea returned to his original position next to them, though this time he kissed Danie thoroughly before closing his own eyes.

Danie lay awake in the dark, listening to the two of them breathe. He had no idea how to reconcile the competing emotions. All he knew was he wanted this feeling to last as long as it could, as long as they were together. Beyond that, he had no hope. Really, in that sense, nothing had changed for him except that he now had even more to miss.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Apart from an obvious soreness, Geo managed to wake refreshed. He was alone in the blankets. From the light inside the tent, he could tell it was still early. The gurgling of his stomach reminded him that they hadn't managed to eat last night. The intensity of their activities had pushed all thought of food from their minds. No one wanted to stop. In fairness, Geo suspected they were all of a similar mindset—the fear that once they stopped, it would be impossible to recreate the circumstances that had both Geo and Danie opening up their relationship far enough to invite Andrea in.

Geo felt fundamentally changed by the experience, and he wasn't sure what that meant for today and the days after. He stretched gingerly, taking inventory of tired and sore muscles. It wasn't bad except for the literal pain in his ass.

He carefully rolled to his knees, crawling around the limited space for his bag. The last thing he needed was to pull on his crusty shorts. Apparently they became indiscriminate in their cleanup at some point. He ran across the pair he'd worn yesterday and could barely bring himself to touch them long enough to stuff them into the deepest recess of the duffle.

His next cleanest pair retrieved and donned, Geo tugged on his socks and looked around for his boots, eventually finding one wedged under their bed and the other in the opposite corner of the tent.

He smirked, remembering the eagerness of both men as they stripped him, and exited the tent. Danie was crouching next to the fire, Geo's French coffee press at his feet. Andrea hovered over him with his nose stuck in a bag of Geo's favorite blend.

“Oi!” Geo cried, trying his best to sound irritated. “Hands off the merchandise!”

“Ah, caro...” Andrea purred, a brilliant smile on his face, “it's too late. We've already handled the merchandise, and I think we'll keep it.” He handed

the coffee to Danie and crossed the distance between them, pulling him into a close embrace with a kiss as sweet as any he'd ever had.

Breathless, he pulled back, only to find himself swung around into Danie's strong arms. He enjoyed the moment, snuggled close with his head tucked under Danie's chin.

"Missed waking up with you," Geo whispered into the man's shirt. The hug tightened, and Geo knew Danie had heard him anyway.

"Mmm, me too. We wanted to let you sleep and bring you breakfast in bed. I guess we weren't that quiet sneaking out."

"Probably the giggling woke him," Andrea laughed and poked Danie in the side. He kissed Geo's hair before waving the pot of coffee under his nose. The perfume of dark French roast curled into Geo's nose, and he began to salivate.

"Oh, yeah, coffee. Gimme before you ruin it." Geo made a grab for the pot, but Andrea held it out of reach.

"What? I'm insulted by your insinuation that I would ruin coffee. I'm Italian! We have espresso in our veins!" His mock ire was ignored by Geo, who managed to rescue his pot in time to plunge it.

"That might impress me if this was Italian roast. As it stands, unless you have a Frenchman in your pocket, you're not much use to me. And frankly, if you do have a Frenchman in your pocket, it would explain a great deal about all the extra pairs of hands last night."

Danie burst out laughing at Andrea's pout and passed tin cups over to Geo to fill. The beverage was dark and smoky, steaming hot. Geo loved it like this, though the metal lip tended to give a little kiss of pain with the first sip.

Andrea pulled up another campstool to sit next to Geo. "Seriously, caro. How are you feeling this morning? I'm worried we tore something last night." Geo could feel the heat rush into his face. *Shit.*

"No, I feel okay. Sore, but no pain." He buried his face into the cup to avoid discussing his anatomy further with this beautiful man. Instead, he

occupied himself by staring at Danie as he worked an iron skillet set over coals from their overnight fire. They used an old camp stove grill, balancing it on rocks to hover six inches or so above the coals. Danie had found their supply of potatoes and onions, and the smell of them frying along with the unmistakable fragrance of bacon and biscuits toasting made Geo's stomach gurgle loud enough for Danie to turn, casting Geo such a look of affection that his breath stilled in his chest.

The early morning sun danced across the gold in the man's tousled hair. Danie didn't bother to do more than run his fingers through his short hair before rolling out of bed. Usually Geo would track him down later, running his own brush through it as he sat and drank coffee. This morning he had no idea where he'd even find his brush. The tent was a disaster, with half their things packed haphazardly in random tubs or bags. Geo hoped they wouldn't need anything in a hurry, because he had no idea where to begin.

Three plates of food appeared, balanced in Danie's large hands, and Geo wiped drool from the corner of his mouth, hoping no one had seen him. He loved when Danie cooked for him. Danie handed out the plates, pulling a bottle of red pepper sauce from the side packet of his cargo shorts and passing it over to Geo.

Andrea raised his brow in disbelief, choking as Geo proceeded to shake it over every inch of food on his plate. He scooped the mixture between the biscuit halves and started shoving the mess into his mouth. Geo tried to keep the food from flying out of his mouth as he and Danie laughed at the look of horror on Andrea's face.

"Drea, this is Geo's secret. It's why he hasn't been swept up into another's arms before now. One dinner out and they realize he was raised by wolves and has hollow legs. He will eat for days without gaining an ounce, and unless you want to lose a finger, keep your hands away from his plate.

"Back at the compound his grandfather makes him dine in the kitchen, or if they have company he sends him out to eat in the kennels!" Geo paused long

enough to flip Danie his favorite American salute. Andrea just cocked a brow and studied him like a bug.

“So then it’s good for us that he’s part animal, in and out of bed.” He smiled and turned his attention back to his own food while Geo choked for real.

Danie patted him on the back. “S’okay, Geo. You can eat anything of mine you want.”

Geo glared at him. “Don’t know, sounds like you’re afraid I might *bite* you. Wouldn’t want you to run the risk of losing something. Think I’ll keep my mouth to myself, thank you.” He huffed and went back to eating.

After breakfast, Geo made a point of tearing apart the tent, airing the bedding and repacking both Danie’s and his own bags. The medical kit was tucked just inside the tent flap where it belonged, and they’d taken the time to inspect both rifles. Andrea used this time to climb on top of the disabled Rover, taking photographs across the veld.

Geo watched him for a while. “Hey! Andrea,” he called over to the man. The Italian swung around with a smile and waved. Geo wandered over with a metal case containing their satellite phones and solar charger. He hefted it up to the photographer before stepping onto the doorframe to raise his chin above the roof level.

“Here,” he said, flipping the case open and pointing. “Set this up. Like this...” He pointed out how the array unfolded so the collectors were now pointing up. He plugged their phones into the leads and pulled a couple of bungee cords out of his back pocket.

Andrea was fascinated as he watched the younger man work to secure the equipment to the roof, threading the cords through metal loops on the case before attaching them to the luggage racks. Geo smiled at the question in Andrea’s eyes. “In case of rhinos. We’ve already lost one unit that way. Oupa

never lets Danie forget it. Since we're stuck, I thought we might as well make the most of a nice day."

"Aren't all the days nice out here?" Andrea asked, gazing around in awe.

Geo grunted and hopped down to the ground. "Mostly. One day in paradise is much the same as the next. The trick is to not forget that it *is* paradise. Otherwise you become jaded and nothing is ever beautiful enough again."

"Hmm... I'll think on it, caro. But from where I stand, it is not Africa itself that is paradise; it is the treasures one finds there. The true beauty can be found here, in you." Geo rolled his eyes. *Save me from bad Italian poets.* He shook his head and smiled at the man grinning like an idiot.

"Danie! I'm going for water!" Geo called out across the empty campsite, slinging his rifle over a shoulder and grabbing two empty five-gallon containers.

He'd gone about three hundred yards into the bush when Danie popped out to his right. "Geo, what have I said about heading off on your own?" Danie looked stern behind his sunglasses, his accent thicker than ever. Geo decided now wasn't the time to be smart.

"One of us is going to have to be alone at some point." Geo was trying to be reasonable.

"Why? Drea can just as easily take pictures while you pick up sticks and I haul water. It's safer that way." Danie took the empty jugs away from him with a frown.

"No, we'll be leaving the campsite vulnerable, and I'm really not in the mood for another game of rhino in the tent."

"That happened once." Danie folded his arms across his chest making Geo sigh. *Stubborn.*

"Once is all I need, I'm a fast learner. We're smack in the middle of their range; I've seen signs of them all over the area, and they'll have their young

with them. I'm just as happy leaving Andrea on top of the Rover with my phones, out of harm's way.'

"Maybe he's out of harm's way, but you're not," Danie persisted.

"I have my rifle."

"On your back, Geo! Not much help if you accidentally step into the path of a charging animal. Please don't be stupid now, of all times. We always work as a team. It keeps us safe..." Danie moved closer sliding his palm across Geo's face, cupping his cheek. "I need you to be safe, Geo." He gently kissed him before stepping back—unrelenting once more.

Geo sighed, looking back towards the camp. "Fine. I'll go back and get him. Meet you at the watering hole. Can you manage that on your own or do you need an escort?"

Danie considered the question for a moment, before smirking. "Go get Andrea, but hurry. I think I'll enjoy letting him get muddy for a change." He took the empty water containers, disappearing back into the bush.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Danie, was a hundred feet from the watering hole. Given the variety of prints at the water's edge from overnight, he deduced that it was a primary resource for the local animal populations. He identified several varieties of antelope, at least three unique sets of rhino tracks, and what looked like a leopard in the mix.

The water had been stirred into a rich, reddish-brown of African clay by the animals, not worth the time and effort it would take to make potable. Fortunately, it was fed from a nearby water source. Yesterday he'd carefully worked his way up a rocky outcropping, tracking the stream as it disappeared under the gravel and sand and bush, reappearing further away up the side of a rockfall. He found himself digging through the loose rocks until he'd uncovered the source of the stream that fed the mud hole below, then covering it back up to keep the larger animals away.

Today his job was clearing through the loose shale and boulders, working them out of the wet soil until the area around the spring was free of debris. The flow of water was slow, but pure enough that they could either boil it or add chemicals. It would depend on how long it took to collect.

This time when he uncovered the spring, he built a mini-reservoir with a piece of plastic sheeting lined with shale. It created a basin deep enough to create a constant flow via rubber tubing into water jugs carefully perched below on a flat rock jutting out of the ground. All Danie had to do was monitor them occasionally to make sure they didn't shift or overflow. So far it was working like a champ. He couldn't wait to show this off to Geo and Andrea when they got here.

Danie glanced at his watch. It had been over twenty minutes since Geo left for camp.

A gnawing at his gut had Danie abandoning his water project, automatically moving his rifle quietly off his shoulder, sliding the bolt back,

and checking to see if the shell was properly chambered before cradling the gun in his hand.

He paused, slowing his breathing and sending his senses outwards, listening for the insects and birds that he'd become accustomed to while he worked. It was a flock of widow birds, exploding from the bush several hundred feet to his left, tails waving like black flags of surrender, that drew his attention, freezing the blood in his veins. Danie silently disengaged the safety, easing deeper into the grass to investigate.

He slowly circled around the watering hole. It seemed likely that whatever had caused the commotion would be centered on the only water for miles. The fine hairs on the back of his neck and across his forearms tingled with electricity, his instincts screaming out danger around him. It felt... human: something out of step with the natural order of the bushveld.

Out here, living and dying was a perfectly choreographed ballet. You couldn't spend any time here without becoming inured to that reality. Survival of the fittest wasn't just a slogan. It was necessity for the health of entire ecosystems. Only man's interference could send things spinning wildly out of control.

Last summer, Geo had just finished a course in comparative religions and had spent hours describing the various points of each to Danie as they drove across the veld. The Taoists seemed a closer fit to how Danie viewed this land. Or maybe it was Buddhists?

He reached up to finger the silver disk that Geo had given him, etched and enameled on both sides with a yin and yang, symbolizing balance in all things, before remembering that he wasn't wearing it. Danie had had the gift mounted inside a circle of platinum before hanging it from a chain. He wore it around his neck every day that Geo was gone. Not that he was sentimental, not really... though he'd tucked it away in a tiny leopardwood box before leaving to pick Geo up at the airport.

He pushed his feelings for the other man aside, focusing on his surroundings as he worked himself onto a slight rise overlooking the water.

Below him on his belly in the mud, was a man sucking in great gulps of cloudy water. *He won't be feeling well soon.*

Danie kept hidden, sighting him through the scope on his rifle to get a better look. Unlike the first moment he saw Andrea, huddled in their campsite, he wasn't feeling any impulse to reveal himself or give aid. There were too many things wrong with this picture.

From the back, the stranger looked a little shorter than Danie himself, wiry and in fairly new clothes. He was a tourist, or a stranger to the bush—that much was certain. He wore trainers on his feet, not sturdy boots that protected the feet and ankles from injuries and snakebites.

The khaki shorts still showed knife-sharp creases along the backs of his thighs, and he wore a safari vest that had risen up his back far enough to reveal a handgun slipped into the back of his waistband. That was more than a little disturbing.

Danie looked around to see if he could spot a rifle. It was risky to go into the bush without a long-range weapon for defense. There was nothing around the man that showed that he was prepared for this environment, not even a hat to keep sunstroke away, or a canteen to carry any water with him when he left.

Danie glanced at his watch again. Thirty minutes. Something was wrong, or maybe Andrea had managed to seduce Geo with that promised blowjob. He gritted his teeth at the image, annoyance surging through him. Even if they had, they could be showing up any time, heading straight into the path of the stranger below.

It wasn't worth the risk. Danie slid quietly back, retracing his steps until he was in position to intercept the man if he headed towards their camp.

Geo watched Danie disappear into the brush and sighed. Danie was being overprotective as usual, but that didn't mean he was wrong. If he wasn't watching over the campsite, even from a distance, then Andrea truly was on his own. In the short time Geo had known the man, he'd pegged Andrea as a

flighty artist. It was surprising that he'd lasted this long in one piece. Well, almost one piece. The arm was still looking raw, and not just a little angry. Andy needed antibiotics and he needed them soon.

Geo turned back, following his tracks to their temporary camp. He'd made it almost all the way back, practicing his tracking skills and moving through the bush. He had visions of sneaking up on Andy from behind and scaring the living hell out of him.

It was a game he'd played with Oupa growing up, learning how to sneak through the bush undetected by either man or beast. He'd only managed to sneak up on Oupa once growing up. To this day, Oupa still swore he'd been distracted by one of the other guides who had escorted them that day, but Geo knew better. His grandfather had been standing staring out across the veld, looking for him in the wrong direction.

Geo had used a grazing herd of antelope and a bush fowl to provide a diversion. He'd flushed the bird into the path of the antelope in such a way that no one could pinpoint the disturbance. He then circled back and had managed to jump the old man from behind. It was the best day of his young life. Now he continued his game, quietly working his way from cover to cover until he was only a short distance from the camp, but close enough that he could still see Andrea's back. The Italian was lounging on the top of the Rover. He laid still, an arm flung across his eyes, shielding them from the late morning sun.

Completely ruins the spirit of the game. I could walk straight up to him and say "boo" before he'd notice. Geo was about to do just that when he heard a rustling in the bush, followed by the quiet murmur of voices.

Slightly ahead of him and to his left, Geo could just make out the profiles of at least two men. He watched as they settled down behind a screen of grass and shrubs, gesturing at Andrea, their whispers floating just out of hearing.

His breath froze in his chest, adrenaline pumping; these men were hunting, and the only prey in view was Andrea. Geo slid back as quietly as he could. He was too close to the men to effectively ambush them. One wrong move and he'd be the one being hunted. He bit his lip, checking his watch. Danie would

be expecting them both back at the watering hole soon. If nothing else, Geo had to make sure that Danie didn't stumble into the middle of this.

He'd backtracked almost to the water when the shouting started. Any thoughts of getting help fled as Geo tore through the grass at top speed.

CHAPTER NINE

“Hallo, my vriend. Is jy verloor?” Danie stepped out from behind the tangle of trees and bushes surrounding the watering hole. He’d waited until the stranger had drunk his fill, sitting back onto his feet in preparation to rise, not much interested in letting him have the advantage.

The moment Danie asked if he was lost, the man spun on his knees reaching for his gun. *Simplifies things*. Danie thought. He was prepared for the movement, kicking him in the chest and knocking him backwards onto the muddy bank. The gun sailed out of his hand into the middle of the pond beyond reach, giving Danie time to level his own rifle at the man.

“Wait, wait! I don’t speak African! Don’t shoot! Don’t shoot! I’m a friend!” The man wailed in panic, his eyes shifting back and forth, trying to find either rescue or escape.

Now that he was on his back, Danie could see a strong resemblance to one of the men in Drea’s photograph. His brown hair was thin and shaggy, hanging around his ears in uneven strands. His eyes were bloodshot, and any visible skin between the grey-and-black bristles was sallow. He looked unwell, and given the quantity of fetid water he’d just drunk, Danie wasn’t surprised.

“Well this is your lucky day, *friend*. I speak English just fine. So do you mind telling me what you’re doing all alone in the middle of the bush?”

The man blanched when the rifle remained trained on his chest. He glanced over his shoulder; the only evidence left of his gun was the slowly dispersing rings spreading out across the water. He sighed, looking resigned.

“Uh... trouble with the jeep. They sent me to find water...” He trailed off as he looked into Danie’s face. Whatever he saw there drained the last of the color from his face.

“Without any way to carry water back? Seems a little impractical,” Danie intoned flatly. “So where are your two friends?” Danie continued to stare the man down.

“Um... friends?” he stuttered, trying to ease away from Danie but sliding deeper into the mud, pulling a hand out with a squelching sound.

“Mmm hmm. The other two—the ones who sent you for water... for the... jeep?” Danie prompted. He didn’t have time to wait for this man to break. He needed to speed things up; the other two from the photo must be close by, which meant that Andrea and Geo were vulnerable.

“Uh, umm... yeah. They’re back where we—uh, um... broke down.” Sweat formed on his brow, rolling off his forehead and dripping onto his shirt. Danie didn’t think he could look suspicious if he tried. Wiping a muddy hand across his face, the man continued, “I could sure use your help friend if you don’t mind lowering that...” he cajoled, waving a finger at the barrel of the rifle, which Danie ignored.

“We’re looking for our buddy. We got... um, separated, and then we had the problem with the... um thing... Maybe you seen ’im? An I-talian kid?” Now he was just trying to look innocent and sincere. Danie resisted the urge to roll his eyes as the man continued. “He just went off into the brush with just his camera. We’re trying to find him, make sure he’s okay.”

“And how far is your base camp?” Danie gave a quick glance at his watch. They were definitely late. He’d tuned out the torturous tale being spun for his benefit, and so only caught the last part.

“He was kind of delirious...” The man trailed off, wriggling deeper into the muck with his squirming to get free. He was lying, of course; even before he started trusting Andrea, Danie had believed his version of events. The Italian’s body language as he shivered in terror was practically screaming his own innocence. This one, however, hadn’t said a single true word.

Andrea was still in danger, and, by extension, Geo. There was only one thing left to know: where were the other men now? He wasn’t going to get it from this man’s lying mouth. His only hope was to watch for his tell.

No time like the present.

Danie tried his best to keep his expression bland and potentially helpful. “Why don’t you take me to your vehicle? I’ll take a look at it and see if we can’t get you out of here.” He paused, giving the other man a chance to relax, thinking that Danie had fallen for his bullshit. “Where did you say you left it?”

The man instantly whipped his head around, looking slightly south of the camp. He turned sheepishly back, “Um... it’s... I’m...” It was enough. If they were there, Danie would find them, but first things first.

The man was still blustering when the rifle butt struck him on the chin, leaving him out cold, lying across the bank. Danie paused long enough to strip him of anything useful or dangerous.

“Hope you’re awake before the dinner rush... *friend.*”

Geo’s heart skittered. He’d worked his way to the top of the outcropping above their camp, the one that Danie had waved from. He had a perfect view of the action below and what he was seeing turned his stomach and made his skin crawl. There were two men in the middle of their camp. Geo didn’t recognize either one, but it hardly mattered since their intentions were obvious.

Andrea was lying face down on the packed earth next to the Range Rover. One of the men knelt on his back keeping his arms twisted behind his back. Even from this distance Geo could make out Andrea’s cursing and struggling to get free.

Geo considered his options. He had the range with his rifle. He could take out the man waving his own weapon at Andrea’s head, though there was no guarantee that he wouldn’t get off a round of his own, and Andrea was much closer to the end of that barrel than Geo could risk. It was bad enough that a bright red bloom was soaking the white bandage around the man’s arm; Geo couldn’t bear the thought of hurting him more.

The man with the rifle was tall. He towered over the scene in faded safari gear, the khaki cotton almost bone white. He had a bush hat pulled low over

his sunglasses and sprouted a sparse beard, like he hadn't shaved in a week. His high-powered rifle was pointed at Andrea's head.

Whatever he wanted, Andrea wasn't giving it up. In apparent frustration, the man stalked over and kicked Andrea in his injured arm. The howl that rose up as blood gushed through the saturated bandage and pooled in the dust made Geo sick. He couldn't bear to leave him like this. With the other man distracted, it was his best chance. He'd have cover if he came up from behind the Rover.

It looked like they'd pulled Andrea off the truck and onto the ground. Geo looked at the satellite phones mournfully. They should have kept them on them. Both he and Danie knew better. When Oupa found out, they'd never hear the end of it.

If he snuck up behind the vehicle, he'd have half a chance to slip one of the phones off the roof before retreating back in to the bush to call Oupa. They needed help. God only knew what Danie was up to, but he probably wouldn't come after him for another half-hour or forty-five minutes.

He probably thinks we're enjoying a nooner without him. Geo sighed and made his way backwards until he was under cover and moving silently into position.

Pressed belly flat against the ground, he was blind. He could hear Andrea cursing in Italian and the other man yelling at him in English to shut up and lay still, but with such a thick accent that Geo wasn't sure what else he wanted. The man pinning Andrea was communicating in staccato bursts of grunts and curses, as the photographer hadn't stopped struggling.

The only chance they had was to call for help and for him to make it back to Danie in once piece. His one shot to save Andrea from a violent beating or worse was to create a distraction in the hope that the Italian could break free. He held his breath and waited for another burst of vitriol from the African before launching himself upright, grabbing the phone, and taking off into the bush like a shot.

Geo could hear the snapping of dried branches and shouting coming from behind him as he tore through the underbrush. Rifle fire cracked, sending a flock of birds exploding from the trees and breaching the noise of blood pounding in his ears.

Drawing danger away from Andrea seemed to be working, but the stranger in pursuit wasn't a novice when it came to shooting animals in the wild. He'd felt the heat of that bullet sing past his ear before embedding to the soft bark of a thorn tree. He dropped down and scrambled under the branches of a bush, thorns tearing furrows into his tan skin. *Crap.*

He hadn't had a moment to make the call, and time was running out. He could hear the man drawing closer, still heading in a trajectory that would miss Geo by twenty feet or so if he remained hidden. He had to try. As quietly as he could, Geo powered up the phone. The telltale electronic ping of activation sounded to his ears like a bullhorn announcing his location to the entire continent. He held his breath, listening intently for the sound of footsteps coming his way.

Sweat dripped into his eyes, stinging. His fingers shook as he tried to dial his grandfather's phone. He wrapped the phone in his shirt, trying to muffle the sounds of it connecting. It was foolish, he knew, wouldn't make much of a difference in the great scheme of things; but he felt a little more in control, and his shaking eased.

He couldn't hear the man, but he could feel him stalking him. Waiting for him to move or breathe or make a sound that would draw him into the man's sights. He slid the phone over his ear and heard the urgent voice of his grandfather calling his name.

"Shhhhhh! Oupa" He whispered urgently, wrapping himself in a ball, hunching over as much as possible so the phone was buried between his knees, driving the sound into the red dirt. "Listen, just listen. They're here, at least two men. They've taken Andrea hostage in the camp, and one of them is tracking me. He knows what he's doing. I don't know where Danie is... you just..." Geo froze, instantly muting the connection.

He left the phone on, hidden under the bush, giving Oupa a signal to find, but he couldn't risk anything else. He'd heard the snapping of a small twig. An animal would have kept moving, but the sudden stillness pointed to the man hunting him. He was so very, very close; too close to run. Geo huddled even smaller and prayed.

Danie slid through the grass listening for any sign of Geo, who could remain undetectable when he wanted to be. He was about a hundred yards from camp when the howling started. It turned his blood cold. It wasn't Geo. He knew Geo's pain, his voice. No, this had to be Andrea, which surprisingly for him wasn't the least bit better. Danie pushed those thoughts away and focused on what he was hearing.

There were two distinct voices. One was obviously the Italian. The other? Likely one of the other men from the photograph... which left two missing: Geo and the third man. He crept slowly forward until he had a view of half the campsite.

From this angle, he could see the front end of the Rover off to his right and a little beyond it he could see a pinned Andrea struggling weakly against the man sitting on him. He was facing the opposite direction, and the man on top of him was keeping hard pressure on him, keeping his arms pulled up high behind him. It was a brutal hold.

He couldn't see the rest of the campsite clearly enough to risk a rescue from where he was. He couldn't spot Geo, which didn't mean he wasn't being held out of sight. He needed to make it back up to the higher ground, regain the advantage. Moving under cover, praying that Andrea could hang on, Danie eased back into the bush.

It felt like a lifetime, though it likely only took a few minutes to get in position on the rocky outcropping overlooking the campsite. Someone had already used this spot; there was fresh sign, scuffs in the rocky soil, and a handprint in the red dust. God he hoped it was Geo's.

He focused on the Range Rover for a moment. Geo must have set up the satellite phones to charge, though the solar panels looked wrong—as though half folded up or damaged in a struggle. He could see only one phone still attached to the charger. A quick glance at the handprint and he could guess what Geo would have thought, seeing the phones so clearly, the vehicle providing cover from the rest of the campsite. He was tempted to go back down and grab the other phone for himself.

It looked like the rest of the area was clear. From this angle he could see a short way into the open flap of the tent. It was too small to hide movement from someone searching their things. It was possible that Geo was incapacitated in some way and hidden from view, but from this vantage point it looked like Andrea and his captor were alone in the camp. He turned his attention to the man using both hands as he struggled to control the weakly writhing Italian.

There was a military-style pistol grip sticking out of the back of his khakis that worried Danie a great deal. At any minute that man could lose patience with Andrea and decide he had a more efficient method of subduing him. It pushed Danie to act now, before Geo arrived back at camp and embroiled himself in the middle of this mess.

Danie raised the rifle and carefully aimed, checking the area one last time through his scope before firing. He watched blood spray into the air in a fine red mist as the bullet caught the man in the shoulder. The force of the bullet spun him off Andrea and into the dirt. He roared in pain, scrambling to reach behind for his gun.

Andrea had rolled over and was grappling with the man to control the pistol. *Fuck*. There wasn't much Danie could do while Andrea was in the way; he was regretting not picking a more permanent placement for the bullet. Sliding down the face of the rise and ignoring the scrapes along his back, he managed to keep his feet and propel himself forward until he was within a few feet of the struggling men.

“I wouldn’t, *friend*,” Danie hissed. “Kick the gun over to me. Drea, are you okay?”

Andrea was gasping in pain, trying to move his arms gingerly. His shirt was bloody from his reopened wound, and the side of his face was covered with blood from the impact of the bullet. He looked pissed. “I’ll live. Fucking bastard kicked me.” He reached carefully for the handgun lying in front of him. His assailant was now settled on his knees, hands held in front of him as Danie moved closer.

“What a mess.” Danie muttered under his breath. He held out a hand to Andrea to give him some leverage to stand, all the while he keeping his eyes and rifle trained on the other man.

The man was still bleeding freely, and Danie knew he’d have to do something about that soon unless they wanted a body on their hands. *Always so much easier to hand them over still breathing.* The authorities were less likely to make a fuss over a little bodily damage.

“Friend of yours, Drea?” he asked. Andrea barely looked able to stand. He was as pale and shaky as the other man, and twice as bloody.

“Karl’s just the muscle. Botha—or Ronson I guess, just took off after someone. I was hoping it was you. I haven’t seen the third one yet...” He trailed off, wincing as he gripped his arm.

“Keep that on him, and shoot if he gives you any trouble. I need to get something to stop all this bleeding, then I’ll go find Geo. He can keep out of trouble on his own, but eventually he’ll be back here trying to rescue us. Can’t let him have all the fun, can we?” Danie’s words were light, but the tone was wrong even to his own ears. Andrea gave him a sympathetic look before wincing again.

Danie ducked into the tent to grab the red backpack where Geo had the medical supplies stashed. He paused a moment, going in deeper for his own duffle. In a side pocket was his collection of tape, string, wire, and *yes!* He

found his assortment of zip ties. Opening the package of longer straps, he extracted three before heading back to Andrea.

“First things first, Drea.” Danie knelt behind the other man. “What’s your name, *friend*? And while you’re thinking of a lie to tell me, please note that Andrea will happily put a bullet into that head of yours if you move your little pinky. Yes? If you play nice, I’ll see what I can do about stopping the bleeding in your shoulder. Otherwise, I’m not too concerned about you living to see another day. Do we understand each other?” He poked the man in his wounded shoulder, until he got a grunted response.

Satisfied, Danie quickly zip tied the man’s hands behind his back before strapping his feet together, as well. He wasn’t moving very quickly now. Andrea eased into a nearby chair and laid the gun in his lap. He was pale and shaking, and Danie wished Geo was there... for so many reasons. He focused on the chore at hand and wrapped the wounds of both men in pressure bandages. It would have to do for now. Danie’s head and heart both screamed at him to find Geo.

“Go Danie. Go get him. I’ll babysit.” Andrea was still drawn, but his color was slowly returning.

Danie handed him a warm Coke from Geo’s medical bag and nodded. “I’ll drag him into the shade. I think he’ll be fine out of the sun for now. You should go lie down.”

“I’ll think about it.” Waving him away with the Coke, Andrea settled deeper into his chair, taking a sip, grimacing at the taste. Danie felt himself smile, and he leaned down, pressing his lips against the man’s brow. “Be well, Drea.” The Italian looked surprised and a little pleased.

“Be well, Danie. Go get our boy,” he murmured, turning his attention to the glaring man laying still in the shade of the tent.

CHAPTER TEN

Geo held his breath. The grass and leaves sheltering him itched. He wanted to scratch his nose. His left foot was going numb. He could feel a burn running through his back muscles as he kept himself wrapped into a tight ball. He ignored all of that and focused instead on the sounds around him.

That was the real problem. It had fallen silent. Even the whirring of insects had faded away, which meant that either his hearing had failed completely, or the man was virtually on top of him. He couldn't risk any movement that would identify his location. *Crap.*

"I think it's time to give up this little game, don't you?" The voice was rich and deep, the Afrikaner accent had a sultry quality. This was a man used to seducing as much as he forced. Geo tried to swallow. "I could just shoot you where you are, but there's not much sport in that. You were doing so well, too." He now sounded a little regretful, and it brought to mind all those low-budget horror films that Geo had watched in the dorms about kidnapped co-eds turned into human prey for depraved hunters, turned out into the woods with their false head starts.

Right now Geo didn't feel very optimistic that he was about to be rescued. *Where are you Danie? Oupa?*

"I'm losing patience here. I need to finish this little farce and get back to my recovery operation. So if you would be so kind...?"

The barrel of a rifle eased the few branches away, leaving Geo in plain view. He couldn't help himself, and he looked up into the eyes of the man Danie had identified as Ronson. They were a cold steel-grey. The tight smile playing across the man's lips never reached them.

He was almost handsome. Geo could see that in the right circumstances he would attract attention. He had an air of mystery and danger that was always a potent combination over drinks in a Cape Town bar. Geo wondered what it

was that made him think of that, given that he was likely within moments of his last breaths.

“Oh, this is interesting.” The man’s brows flew up in surprise as he got a good look at him. “I thought I was hunting bush fowl, and I manage to capture a peacock in my trap, instead. How delightful. And inconvenient...” He motioned with his rifle for Geo to rise, stepping back as he did so.

“I saw you two summers ago. You attended a fundraiser in Johannesburg with your grandfather. You’re the next Christiansen heir. Pride of the Veld, apple of the old man’s eye, savior of the reserve to hear the old man brag about you. Some sort of environmentalist, aren’t you?” He made the word sound dirty, as if Geo was a disease or a foul substance tracked in on the bottom of your shoe.

“Why are you here?” Geo really wanted to understand. He’d been worrying that question in the back of his mind since Andrea had appeared. It never made much sense to him that a man like Ronson would bother masquerading as a guide. He’d assumed that poaching was the reason, but that wouldn’t explain dragging the Italian into this mess, unless he needed the illusion of a legitimate cover.

“I misplaced something, which I’ve since found, thanks to your friend. He was just a convenient excuse to be out here, searching. Finding you, however, poses an interesting problem for me, Christiansen.

“I only have a few more things to clean up and then I can be on my way, but I think I can use you... at least for the moment. I’d recommend keeping your nose out of my business and doing exactly as I say. By the look of you, I imagine you’re used to being under another man’s... thumb. So let’s see how well trained you are, shall we? Let’s go.”

Geo wanted to puke. He only hoped that Danie was somewhere safe, that he would stay hidden until Oupa and his men arrived. He worried about Andrea, about the arm, about the missing third man. He was less worried about himself at the moment, his blood too valuable to be wasted in the bush, apparently.

They worked their way back to camp, and Geo had to admire Ronson's skills. He knew what he was doing. It also took a little of the sting out of being discovered. They took a circuitous route, backtracking several times until Ronson was sure that they weren't being followed themselves. Geo didn't bother telling him that Danie was far better at this than even he was. They wouldn't have spotted Danie unless he'd wanted them to... though Geo wasn't sure what he wanted. No, not true.

He knew the "who, what, where, and whens" of his desire—he just didn't think he'd get a chance for any more of it in this lifetime. He wanted Danie and Andrea to have that chance, even if he couldn't be with them when they took it. *I wonder when I started thinking of them both as part of us?*

"Step lively, Christiansen. No need to pretend on my account. I don't think we'll worry too much about being subtle." He put his beefy hand on Geo's neck, squeezing it hard before dropping back a step. The hand was replaced with the barrel of the rifle now nestled at the base of his skull, settling nicely into the notch at the top of his spine. A shiver ran down his back, and Geo swallow hard before stepping into the camp.

"Stop!" Ronson hissed in his ear. The scene in the camp had changed during the time that Geo had been playing the game of hare and hound with Ronson. Andrea now sat holding a pistol pointed in their direction. Geo remembered Andrea's confession that he couldn't shoot and grimaced. Hopefully he could bluff.

Geo looked him over. Even from this distance the scent of blood still hung heavy in the air. Andrea was covered in it. His arm looked freshly bandaged, and Geo recognized Danie's handiwork with the surgical tape. At his feet, stretched out on the ground, was the other man, his shoulder wrapped in another pressure bandage, already seeping red at the edges. That one could go fuck himself, Geo thought, still pissed at all the pain he had subjected Andrea to earlier.

“Andrea. I see you managed to make yourself a little more comfortable,” Ronson rumbled from behind. “But I think we both know a charade when we see one.” He shoved Geo forward.

“Unless you’re interested in seeing the inside of our young friend’s head, I suggest that you lower the gun and toss it into the bush—behind the tent there. Any move in my direction will result in me shooting first this one, then you.” Geo watched the wheels in Andrea’s mind spin furiously, looking for another solution. The man glanced down.

“I really don’t care if you shoot Karl or not. I won’t be taking him with me if he’s going to slow me down, so feel free.” Andrea deflated.

“Geo, are you all right?” Andrea whispered, still clutching the weapon pointed at them. He was brave; Geo would give him that.

“Andrea, I’m fine, but he needs me. He won’t hurt me. I’m worried about you. Don’t give him your gun!” He would have said more, but the rifle jammed into him painfully.

“You’re not helping your friend any, Christiansen. Now…” he turned his attention back to Andrea. “I’d like you to consider your options very carefully Andrea. We both know that you can’t hit me with a bullet. You’ve already said as much to me. I think we can wrap this up very quickly with your cooperation, and in the end you and your friend might both just live.” He paused, waiting for some signal from Andrea.

“What do you want?” Andrea sounded tired, resigned, and it made Geo’s chest ache.

“I need your camera, Andrea. You have some pictures that would be inconvenient if they came to light.” Ronson was practically purring, trying to woo the other man into complying. It made Geo sick.

“Why? What?” Andrea was genuinely confused, and Geo wished Danie was there to see it. If there were any lingering doubts about Andrea’s innocence, these last few moments would have removed them.

“The plane crash, Andrea. It’s one of mine, and unfortunately it was carrying something very, very important to me. When it went down, I only had a very general idea of its location. There was no flight plan, no transponder. Who would have thought that a wildlife photographer stumbling around the bush would find it for me? I should have done this months ago!” The man’s laugh raised hairs on Geo’s arms, and he could tell Andrea was very upset at the news.

“Okay, David. Just, just let me get it. You can have my camera if you just take your friend and leave. I don’t want anyone else getting hurt because of my stupidity.”

“Well, Andrea,” Ronson chuckled, “that’s the first sensible thing I think I’ve ever heard you say. Let’s start by putting down your gun.”

Geo tensed all of his muscles, desperate to leap across the camp and throw himself at Andrea. He couldn’t possibly be so stupid that he’d believe this man. He finally couldn’t contain himself.

“Don’t Andrea. He won’t let any of us live. Don’t kid yourself, Andy. The only chance you have is if you shoot him. Just shoot him now. I’d rather be dead than used as a tool against my grandfather. Just. Shoot. Him!” By the end Geo was screaming at the Italian, trying to get him to snap out of it. Geo needed him to be brave enough to save himself and Danie. He needed Andrea to act.

Flinging himself backwards as hard as he could, Geo tangled himself with the man behind him, the rifle now wedged between them, as much of a danger to Ronson as it was to himself. He was vaguely aware of Andrea’s panicked cries echoing across the bush.

Andrea’s shout of horror tore through Danie. He’d picked up Geo’s trail, and the sign wasn’t boding well. There were two separate sets of tracks. Recognizing Geo’s boot prints was easy, but it was a set left by a heavier, bigger man that worried him. The tracks synched with Geo’s perfectly, leading

Danie to believe that Geo was now a hostage. He tracked them on a route that was difficult to follow at times, until they made a beeline straight for camp.

Danie heard the struggle before he saw it. He slid into the camp just a few feet from where Geo lay entangled with Ronson in a struggle for his life. They were both trying desperately to control a rifle, and, thus, the outcome of their fight. As Danie watched, Ronson wedged a knee under Geo that allowed him the leverage to flip him over onto his back. But he still hadn't wrested control of the weapon from Geo; the rifle was still being yanked back and forth between them, any shot potentially fatal to either.

Danie shivered. It was now or never. He raised his rifle and jammed it against Ronson's head. The man froze with a hiss, and Geo was able to yank the rifle out of his face at last.

"Think about your next move very carefully, Ronson. At this minute, no magistrate in the land would convict me if my trigger finger slipped and you found my bullet lodged in your brain. I believe there's a bounty on you dead or alive, Ronson?"

"You have a choice to make, my *friend*. Will you live to see another day? Or will you simplify my life by making a single move towards my man? And while you're considering how much help your man in the bush will be to you right now, you should know that he's currently unconscious and laid out like a lunch buffet for the crocs."

Ronson sneered at Danie, but released his grip on the rifle, relinquishing it into Geo's hands. Danie didn't waste any time, putting him on the ground with a well-aimed blow to the face.

Geo rolled to his feet, standing out of reach of the man lying stunned on the ground. Pointing his own rifle at Ronson's chest, Geo caught Danie's eyes, giving him a huge smile. "Nice timing, Danie. Didja have a sweet stroll in the bush?"

Danie could feel his own grin, his relief overwhelming. Andrea rushed over, throwing his arms around Geo from behind, kissing the side of the man's neck. It made Danie's chest tight to see the affection between the two.

The distraction gave Ronson new life. "Fuckin' queers," he snarled.

Andrea whirled on him, furious. "You bastard! You dare threaten these men! They are without question the best men I have ever met. I would never betray them!" Without hesitation, Andrea slammed his boot into the man's ribs, kicking him as hard as he could, while still holding onto his arm. Danie didn't even need to hear the snap of bone to know that Andrea had hit home with that blow. Ronson's howl would have been enough.

"It's fine, Drea. We're okay. You're going to be okay, and this animal will be gone for a very long time. But now, I think you need to sit." Danie was watching Andrea closely, so when he lost all color in his face, Danie had just enough time to sling his rifle over his shoulder and catch the man as he fainted.

"Andrea!" Geo was shocked. He could see that the wound had started bleeding through the bandages, and was immediately torn.

Danie caught Geo's eye. "Drea lost a lot of blood earlier, but he'll be fine. Watch this one for me." Danie nodded at Ronson, still writhing on the ground. He carefully lifted the Italian higher in his arms, carrying him back into their tent.

When he returned, Geo was standing further back from Ronson, and Danie approved. Ronson was a snake waiting for the first opportunity to strike. He stayed carefully out of Geo's line of fire while he trussed the man with another set of zip ties. When the last one was in place, linking his cuffed wrists from behind his back to the ties around his ankles, Danie stepped back satisfied.

"Okay, call Oupa back would you? So he doesn't have a heart attack? Oh, and remind me I need to find the other phone... I buried it under a bush somewhere." Geo gestured vaguely as he headed back into the tent, pausing only briefly to check the status of their other prisoner.

“Geo, I need to go back for the third soon. I’ll find their jeep and go get him before the animals do,” Danie called out as he disappeared. He waited for the grunt of acknowledgement to come before heading off.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

George Christiansen had done one better than they'd hoped for. While Geo worked to stem the blood loss in camp, Danie had rounded up the other prisoner, finding him wandering through the bush in circles. If he had had to guess, he would have suspected sunstroke rather than a concussion, though the jaw was probably broken from Danie's blow. The man was so grateful to be found and so terrified of the area wildlife, that he made no trouble at all while being cuffed with more of Danie's zip ties.

Geo had shoved him in the tent along with his other two patients. He'd activated a chemical cold pack, placing it next to his spine to cool down his core. Danie watched him work in silence. Andrea was sleeping. His color had improved, but the arm still oozed blood.

More worrisome for Geo was the stranger Danie had shot. The shoulder wound was large and serious. Geo could see shattered bone in the entry wound, and there was probable nerve and ligament damage. He kept it packed, but Danie could tell he wasn't happy.

He entered the tent to give Geo an update. "George just called. They should be here within the hour. He managed to get us a military medevac. Will you be ready to go?"

"Me?" Geo looked up, confused.

"I'll stay here and help repair the Rover, get our stuff packed and hauled out. They may call an inquiry before I can get back, and your word has more weight than mine." He paused to reassure Geo, running his hand through the blonde hair. "Besides, these are your patients. You'll just drive me up a tree worrying about them."

Geo made an effort to smile a little. Danie leaned forward to kiss him. The moment was broken by the sound of rescue. Geo darted past him to watch the brown-and-tan camouflaged helicopter land a short distance away.

The first man out of the sliding doors was George Christiansen, standing like a tower against the brilliant South African sky, his white hair gleaming as he lifted a hand to shield his eyes from the glare.

Danie watched Geo race across the space and fling himself into his grandfather's waiting arms, looking more like a child than an adult. To date, the elder Christiansen had been the one male constant in Geo's life.

Danie hoped that he would be the one to change that, though maybe that wasn't so true anymore, given the deep affection he'd spotted between Geo and Andrea on more than one occasion. So much had happened to them all, and in such a short amount of time, that the three of them had formed a deep bond. Danie couldn't predict what would happen with it in the coming days, weeks, or months, so he stopped worrying about it.

Danie watched the helicopter depart with a heavy heart. George seemed to sense his sorrow. Standing next to Danie, he slung an arm across his shoulders before patting him in consolation.

"I brought whiskey" were the last words either of them spoke for a long time.

Geo stood on his balcony overlooking the compound, gazing far into the bushveld and the coming violet of twilight beyond. He watched a winged changing of the guards: the last of the birds flew to their nesting sites, settling in for the night, while bats rose, flapping heavy wings against the sky, feasting on the mosquitos and flies that rose with the moon. He sighed.

Yesterday he'd returned to the compound from Johannesburg, where he'd been giving testimony in front of the magistrate about the events in the bush.

Andrea was being held in a secure hospital suite until he could be cleared of charges of trespass, poaching, and collusion with a criminal enterprise. No one really believed that Andrea was guilty, but they were being very cautious, not wanting Ronson's very expensive attorneys to take advantage of Andrea's absence as a strategy to shift blame.

Andrea had technically hired Ronson and his crew to take him out to the area of the bush where the single-engine bush plane had been recovered, along with the remains of a pilot and a package of uncut diamonds valued at three million pounds sterling.

Everyone was being very, very careful with the case, so careful that Geo hadn't been allowed to see Andrea after those first moments in the emergency room. He'd been escorted out of the hospital once he'd given the head of emergency services a rundown on how the injuries occurred and the field medicine he'd employed to save the men's lives.

He was installed in a very nice hospitality suite not far from the courthouse that included a very nice man in a dark suit at the door who wouldn't exactly say he couldn't leave but then didn't say he could. He'd just politely ask what Geo wanted and took down orders or messages, calling out on his cell before nodding to Geo pleasantly and reseating himself.

So, there Geo sat for almost a week without further news, until he was suddenly offered a seat on the flight out of Rand Airport, eventually hitching a ride out to the reserve. The timing seemed lucky until he arrived, hot and dusty, with only the shirt on his back, to find that Oupa and Danie had flown out that morning for their own round of testimony in Johannesburg. They'd been planning on surprising Geo by meeting him there. *Surprise*, he thought.

One hurried phone conversation with Oupa between meetings during the week wasn't enough to satisfy Geo. He hadn't spoken to Danie at all since he'd boarded the medevac flight, and he'd heard nothing more about Andrea.

All of this was ridiculous. The man in the suit had found out about the other injuries for him. Andrea had broken two of Ronson's ribs and cracked a third. The damage to Karl's shoulder was so extensive that it was doubtful he would regain more than nominal use of it, and the third luckless thug had gotten himself a fine case of dysentery to go along with his heat stroke. All he got about Andrea was a "condition satisfactory," whatever that meant.

It seemed inevitable that he and Danie were back to playing employer and employee in front of Oupa. It was the only reason Geo could think of that

would explain the lack of communication from Danie. In the end, Geo found himself stuck, waiting on someone else to give him information. He gave the staff grief for an entire day, until he finally took himself back to his rooms to mope in private.

The evening slid quietly into the arms of night as Geo stood in the gloom, lost in thought. In the morning he'd go back out to the bush. It was the only place he'd found peace. The waiting was killing him, and worse—he wasn't sure what he was waiting for.

He intended to leave before dawn, taking one of the guest Range Rovers already packed with a tent and supplies. He wouldn't need much on his own. So when he woke in the middle of the night he simply threw off his covers and started dressing without checking his watch.

“Geo...” the voice whispered in the dark, beyond his bed, “what are you doing? It's still the middle of the night.”

Geo yawned, rubbing his eyes. The figure rose, looking as if it was formed of shadow, slowly becoming solid until it stood close enough to wrap a hand around his neck and tug him forward into a kiss.

The kiss was slow and thorough, and Geo wondered if he was dreaming, or the victim of an African spirit come to visit him in the shape of his lover, brought forth by too much yearning and unhappiness. But the arms that now held him felt real enough, and the skin pressed against his nose smelt familiar and comforting.

“Danie?” he whispered.

“Yes, love.” And Danie kissed him again. The night wrapped around them, and Geo felt like he was enclosed in a bubble outside of time and space. Danie wasn't really here, but the dream Danie was now nibbling down his throat and running his hands up and down the skin of Geo's back. He shuddered at the delicious sensations and wondered when he would wake up.

“I don’t wanna wake up, Danie,” Geo pleaded before being silenced once more with a kiss.

“You’re not asleep, Geo, but you should be. Go back to bed, love.” The dream Danie finished unbuttoning his shirt, easing it off his shoulders and down his arms before dropping it onto the floor. He eased Geo’s shorts off next and took his hand, leading him back to his bed.

He found himself tucked back under the covers, and whined as the dream Danie moved away.

“Don’t leave!” Geo cried, upset that he was always being abandoned, even by his dreams. It was so unfair. He could almost see the smirk on Danie’s face, as if it had been real. The rustling in the shadows sounded real to Geo, but his lids were already sinking, and he was losing the battle to keep them open. He briefly managed to open them once more when he felt the far side of the bed dip under a weight, and a pair of warm arms slid around his waist, tugging him backwards into a warm, silky chest.

Geo’s last thought was to wish that Danie wasn’t just a dream.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Danie was working through a medium rare steak when George Christiansen entered the dining room with the reserve's estate manager, Baruti Eze.

"I hear Geo was planning a solo trip to the bush." Disapproval dripping from his tone, he sat. Immediately a young, white-jacketed server brought him a china cup and began pouring the coffee. "I've put a stop to it," George continued, snapping open that morning's edition of Business Day.

Danie looked up from his plate and grunted at Lenka Eze, who gave him a cheeky grin behind George's back.

Baruti frowned at the grandson now taking his turn at learning the traditional service still practiced in the Christiansen dining room. Cocking a brow, Danie moved his cup away from his plate signaling a refill from the youth before whispering in Baruti's ear, "Teen-in-training?"

"Don't remind me Danie. One week in the dining room with him has aged me twenty years."

They both grimaced as Lenka over-poured Danie's cup, sloshing coffee across the pristine, linen tablecloth. At the horrified expression on the teen's face, Danie slid the napkin from his lap onto the table, covering the stain with a smile. The grin was back, and Lenka bounced out of the dining room, grin firmly in place once more.

Baruti shook his head and pulled out a slim notebook from his left shirt pocket to start making his notes for the day. Lenka came back with a cup of black tea for his grandfather, serving him with exaggerated care before refilling George Christiansen's cup from the fresh pot he'd brought along with the tea.

"We have a guest coming in later today and I need Geo to show him around. You'll drive." George laid the newspaper aside, fixing Danie with a stare.

“Don’t you think Geo has earned his privacy and time off?” Danie resumed eating, not bothering to check the elder Christiansen’s face for irritation. It was fairly crackling in the air between them.

“Nonsense. He’s a Christiansen. He has responsibilities to this family and to this land. It’s what he’s been raised for.” His familiar tirade was cut short by the arrival of his own breakfast.

Danie sighed and finished up. He wanted to go find Geo. They’d been delayed longer than intended in Johannesburg. He’d tried to get back to the reserve by late afternoon, but George’s lawyer needed additional details in order to pursue a claim for salvage rights on the property retrieved on the reserve. Andrea had signed over any claims to Geo, though Geo didn’t know it yet, and George had attached a secondary claim on behalf of the reserve.

His lawyers were negotiating release of the uncut diamonds into a trust account for conservation and education on the reserve. It was something they’d been planning for but hadn’t funded yet, and this situation presented a way for the South African government to avoid a lengthy and potentially embarrassing legal battle.

Technically there was no way to prove the ownership of the diamonds or the fact that they’d been stolen, since no claims of losses had been filed from any of the mines in the period preceding the crash. Ronson himself was being held on kidnapping, fraud, and attempted murder charges, not smuggling. It was a mess.

“Danie,” the old man cautioned, “you’re wearing your heart on your sleeve. You’re not out in the bush any longer.” The cold tone left Danie gritting his teeth against the explosion of words pressing to be released.

“And that’s wrong?” he finally responded.

“It is. Geo isn’t a homosexual. No Christiansen is. He was born for great things. He has a position that requires an impeccable reputation; his family, this reserve, require it. I’ve tolerated his little expeditions in the bush, but I

won't have it here!" He snapped the last, slamming down his cup, making the porcelain ring from the impact.

"Well then, I'll miss you, Oupa." Neither man had noticed Geo's arrival, nor how long he'd been leaning against the doorframe listening to them. Geo continued, his face a study of calm determination. "But I'm gay. Life is too short; the last few days have made that obvious to me, if not to you. I'm gay and, apparently, I'm in love with two men."

Geo finished his announcement in style by strolling over to Danie, who was still seated at the table, and kissing him in front of the staff and his grandfather.

"Two men?" Danie teased. "Do I know them?" Geo smirked but didn't answer, sliding into the seat next to him and picking up the half eaten slice of toast from Danie's plate. Danie watched Geo smear it with the reserve's homemade strawberry jam before shoving almost the entire piece in his mouth.

"This is totally unacceptable, Geo!" The elder Christiansen rose, towering over them even as he leaned forward, bracing his arms on the table. "I've made plans for you! You are the only one capable of protecting my legacy here! Your uncles want to turn this into a theme park! I love you, Geo, but you're naïve if you think you can carry on an open affair with a man here and be safe or listened to!" George slammed his fist into the table, the white, linen cloth deadening the sound. No one spoke. Danie could see the shock and pain in Geo's profile. All his earlier bravado seemed wiped away, when a small sound broke the silence.

"I will listen."

As one, the three men and a teenager turned to stare at Baruti. Lenka stood frozen, pressed against the dining room wall, looking like he wanted to disappear.

Danie knew that Baruti's family had worked for the Christiansen's for four generations. His ancestors had lived on this land long before the white Europeans wrapped their collective fist around the heart of the continent.

Baruti himself had worked for George Christiansen for more than thirty years, rising to the position of estate manager, a role uncommon even in the decades since the fall of apartheid and unheard of for a black South African of his father's generation.

Baruti's father only managed to rise through the ranks of workers and staff, becoming the reserve's head guide in every way but name. He'd passed his deep love for the reserve to Baruti, sending him to university in England to study land management with help from the Christiansen family. From the day Baruti returned to his ancestral home on the reserve, he became the steadfast and devoted steward of both land and family.

Baruti had been sitting quietly, lingering over his breakfast, making notes to himself about the day's agenda, when the argument erupted. In all the time he'd eaten at the family table, Danie couldn't remember Baruti ever standing up to George Christiansen publically. But he spoke now.

Baruti repeated, "I will listen. And my children will listen, because young George is a good man. Your staff will listen because he is a strong man, a trustworthy man... an honest man. And this community will listen. They will listen because he is an educated man, and most importantly, a wealthy man. We will all listen."

Danie was stunned. He marveled at the quiet dignity of the man, educating them all. Geo had tears in his eyes as he reached over to hug him. Baruti himself looked surprised, aghast. Whatever led him to speak out against his employer for the first time in his life hadn't prepared him for the breach of all social protocols.

Geo patted his shoulder, quietly thanking him, before turning to his grandfather once more. "I don't expect you to understand, Oupa. I love you. I love the reserve. This is the home of my heart, and it will hurt me to leave and never come back. But I will.

"A month ago, I wouldn't have considered it. I would have kept who I am hidden, pretending I'm something I'm not. I'd like to think that I'd never stoop

so low as to let you marry me off to some landowner's daughter to advance your plans... but I'm ashamed to admit that I can't."

Danie watched George Christiansen turn from white to red as he listened to his grandson's declaration. It was plain to see that he was about to object when Geo cut him off. "Oh, don't worry, I don't intend to roam the streets at night wrapped in a rainbow flag and short-shorts—that's not who I am. But here, in my home, I want to live openly with my partner... or partners."

"I can't accept this. I won't allow this." George thumped the table one last time, punctuating his words with his fist before turning away.

"I'm sorry, Oupa. This is your home first, so I won't disrespect you further by my presence." Geo dipped his head and slipped from the room.

Danie couldn't bear to see him in pain. He jumped up to follow, but, pausing briefly, he turned to George, who was now gazing out the window to the veld beyond, his back to the room. His reflection in the glass was stormy.

Somewhat fearful of breaking this reverie, Danie spoke. "George, don't lose the one person in this world that you love, the one who loves you back without condition. I experience that each year when Geo gets on that plane—I'd save anyone that pain." He hesitated a moment before continuing, "I'll be leaving with Geo. Thomas is ready to promote to head guide. You'd be a fool not to use him."

The old man remained unmoved in the reflection.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Danie found Geo sitting on the edge of his bed, a pile of shirts next to him. He was idly folding and unfolding them into progressively thinner piles. Danie watched him for a few minutes, just to absorb the “Geo-ness” of the whole scene. He’d never met anyone quite like him. He was such a mixed up bundle of refinement and horrific table manners. Education. He had the foulest, sweetest mouth Danie had ever known.

Geo looked up and smiled. “Not a dream?”

“Nope.” Danie smiled back. “You’re very cute when you first wake up. Where were you going?”

“Um, bush.” Geo went back to refolding.

“At three in the morning?” Danie grinned at the memory.

“It was three? Huh. No, I thought it was closer to dawn. I wanted to leave before anyone thought to stop me.”

“Good plan,” Danie agreed. He’d fire any of his guides that let Geo go out alone... not that it’d be a problem anymore.

“Were you stalking me?” Geo looked up with a frown on his face.

“Can you stalk someone asleep in bed from three feet away?” Danie asked in return.

“Hmm. Maybe? Why were you in my room and not in my bed?” Geo as usual put his finger straight into the eye of the question.

“Ah, well, I didn’t want to wake you.” Geo snorted, which Danie ignored. “We’d managed to wrap up all the meetings around ten o’clock. The pilot called to see if we still needed him on standby, so we decided to go for it. We got home around two-thirty and I came straight to you. I was sitting in that chair for at least half an hour, so I don’t think I woke you.”

Geo smiled at him again before sweeping all the neat piles onto the floor with a flourish. He patted the bed next to him, and Danie sat, taking him into his arms.

“Are you okay?” Danie whispered.

He felt Geo’s nod. His head tucked under his chin.

“You know this isn’t over,” Danie reminded him, pressing a kiss into his hair.

“No, you’re wrong this time, Danie. It feels done.” Geo pulled away to look him in the eyes. They were clear, which was a relief.

“You coming out to your grandfather, that’s done... but this thing between you two? That’s not finished. You’ve upended his careful plans, Geo. He loves you, but he wanted your life to follow a certain path, the dreams he has for this place. He’s not a bad man, Geo. He’s just been hit upside his head with your reality stick.”

Geo snorted. “Reality stick? Are you watching American TV online again?”

“I miss you so much when you’re gone, Geo. Can you blame me?”

“Not for the missing me, no. But the bad references, yes.” Geo lay back on the bed and flung his arms wide. “I have to leave, or he won’t take me seriously. He may change his mind, but I won’t. I’ll only be here on my terms.”

“Ah yes, your terms. That would be you and your harem of men? Will you at least share them with me?”

Geo sighed and pulled Danie down on top of him. Danie could feel the heat from his chest to his thighs. Their cocks lay nestled next to each other through the cotton of their pants. There was a stirring of interest. Danie ignored it for the moment.

“I already have,” Geo whispered into his ear, dragging Danie’s face close enough to kiss. He opened his lips just enough to encourage Geo to slide his tongue into his mouth. The sweetness of jam still lingered.

Geo drew back, and Danie shifted down slightly so he could settle his head over Geo’s heart. He listened to it beating as Geo gently stroked fingers through his hair. He was almost asleep when a knock sounded at the door.

Geo kept a firm hand on Danie’s back, keeping him from moving away, before calling out, “Enter!”

Danie had never allowed himself to visit Geo in his room in the lodge. In the early morning hours he figured it was safe enough—he’d missed Geo desperately, and so much had happened between them that needed to be discussed. But with every opportunity that presented itself to call or see Geo, circumstances, or more likely George Christiansen, had kept them apart.

So as he had passed Geo’s door on the way to his own room, he couldn’t resist. He’d sat there staring at the man, watching the moonlight throw light across his face. After Geo finally rolled over on his side after five in the morning, Danie had slipped away again. Now, here he was on the man’s bed, wrapped in his arms, and the idiot was inviting to world to witness his rebellion first hand.

It was Baruti. “Excuse me, sirs. After this morning, I thought it best to bring this man straight to you. Your grandfather is in his study.” He smiled briefly before waving in their guest and shutting the door behind him as he left.

Andrea stood, looking better than ever to Danie’s eyes.

Geo felt his breath leave his lungs. Hope struggled with a fear so feral it ravaged the edges of his sanity. He tore his eyes away from the man standing silent and so very close again. Danie looked up at him, the question was in his eyes, too, but no anger, no disappointment or jealousy—just love.

Could this be possible, Geo wondered. Was this connection between the three of them real? They'd only really had hours together, under the most extreme circumstances. Psychologists had names for things like this, none of them particularly flattering.

He knew he loved Danie, had loved him for years. Each parting under the gaze of Oupa had been heartbreaking in its silence; just Danie carrying his bags to the plane, a brief squeeze of fingers as Danie handed them over.

He would live, holding his breath, until the next summer, when he'd feel the overwhelming need burn bright again. Stepping into baggage claim, hoping to see Danie there, but inevitably finding Oupa; the man who would scoop him up into the air no matter how tall he'd gotten.

He'd lived entire lifetimes in seconds. His whole relationship with Danie stretched and retracted like one of Einstein's rubber bands. So, was the attraction to Andrea any different?

Certainly not for him, but, honestly, he knew almost nothing beyond the man's heart. A heart that represented a new wilderness for Geo to explore. And, as with every other adventure over the last few years, Danie was by his side. Geo had already burned the bridges keeping him securely anchored in his old life. All he knew was that Danie was there, getting ready to fall off the edge of the world with him.

He lifted his arms at the same moment as Danie, welcoming Andrea home.

...to be continued.

Author Bio

At seventeen, LE Franks walked away from writing for love. Jumping head first into real life and travelling the world seemed to be fair compensation until the characters in her head demanded their turn. Now, living in the San Francisco Bay Area, surrounded by inspiration everywhere, LE is finally taking off the filters and giving the stories free rein. These days, LE can be found frequently writing about sexy men who desperately need a happily ever.

LE writes M/M Romance in a unique mix of humor and drama with enough suspense to produce fast-paced stories filled with emotion and passion and featuring characters that are quirky and complicated. Don't expect the typical, rugged hero or sophisticated businessman with the world at their feet; LE's men are living in the margins—they're in the middle of their journey, doing the best they can while searching for a connection to something bigger than themselves. With a little effort, and a lot of luck, they may actually find their happily-ever-afters.

When not writing, LE wrangles an odd assortment of jobs (six—both paid and volunteer), houseguests (including pro baseball players), family, and friends. Manifesting an odd combination of contradictory talents and traits, LE is tragically honest and personally deceptive and makes the best piecrust—ever.

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THE LONG RETURN

By Jessica Freely

Photo Description

A stunning African American man in a stylish suit looks over his shoulder at us. He has an oval face with high, chiseled cheekbones, hooded eyes, and full lips. His hair is cropped close to his head. He is frowning slightly and in the depths of his liquid eyes is an expression that could be lust, longing, or reproach.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

We've been best friends for so long. He knows my pains, fears and the little things that bring me delight. One day, I caught him, staring at me, with that look on his face. The very next day, he was gone.

It's been fifteen years, and now he's back. Self-made and self-assured.

Why did he take off all those years ago? What could he want from me?

Sincerely,

Alessandra

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: LGBT Youth Center, African American, long-lost lovers, community activism, at-risk youth, reunited, homophobia, in the closet

Word count: 11,034

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THE LONG RETURN

By Jessica Freely

Bright sunshine flooded through the windows and reflected off the freshly painted walls of the Delany Center for LGBT Youth on Michigan Avenue in Detroit. On a Saturday afternoon like this one, the center was a bright, bustling hub of activity. Kids chased each other up and down the halls and through the lobby, their voices a raucous, welcome soundtrack to the day-to-day chores of maintaining the center. In the laundry room, Director Trevor Davis threw another load of sheets in the washer and grabbed some fresh ones to make up the center's ten beds.

"Trev, Trev! Can I borrow your laptop? I want to show Vivienne your 'It Gets Better' video," Bryan said.

"Yes, if you help me make up the beds first."

Bryan scrunched up his face. His nose wrinkled and brow puckered before the muscles smoothed into a grin. "Okay."

Bryan was fifteen, and homeless. His parents kicked him out of the house three months ago when they found his sketchbook, filled with homoerotic drawings. Fortunately, Bryan found his way to the center that first night, before getting caught up in the cycle of prostitution and drugs that awaited so many young people on the street. Others weren't as lucky. Vivienne, for example. Before she found out about the center, the sixteen-year-old trans woman had been on her own for two years, turning tricks just to get out of the cold.

Trev thanked his lucky stars he had beds for these kids. It hadn't always been the case. In fact, for years they'd only been able to keep the center open on the weekends. There had been no beds, just a couple of couches where those most in need could crash for a night or two before being thrust back out onto the streets.

But for the past five years, increasingly generous donations from the Mathis Foundation had changed all that. They came unsolicited every quarter. Now the center had two dormitories, a vocation center, a kitchen, even a rec room. And they'd attracted the attention of the Community Initiative Coalition, whom they'd be meeting with on Monday about expanding their mission even further.

Trev had written the Mathis Foundation several times, thanking them, telling them what a difference they had made. He'd never gotten an answer, much less an explanation. All the same, this was one gift horse he wasn't about to look in the mouth.

As Trev followed Bryan to the dorms, he paused at the rec room. Carlos and Dean were in there, playing Ping-Pong. Carlos's shot went wild and hit Dean on the forehead. They both broke down laughing. Trev's heart swelled at the sight of kids finally getting a chance to be kids again. That was what the Delany Center was all about.

How many times had he wished there'd been a place like this when he and Shane were young? Maybe, if they'd been around people who accepted them for who they were, things would have turned out differently.

He could still picture Shane at seventeen, all long limbs and big, luminous eyes, but not awkward, never that—graceful, beautiful, with warm brown skin, and a smile that could light up the whole city. Trev, with his dark complexion and geeky appearance, differed from Shane in almost every way. Shane was outgoing; Trev was shy. Shane was athletic; Trev was a bookworm. Shane dropped out of high school; Trev graduated with a full scholarship to Wayne State University.

But none of that ever seemed to matter. Best friends since the age of ten and lovers at fifteen, they were inseparable. At least that's what Trev had thought.

He'd never know why Shane suddenly up and left him. He could still picture that moment at his graduation party when their gazes met across the crowded backyard. The weight of the memory bowed his shoulders down.

It had just been getting on to evening, that time of day when the setting sun makes everything seem magical. The smell of lilacs and freshly mown grass perfumed the air. Trev looked past his Auntie Cecilia, who had trapped him beside the punch bowl, her high, whiny voice buzzing in his ear like a mosquito. “Why don’t you have a nice girl yet, Trevor?”

Shane stood at the gate. His oval face glowed like gold in the warm light. He stared at Trev, his dark-brown eyes half-lidded, unwavering. His full lips turned down at the corners, but Trev couldn’t tell if Shane was angry with him about something or just sad.

Trev broke away from his auntie and wove his way through the throng of sweaty, well-dressed relatives. But by the time he reached the gate, Shane was gone. Trev looked all over and couldn’t find him, not that night and not in the weeks and months that followed. Shane had simply vanished, never to be seen again.

That last look Shane had given him still haunted his dreams. What had it meant? Trev sighed.

“Penny for your thoughts.”

Trev jumped and dropped his end of the sheet. “Oh, sorry. Just woolgathering.”

Bryan narrowed his eyes. “Whatever it is, it makes you sad.”

“I was thinking about someone I haven’t seen in a long time.”

“Well, why don’t you visit him, then?”

“I can’t. I don’t know where he is.”

“Oh. He’s not on Facebook?”

It had honestly not occurred to Trev. Was Shane on Facebook? *Don’t go down that road.* “It doesn’t matter if he is. The way we left things, I couldn’t just message him or something. It’s complicated.”

“‘Complicated’ is what my parents used to call anything they didn’t want to talk about.”

Trev raised an eyebrow. “That might be a hint, then.”

Bryan sighed. They made up two more beds, and then he said, “Do you have a boyfriend, Mr. Davis?”

“That’s none of your business.”

“So you don’t.”

“Bryan—”

“Well, it’s just that Viv and Dean and I have noticed you’re here all the time, working, and you never talk about going out or doing anything exciting. We figure you’re either married or alone.”

“Just because I’m not out every night painting the town red doesn’t mean I don’t have a rich and satisfying social life. Not that it’s any of your concern.” He wasn’t fooling Bryan, or himself. He had no life outside the center. But that was fine. He loved his work. It was important, and he’d rather be here, doing something that mattered, than engaging in another string of empty hookups that only left him feeling lonelier than before.

“Well, I think you deserve someone to make you happy, Mr. Davis.”

“Thanks, Bryan. You’re a good kid.”

Trev was at the front desk sorting through mail when the door opened. He looked up and dropped the envelope in his hand. The man standing there was fifteen years older and vastly better dressed than he’d been the last time Trev saw him, but there was no mistaking those luminous eyes, or the high cheekbones and arching brows of that face.

It was Shane.

Trev’s heart hammered. How many times had he dreamed of this moment, only to shove the thought down deep inside? How many times had he rehearsed what he would say if he ever saw Shane again? All those words—angry words, joyful words, words of love and desperation—fled in the face of

the living, breathing reality of Shane, standing here before him. Their eyes met and he couldn't speak. He couldn't move.

"It's you." Shane strode toward Trev, grinning. His hair was cropped close to his shapely head. He wore black jeans, a white dress shirt open at the collar, and a black sport coat printed with a white fleur-de-lis pattern. "I can't believe it! It's really you."

Suddenly conscious of his own faded jeans and raggedy WSU sweatshirt, Trev nodded. His mouth hung open. With an effort, he closed it. "Sh-shane."

"Man, how long has it been?" Shane held out his hand, and like iron to a magnet, Trev reached for it. Shane's hand enveloped his in warmth and strength. It felt so good.

"Fifteen years," Trev said. *Make that fifteen years, two months, and three days.*

"You're looking good." Shane still held Trev's hand.

Heat radiated from their clasped palms, spreading through Trev's body. Sweat broke out on his forehead. He pulled away. "Thank you."

Shane reached out and touched one of the tiny, inch-long dreads that covered Trev's head. "I like your new do."

"I've been wearing my hair like this for seven years."

"Oh." Shane took a deep breath and nodded. He looked chastened for a moment, then he smiled. "Your glasses haven't changed, though."

"I got these frames a month ago. I like the retro style." Were they really having a conversation about Trev's hair and glasses? What the fuck was this? What was Shane doing here? Why had he come back after all this time?

"So... you're the director here."

"How do you know that?"

"Says so here." Shane leaned over and picked up the ID badge hanging from Trev's neck. His scent enveloped Trev.

The spicy aroma took Trev right back to their first time together in his old twin bed with the astronaut sheets. They'd been fifteen and in love. "Oh. Yeah." A fierce yearning for the days of their youth awoke in Trev's heart. He fought the urge to pull Shane onto the counter, tear all his clothes off, and have his way with him then and there. What would Bryan say to that? Or for that matter, the assistant director, Carlotta Hernandez, who was in her office preparing for Monday's meeting with CIC?

"It's good to see you," Shane said.

"Yeah?"

Shane nodded.

They stared at each other in silence. Trev forced himself to speak. "Looks like you've done well for yourself."

"I have my own company now."

What a relief to know Shane wasn't destitute on the streets, or dead, even. Trev had never realized how much that fear had weighed on him all these years. In its absence, he almost felt like he could float off the ground. "I'm so glad you're doing well."

"Thanks. You are too." Shane nodded at the center's lobby, a bright room with lots of windows, decorated with artwork from the residents. "This place is great."

"It is. We've really grown in the past five years. We're open seven days a week now, and we have ten beds."

Shane smiled that big, bright, irrepressible smile of his. "The Delany Center, huh?"

Trev couldn't help smiling back. Shane had never shared Trev's enthusiasm for science fiction, but he'd never mocked him for it either. That alone probably would have been enough to make Trev fall in love with him.

"Named for your favorite author, Samuel R. Delany—the first and for many years only openly gay black science fiction author," said Shane.

“You remember.” Something about that made Trev want to cry, though he couldn’t explain it.

“Of course.”

The years between them seemed to dissolve. The words, “Why did you leave me?” were on the tip of Trev’s tongue.

A shout came from behind him, and Vivienne ran into the lobby with Bryan right on her heels.

“I told you if you touched my stuff one more time I’d kick your tranny ass!”

“Hey, Bryan. We don’t use words like that here, remember?” Trev said.

“But he—she stole my magic markers again.”

“I didn’t steal them. I borrowed one.” Vivienne’s lips were bright red. “I was going to give it back.”

“After it’s been all over your mouth? I don’t want it!”

“Fuck you, transphobe!”

“Both of you, just stop right now,” said Trev. “Come with me.” He waved them into his office. “Sorry,” he said to Shane. “I have to take care of this.”

“I’ll wait.”

“Where’s Carlotta?” Trev asked the kids.

“Right here, right here,” said the center’s assistant director, rushing into the lobby with an armful of paperwork.

“Carlotta, this is Shane Edwards, an old friend of mine. Could you give him a tour of the center?”

“Of course.” She beamed at Shane.

“It was good seeing you again,” Trev said. “Take care of yourself.”

Carlotta gestured toward the rec room. “If you’ll come with me?”

Shane looked over his shoulder at Trev. He opened his mouth to say something, but Trev turned away and shut the door.

Trev sorted things out with Bryan and Vivienne and made a note to ask Carlotta to give Vivienne some of her cosmetics. The dispute between them was a welcome distraction, but within twenty minutes both kids had forgotten all about it and gone back to being friends again.

When Trev returned to the front desk, Shane was still there chatting with Carlotta. He leaned in close to her and said something that made her throw her head back and laugh. They both looked up to see Trev. Shane's eyes were bright, and his smile lingered.

"I didn't know you'd still be here," Trev said.

"I am."

Again, silence descended as they stared at one another. Unspoken words seemed to crowd the air, making it hard to breathe.

Carlotta looked back and forth between Trev and Shane. "Um. Well, if you'll excuse me, I've got some more work to do. Lovely meeting you, Shane." She picked up a stack of files and left.

Trev walked up to the counter and leaned on it, facing Shane. *Might as well have this out.* "Why are you here?"

Shane shrugged. It was the same liquid gesture he'd perfected at the age of thirteen. If anything, it was even sexier now. "I wanted to see you."

Now Shane wanted to see him. What about any of the previous fifteen years? "Well, you've seen me."

"And I wanted to thank you."

Trev took a step back. "For what?"

"You inspired me to do something with my life."

Great, now he was a source of inspiration. What was he supposed to say to that? "Well, you're the one who's made something of yourself. I'm proud of

you.” He didn’t feel proud. All he could feel was bitterness over being abandoned. How childish.

The smile Shane gave him was the same one he’d flashed when Trev taught him how to do fractions back in fifth grade. “Really?”

“Of course.”

“Thanks. Coming from you that really means a lot.”

Trev forced himself to smile and held out his hand. “Well, it’s good to see you again.” And it was true, if only to know that Shane was alive and well.

“Great seeing you.” Shane gripped his hand.

All Trev wanted to do was haul him in for a hug that would never end. But it was too late for that. Fifteen years too late. He let go. He turned away and headed back to his office. Tears filled his eyes.

“Wait, Trev.”

Shit. He stopped but didn’t turn around. “What is it?”

“I thought maybe we could get together later. Go out for some burgers or something. Catch up.”

For a moment he was tempted to say yes, but he couldn’t reopen that wound. Just seeing Shane again was painful enough. “Oh, sorry. No, I have plans.” If “plans” meant going home and anesthetizing himself with beer and television, then it was a perfectly honest statement.

Five minutes later, Carlotta let herself into his office. “Who in the hell was that?”

“I told you. An old friend.”

“He’s more than that,” she said.

“What do you mean? What did he tell you?”

She raised an eyebrow. “He didn’t have to tell me anything. I saw the look on your face. He’s an old flame.”

“Very old. And long since died out.”

“Oh, I don’t think so.”

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

“I’m not the one being ridiculous. You looked like you wanted to strip him naked and do him on the reception desk.”

Trev blushed. He picked up a pencil and rolled it between the thumbs and forefingers of both hands.

“And he asked me if you were seeing anyone.”

Snap! Trev held one half of the pencil in each hand. “What did you say?”

“I told him the truth.”

Trev threw the pencil pieces down on his desk. “Damn it.”

“You didn’t want him to know you’re single? I thought maybe—”

“Shane Edwards and I were best friends from the day he and his alcoholic ass-hat of a daddy moved in next door to me and my mom. Shane and I were both ten, and he’d been locked out of the house. He stayed with us that night and many more nights after that. When we were fifteen we became lovers. We kept each other’s secrets and tended each other’s wounds. We were going to get out of the neighborhood together and find some place where we didn’t have to hide. Then, on the night I graduated from high school, he disappeared. I never saw or heard from him again until today.”

“Oh, shit. Trev, I’m so sorry.”

“You didn’t know.”

“Still.” She put a hand on his shoulder and squeezed it. “Is there anything I can do?”

He took a deep breath. “Can you cover things here for the rest of the day? I want to go home.” He sounded pathetic.

“Yeah. Okay, but you sure you want to be alone?”

“I’m sure.”

Trev lay on the couch in his underwear, watching old reruns and working his way through a couple of 40s. He was on his fourth episode of *Deep Space Nine* and his second bottle of Olde English when someone knocked on the door. "Go away," he said.

"Trev. It's me," said Shane.

Fuck. "Go away."

"Let me in. I need to talk to you."

Now he needs to talk. "Why now?"

"I'll explain, just let me in."

"No."

"I'm not going away, Trev." He pounded on the door again.

Trev lay back on the couch and closed his eyes. The pounding continued. This was what he got for staying on in his childhood home after his mom moved to Tampa. Maybe if he finished his beer he'd pass out and wouldn't hear Shane anymore. But a treacherous little voice in his heart said, "*What do you think he wants?*"

With a groan, he got up and opened the door. He didn't greet Shane. He just went back to the couch and sat down. "What do you want?"

"Look, I get that you're mad at me."

Trev started laughing. He took another drink.

Shane eyed the empty bottle and the clothes piled on the floor. "This your usual mode these days?"

"None of your business." Trev stood up. He advanced on Shane. "Who the fuck do you think you are coming into my house and criticizing me?"

"I'm just concerned, is all."

"That's hilarious, coming from you. You ran out on me fifteen years ago without a word. A day hasn't gone by that I haven't wondered and worried about you. Now you're worried about me? Fuck you!"

“Trev.”

“No. Don’t ‘Trev’ me, Shane. I thought we were friends. More than friends.”

“We were. We are.”

“Oh, hell no. We’re not anything now. There is no ‘we’. You killed that on graduation night.”

“I know, and I’m sorry, believe me. If you knew how many nights I lay awake, regretting what I did. It’s been…” He sighed. “I miss you, Trev.”

“No. You’re not sorry. You don’t miss me. And you don’t get to be the one hurt by this. I am. You hurt me, Shane.” Great, now he was crying. He picked up a bottle for another swig. It was the empty one. He threw it.

It hit the wall and shattered.

“Hey, take it easy, man.” Shane grabbed him by the arms and pulled him close.

Trev fought him, but Shane always had been stronger. He put his arms around Trev and held him close. Even after all this time, his embrace was familiar. His smell, the shape of him—more filled out than he’d been at seventeen yet still unmistakably, uniquely, Shane. A thousand memories from their childhood and teen years flooded in on him.

Trev sobbed against Shane’s shoulder. This had to be the ultimate humiliation. It was bad enough Shane had left him. He had to come back and find him like this. “You fucker.”

Shane stroked Trev’s back and rocked him. “I know.”

The warmth and comfort of Shane’s embrace overwhelmed Trev’s anger. By degrees, he relaxed. Soon, he began to notice how good Shane’s body felt against his—firm and muscular. Trev’s cock twitched. He should push Shane away. He should make him leave.

But he didn’t want to.

He lifted his head and looked Shane in the eyes. Their faces were inches apart. God, those eyes. That mouth. Trev's cock hardened. He leaned closer, pressing his lips to Shane's.

Shane kissed him back, parting those voluptuous lips and drinking in Trev's pain and horniness.

He lost himself in the sweetness of the moment. His head spun. The room tilted around him. He wanted Shane. Now. He wrapped his arms around Shane's neck. He pressed his erection into Shane and began to flex his hips, dragging his hard cock back and forth.

Shane gripped Trev's arms and pulled free from his embrace. He took a step back. "No. Not like this."

"What? Why not? We're both adults." He looked down at Shane's hard-on tenting the front of his jeans. "You want it. I want it. Why shouldn't we?"

"Because you're drunk."

"So what? Here." Trev picked up the remaining bottle of Olde English. About three inches of malt liquor swirled around inside. "You can have the rest."

Shane just shook his head.

"Oh, so now you're too good to drink with me? Your old friend from the East Side? You're all fancy and you can't be associating with me anymore? Then why the fuck did you come here, Shane? Why did you come back?"

Shane ran one hand over his head. "I wanted to see you again. I wanted to try and make up for what I did and see if we could—" He let out a breath. "I wanted to help. But all I've done is hurt you more. This was a mistake. I'm sorry."

He left, and the world made sense again. Lonely walls echoed back the silence of fifteen years. Empty arms vibrated with the same hollow feeling they'd wrapped around for fifteen impossibly long years. Yeah, the world made sense. Trev lay back on the couch and finished his beer.

Trev slept through most of Sunday and spent the rest of it trying to dispel the lingering effects of his drunk. By Monday morning he felt better, but there were still shadows under his eyes. All he could hope was that the Community Initiative Coalition people would chalk them up to hard work.

Thoughts of Shane still skulked at the back of his mind. Had he gone for good again? Did Trev want him to?

When he got to the center, Carlotta met him at the door. “Shane Edwards has been calling. He left his cell number and his hotel information. He wants you to call him back as soon as possible.”

So, not gone forever. Not yet. That was good. Trev didn’t want it to end in a drunken fight. He wasn’t sure how he wanted it to end, but not like that.

What if he *could* forgive Shane? What if they did get back together again? The memory of Shane’s body against his brought a rush of heat to his face. “I don’t have time for that right now. When are the CIC people due?”

“In a half an hour.”

“We have to set up the lunch room.”

By the time they’d pushed tables together and set up the PowerPoint presentation, it was almost time for the meeting. Trev put on a fresh pot of coffee, and Carlotta set out some plastic bowls and filled them with peanuts and M&Ms. “One of us should go wait at the front desk in case they’re early,” she said.

“You go. I want to look over my notes one last time.”

She was back two minutes later, looking like she’d just met a ghost. “They’re here.”

“Everything okay?”

She opened her mouth to answer. Before she could say a word, Shane entered. Two other men followed him.

Trev stood up.

Shane held his hands out. “I tried to call.”

“I don’t understand,” said Trev. He looked from Shane to Carlotta to the other two men, one a white guy in his twenties and the other a black man in his fifties.

“This is the CIC project manager, Tony Gregson.” Carlotta indicated the older black man. “And this is Mike Peters, the financial analyst.”

“And I’m the president of CIC,” said Shane, stepping forward and holding out his hand.

Trev took Shane’s hand and they shook. Part of him watched the scene as if from afar. Shane was the president of CIC? That was the company he owned? “I...”

Carlotta said, “This is our director, Trevor Davis. We’re so pleased to have you all here. Now, if you gentlemen will be seated, we’ve prepared a PowerPoint presentation. Can I get anyone a coffee before we get started?”

Thank God for Carlotta. As the graphs and charts of the Delany Center’s financial status and mission implementation flashed on the screen at the front of the room, Trev fought to get his bearings. What in the hell was Shane trying to do? Was the man putting Trev off balance on purpose? Why?

Carlotta wrapped up the presentation by pitching the expansion plan they’d been working on for the past several months. “With CIC’s involvement, we could open two or three more centers in the city and thereby expand our outreach to cover most of the youth LGBT population in Detroit. Such a program is ambitious, and would require a significant commitment from CIC. My question is, just how much is CIC willing to invest in us?”

It was a bold move, essentially demanding that CIC step up with a major investment in time and money. Trev reminded himself there was more at stake here than two hearts that had been broken years ago.

Shane said, “I think we can budget enough for three more centers to be phased in over a period of three years: one in Midtown, another in Palmer

Park, and another on the East Side. That would offer good coverage and give your organization time to grow.”

That was exactly the approach Trev and Carlotta had arrived at as the most sustainable and effective.

“We do have a question about your financials,” said Peters. “Going over the information you’ve provided us, it appears the center’s current operating costs exceed its funding from state and federal grants. The extra support has come from a small private charity.”

At last, Trev found his voice. “The Mathis Foundation, yes.”

“If I may say so, they’ve been extremely generous to you.”

“We have been blessed.”

“And you’ve spent the money wisely, but I did a little research and I was unable to find any information on the foundation. No website, nothing.”

Shane jumped in. “I don’t think that’s something we have to worry about in this case.”

Peters turned to him. “These donations constitute over half of the center’s operating budget. If they suddenly go away, the center’s entire mission will be jeopardized.”

Funny. Shane looked like he wanted to stuff a handful of M&Ms in Peters’s mouth just to get him to shut up. What was that about? “I’m familiar with the foundation in question.”

“You are?” said Trev.

“It’s backed by a very private benefactor, and it’s not going away any time soon.”

Okay. Interesting. How did Shane know that? Still, he’d provided an opportunity to move this conversation away from the subject, and Trev wasn’t about to waste it. “With CIC’s involvement, we won’t be as dependent on donations. Perhaps, with the slow growth plan on the table, we can wean off of them by forming new partnerships with area businesses.”

“Yes,” said Shane. “We can examine that aspect in more detail later, but I think we can all agree that the Delany Center has a proven track record of responsible spending and that this current plan, with the adjustments I’ve suggested, is a sustainable one. I think we have what we need to move forward.” He looked at Peters, who nodded.

The meeting wrapped up, and everyone stood to leave. “Trev,” said Shane. “Can you hang on a minute? I’d really like to talk to you.”

Part of Trev just wanted to walk away, but he couldn’t do that. He had a responsibility to the gay youth of Detroit. Shane Edwards might be heartbreak on two legs, but he was also the president of CIC. Trev didn’t have to like his secretive ways, he just had to work with the man.

And, if he were completely honest with himself, he wanted an explanation for Shane’s disappearance all those years ago. Maybe getting to the bottom of that would help clear the air between them. “Okay,” he said. “Let’s get lunch. You still like barbeque?”

The look on Shane’s face told Trev he’d surprised the man. “Yeah.”

“Come on, then. I’ll drive.” He took Shane to Slow’s, an upscale barbeque place which, for all its trendiness, served some of the best ribs he’d ever had.

“Fancy,” said Shane.

“Yeah, it’s a far cry from Bobbie Joe’s Grits ’n’ Things, but I think you’ll like the food.”

They got a seat in a booth, ordered, and ate.

Shane devoured his pulled pork sandwich and mopped up the extra sauce with a slice of bread. “Listen, I’m sorry about this morning. I didn’t mean to blindside you.”

“That’s why you were calling.” Trev added his last rib bone to the others piled on his plate.

“Yes.”

“And it’s not like I gave you much opportunity to explain on Saturday.” He blushed at the memory of how he’d acted. “You must think me ungrateful.”

“What?”

“The way I’ve been behaving. Seeing you again stirred up a lot of memories. My reaction on Saturday was off base, but now that I know you’re here in a strictly professional capacity, nothing like that will ever happen again.”

“Trev.”

“I appreciate what you’re doing for the center. And I’m proud of the way you’ve made something of yourself and are giving back to our community. Really. You’ve moved on, and so will I.”

“Trev.”

“Whatever was between us back in the day is over. It won’t be an obstacle to our working together. Of course, if you’d prefer, Carlotta can take point with CIC. That way we won’t have to—”

“Trev. Stop. Please. Listen to me. I could have told you about CIC right when I walked into the center on Saturday. I didn’t.”

That was true. “So why didn’t you?”

“Because...” Shane looked down and fiddled with his fork. “I knew how unlikely it was you’d still have feelings for me, but I needed to find out for sure. I didn’t want CIC confusing the issue if there was even the slightest chance you might take me back.”

An invisible hand squeezed Trev’s heart. Was he hearing this right? “You want to get together again?”

Shane pinned him with his gaze. “Yes.”

“Why? I mean, after all this time...”

“Because, in all this time, I’ve never wanted anyone except you.”

An ache arose in Trev’s chest, at once so painful and so sweet he could hardly stand it. He tried to regain his bearings. “But... CIC...”

“Forget CIC for a minute, will you?”

“I can’t. Those kids are depending on me.”

“I promise, whatever happens between us won’t affect CIC’s involvement with the center. We’ll use go-betweens if we have to, just like you said. One way or another, I’m helping—CIC’s helping Delany and that’s final.”

“I don’t know what to say.”

“Then hear me out, please. First of all, and I should have said this the minute I saw you on Saturday, I’m sorry for leaving you.”

Trev’s head spun. “Sorry?”

“Yes. More than words can say.”

Wasn’t this what he’d been waiting to hear for the past fifteen years? “Why did you do it?”

Shane ran a hand over his head and looked down. “Because I knew I wasn’t good enough for you.”

“What?”

“You were smart. You stayed in school and got good grades. You had that scholarship. You were going places.”

“So?”

“The only place I was going was juvie or an early death, probably both.”

“No. You were coming with me, remember? You were going to get your GED and apply for financial aid and we were going to—”

“That was your plan, Trev. If you’ll recall, I never opened a single one of those books you gave me.”

“But—”

“I should have at least tried. It just seemed impossible. And I could see the way everyone watched us. People suspected we were queer for each other. Especially your mom.”

“Yeah. She’s still not all that comfortable with my orientation.”

“Well, she sure as hell wasn’t comfortable with it back then. I can remember the looks she’d give me.” He shuddered.

“You always said you didn’t care what people thought.”

Shane shrugged. “Bravado.”

Trev just looked at him.

“It was all I had in those days, Trev. I can’t tell you how many times I’ve cursed that stupid pride of mine, but honestly? I’m not sure I’d have survived without it.”

Trev leaned forward, bracing his hands on the table. “That was for everyone else, Shane. Not me. Never for me.”

“You’re right. And the judgments of others wouldn’t have made me leave you. Not if I thought for one second I was worthy of you. But I knew I wasn’t.”

“That was for me to decide, not you. You should have talked to me.”

“You never would have abandoned me. I knew that. You’d have stuck by me and let me drag you down with me. I couldn’t stand the thought of that.”

“It never occurred to you that we could both make something of ourselves?”

“No. It didn’t. Not then. It took me a long time to realize it was even a possibility for me.”

“So your answer was to disappear without even saying goodbye? Do you have any idea what that was like for me?”

“I know. It was terrible. I don’t know what more to say except that I was seventeen and I’m really sorry.”

Trev stared at Shane, seeing in him his seventeen-year-old self, cocky and streetwise and secretly hurting. He ached for that boy, but he still wanted to strangle the man sitting in front of him. “Okay. I can see that part. But you should have written me, later, when you wised up. All this time, I didn’t know

why you'd gone, or where. Were you okay or in trouble or alive or dead? Did you still love me or hate me? Had you ever loved me at all?"

"I do love you. I always will."

If only Trev could believe that. If only he could trust Shane. "You've got a fucked up way of showing it."

"I know. I made a mistake."

"It was more than a mistake, Shane. You broke my heart." His chest smarted as if the broken shards were trying to fit themselves back together, only to miss and stab one another instead.

Shane grabbed Trev's hand and gripped it tightly. "And mine. You have no idea. A day hasn't gone by that I haven't thought of you."

Trev tugged his hand back and crossed his arms.

Shane turned his hand palm up. "So many times I wanted to write or call."

"So why didn't you?"

"Because I didn't think I'd be strong enough to stay away if I did."

"And exactly why was staying away so goddamned important?"

"I was ashamed of myself. I wanted to wait until I had more to offer than an apology."

Goddamn Shane's pride. And what about him, pining away all these years? Was there anything more pathetic than that?

Shane caught the look in Trev's eye and flinched. "Look, I left because I felt unworthy. I know it was messed up, but that was the path I chose and I had to see it through. I had to be able to look you in the eye when I saw you again."

"If you think fancy clothes and a lot of money are what make a man worthy in my eyes, then you've never known me at all."

"No. I do know that. But what money can do is important, for a lot of people. Just look at the center. You know, when I see the faces of those kids,

it's like I'm looking at us, like I've been given a second chance. I don't know if I can ever make up for how I hurt you, but if I can work with you to give these kids a better chance than we had, then I'll take that and still consider myself fortunate."

Trev took a deep breath and closed his eyes. He almost expected Shane to be gone when he opened them again—vanished like a ghost. But Shane was still there, still watching him with that look in his eyes that took Trev back to that first day in the backyard, all those years ago. "Well, you've given me a lot to think about."

"Okay. I guess I'll take that over 'I never want to see you again.'"

"We will be working together."

"You know what I mean."

Trev stood. "I have your card. I'll call you if..." He trailed off, not sure what to say. *If I forgive you? If I need a late night shag down memory lane? If I decide I can't live without you?*

Shane nodded, and Trev left. He wasn't proud of it, but part of himself took satisfaction in the fact that this time, he was the one walking away.

When Trev got back to the center he found Carlotta, Peters, and Gregson still in the dining room, their heads bent over a folder full of paperwork. Carlotta looked up. "Trev!"

The other two saw him and closed the folder. Peters shoved it back in his briefcase.

"What's up?" asked Trev. "Anything wrong?" He almost welcomed the distraction from his tumultuous thoughts about Shane.

"No," said Peters. "Just dotting all the i's and crossing all the t's." He turned to Carlotta. "I think we're good, then?" He glanced at Trev and back to her. "We all have the information we really need?"

Carlotta raised one eyebrow and tilted her head. "I'll be the judge of that."

Peters opened his mouth and then cut his eyes at Trev again. He sighed. “Very well.” He and Gregson left.

“What in the hell was that about?” asked Trev.

Carlotta grabbed him by the arm and ushered him into his office. She shut the door behind her. She stood with her back to it, grinning.

“What?”

“Sit down.”

“You’re freaking me out.”

“It’s the Mathis Foundation. We figured out who it really is.”

“What? You and Peters and Gregson?”

She nodded. “We didn’t mean to. We were looking at the pattern of the donations over time and Peters let slip that the timing and amounts matched CIC’s donations to the East Side Project.”

“Okay, well, that’s an odd coincidence, but—”

“It’s not a coincidence. I did some checking on both East Side and Mathis and their inflows and outflows match up exactly.”

“You mean—”

“One hundred percent of the East Side Project’s inflow comes from CIC, and one hundred percent of the Mathis Foundation’s outflow comes to us.”

Trev’s pulse quickened. “CIC is funding the East Side Project and the East Side Project is funding the Mathis Foundation.”

“Who’s funding us?”

“And Shane’s behind it all?”

“Who else?”

Trev sat back in his chair. “Wow. All this time he’s been supporting the center. Hey, wait, those donations from the Mathis Foundation go back five years. CIC’s only been around for three.”

Carlotta shrugged.

“You think it was still him?”

“Probably.”

“How in the hell did he afford it before CIC?”

“I don’t know.”

Shane still wasn’t being honest with him. He was still hiding things.
“Damn it!”

“I thought you’d be happy.”

“I don’t know what I am.”

“How was your lunch?”

“Confusing.”

“Oh.”

“He wants me to forgive him.”

“Can’t you?”

“I don’t know. Maybe. Yes, of course. But that’s not all. He wants to get back together again. He says he still loves me.”

Her face lit up. “That’s wonderful!”

“It is?” Why didn’t it feel wonderful? Why did it feel like he was slowly being torn in half?

“Of course, Trev. I mean, obviously you’re still in love with him, so—”

Oh God. “Obviously?”

She nodded.

Trev sighed. His whole body felt heavy, like he was stuffed with wet rags.
“He’s still not being honest. How can I trust him?”

“You can trust him to fund the center.”

“That’s true.”

Carlotta leaned forward. “All this time he’s been funneling money to us. He cares about the center and about you. I think you both deserve the chance to work this out.”

She was right. Was he just being a coward? No. “There’s still something he’s not telling me. I need to know what it is.”

“He’s in room 607 at the Westin,” she said.

Trev took a deep breath. “Right.”

Trev knocked on the door of Shane’s room. “Open up, Shane, I need to talk to you.”

The door opened and Shane stood there, still in his dress pants and shirt but without the jacket or tie. “Come in.” His face looked puffy. Had he been napping?

The room was tidy but the bedspread was ruffled, like Shane had been lying on it. His shoes lay in the middle of the room, one of them on its side. Shane picked them up and put them in the closet. He hung his head the way he always did when he was upset. “I didn’t expect to see you again so soon.”

Trev sat down on the couch and took a closer look at Shane. The puffiness was mostly around his nose and eyes. Had he been crying?

“Can I get you anything?” Shane said with all the enthusiasm of a condemned man. “There’s the mini bar, or I could call room service.”

“No, thank you.”

Shane took a seat in the swivel chair and turned to Trev as if facing his executioner. “What can I do for you?”

Trev fought the impulse to comfort Shane. He was in the right, damn it. Why should he feel bad? “You can be honest with me. Completely honest this time.”

Shane drew his brows together. His gaze flickered over Trev. “I don’t know what—”

“The East Side Project.”

Shane’s nostrils flared and he stood. He turned away from Shane and looked out the window.

“The Mathis Foundation is you. It’s been you all this time. Nice one, naming it after the famous closeted musician.”

Shane clenched his fists. “How did you find out?”

“Don’t bother about that now. Though I should have known. You always did have a soft spot for that old school music. The point is, you haven’t been honest with me. You’re still hiding things.”

“I didn’t want you to know the money was from me.”

“Why?”

“Because by then I knew I was never going to get over you. I knew one day I’d come back, even though I had no right to expect you’d still be single, or that you’d want me even if you were. If there was a chance for us, I didn’t want the CIC money to be part of the equation.”

“But you were funding the center two years before you even formed CIC.”

Shane stared at him, his mouth open.

Trev pushed on. “You say you want to be a part of my life again.”

“Yes.” For the first time since he’d opened the door, a glimmer of hope brightened Shane’s eyes.

It awoke a similar spark in Trev. One he tried to ignore. “And you want me to forgive you.”

“More than anything.”

Trev forced himself to hold the line even though all he really wanted to do was hold Shane. “I want the same things you do. I want to forgive you, but I can’t do that unless you’re completely honest with me. I need to know everything that happened the night you left, and everything that happened afterwards.”

Shane's shoulders drooped. "Everything?"

"Yes. Including how you were able to make donations to the center before CIC even existed." Trev's stomach knotted. On some level, he didn't want to know.

Shane closed his eyes and let his head drop back.

Just get it over with. "Was it drugs? Is that how you made the money?"

Shane shook his head.

Okay, good. Not drugs. But there were still worse things. "Well what, then?"

Shane went to the mini bar and opened a tiny bottle of scotch. He poured some in a glass and offered it to Trev, who took it in a white knuckled grip. Then he poured himself twice as much and downed it in one gulp.

God. It had to be bad, whatever it was.

"You remember when my father left," Shane said.

"Of course."

"You remember I was looking for a roommate."

"Yeah. Nothing ever came of it. I was just as glad. I liked having you stay with us. I never saw why you needed to—"

"Well, that ad I answered turned out to be a front for something else. This older man met me and bought me dinner. And then he offered me fifty dollars to blow him."

Trev took a deep breath and let it out. So that's what it was. So many things made sense now. His heart hurt for Shane but at least this was something he understood and could help with.

"I took it." Shane's words were hard, like a fist he beat himself with. "And then I answered a bunch more of those ads. Eventually I met a guy who paid me seventy-five to let him blow me." Shane turned away and bent his head. His breath hitched.

“Shane.”

“I didn’t want you to know. I never wanted you to know.” His voice was thick.

Trev went to him. He put his arms around him and held him tight. “Shane. It’s okay.”

Shane didn’t seem to hear him. He broke from Trev. “That’s why I left. I couldn’t stand the shame. You were so innocent. So good. I was a whore. That man—”

“The seventy-five-dollar blow job one?” Trev wished he were ten inches taller and fifty pounds heavier. He’d find that asshole and make him answer for what he’d done.

“Yeah, him. He offered to set me up in New York. I accepted and instead of fifty and seventy-five dollars it was one and five thousand dollars, and it was a lot more than just blow jobs, but I did it anyway. I made money hand over fist. One thing—one thing I did was I always used condoms and I never used drugs.”

That was two things, but Trev didn’t mention it. Poor Shane.

“Since I wasn’t using, I could save my money. A client who worked on Wall Street taught me how to invest. I made some good buys and sold them at the right time, and that’s when I formed East Side and Mathis.”

“Jesus, Shane.” Trev didn’t know how to say how sorry he was, and how relieved that Shane hadn’t murdered somebody or become a pimp himself.

Shane walked to the door and opened it. He looked down at the floor. “Now you know.”

Trev went to him. He shut the door. He took Shane’s hands in his and looked up at him. “Now I know. Thank God. Finally.”

Shane stared at Trev like he had that day they first met, when Trev found him crying because his daddy had locked him out of the house again. Shane furrowed his brow. He looked down at their clasped hands and shook his head. “Thank God? I don’t understand. I told you all of it. Why are you still here?”

Trev pulled Shane close. “You can be so stupid about some things, Shane. Did you really think I’d give a fuck about something like that?”

“But—”

“No. I get that you feel shame over it. For that I’m deeply sorry and I want to help. But for myself? Honestly, I thought it was something much worse. I was afraid it might be something that would change how I feel about you.”

“It hasn’t?”

“That you were a victim of sexual predators when you were young and vulnerable? That’s something you expect me to abandon you over? Christ, Shane, I work with runaway and homeless LGBT youth. What the fuck?”

Shane stared at him a moment and then laughed. “Oh my God, you’re right. What the fuck indeed? I just—” He shook his head. “I don’t know what to say. Once again, you’ve turned my world upside down. How could I have ever put my pride at a higher price than being with you?” He wrinkled his brow and inhaled sharply. “Oh, fuck! I’m so sorry!” He fell against Trev and clung to him. “Shit! All this time, I thought it mattered.”

Trev held him back as tight as he could. “It mattered to you.”

“I should have trusted you.”

“Well yes, of course. Still, you were seventeen. For that matter, so was I. Who knows how I might have fucked it up, given half a chance.” Trev pulled Shane over to the bed, and they sat down.

Shane said, “Remember when we used to lie in bed, facing each other, and we’d talk about all the things we wanted to do?”

“Yeah. I remember that.” Trev scooted up on the bed and lay down on his side. He patted the space across from him.

Shane reclined. They lay side by side, facing each other, and it was as if the years just melted away.

“Do you know how many lives you’ve changed for the better, Shane?”

He didn't answer, so Trev told him about Vivienne, Bryan, Dean, Hampton, Elise, Samantha, Iris, Malcolm, June, and Evander. The list went on and on. Each kid with their own unique story, but all of them with two things in common: Trev and Shane. "You've done good. You've done everything you set out to do."

"So did you."

Trev nodded. "And here we are."

Shane took his hands. "Together."

Trev squeezed back. They both leaned in, and Shane pressed his lips to Trev's.

It was like coming home.

Shane cradled Trev's face in his hands. He devoured Trev's mouth as if it were made of whipped cream.

Trev's cock stiffened. He grabbed Shane's hips and pulled him in close so Shane could feel how much he was wanted. "You're home," Trev said when they broke their kiss. "We both are."

Shane nodded and dove back in for another mouthful of Trev, sliding his tongue between Trev's lips, licking and sucking. Little whimpers escaped his throat.

The needy sounds awoke Trev's own longing. He threw one leg over Shane and wrapped his arms around Shane's chest, holding him tight. "I'm never letting go of you. Never again."

Shane's breath hitched. "Don't. Keep hold of me. I don't ever want to go away again." He trembled.

Trev ran a hand up the side of Shane's face and over his head, stroking his skin and the close-cropped hair on his scalp. "Oh, Shane, what you've been through. I'm so sorry."

Shane shook his head. "I took care of myself, Trev. I get tested twice a year and I haven't had sex with anyone in three years. I'm healthy."

“I wasn’t asking that.”

“You should.”

“But I wasn’t. I need to know if there’s anything I shouldn’t do, or should do, or if you’re up for this, emotionally, I mean.”

“Do you want me?”

“God! Of course I do.” He tilted his hips. “Can’t you tell?”

“Well, I want you, too. Need you. Remember how it was, when we had a fight?”

“We always had to have sex before you could feel like we were really made up.”

Shane nodded. He took Trev’s hand in his and clasped it, raising it to his lips and kissing the knuckles. “Please, Trev.”

Trev swallowed the lump in his throat and started unbuttoning Shane’s shirt. Inch by inch he exposed Shane’s beautiful, sculpted torso. “You are so fucking beautiful. I’ve never been able to get over that. I’ve always felt out of your league.”

“Really?”

“Yeah.”

“That’s ridiculous.”

Trev pushed Shane’s shirt off his shoulders.

Shane’s chest was smooth and hairless, his nipples peaked like buds on a tree in early spring.

Trev dipped his head and ran his tongue over one of them.

“Ah! You are a handsome, sexy man, Trevor Davis.”

“I’m your man. That’s all I care about.”

Shane sucked in a breath and then whimpered again as Trev bit down gently on his tender flesh. He thrust his hips, rubbing his big, hard cock against Trev’s belly. “Want you so bad.”

Trev remembered something Shane said a moment ago. “You haven’t had sex for three years?”

“Yeah. Since I left the life.”

“Then... you haven’t been with anyone since me?”

“Uh...”

“Johns don’t count.”

“Then no.”

Maybe it wasn’t right, but Trev was glad. He unzipped Shane’s fly and drew his cock out. The warm, velvet skin caressed his palm. The weight of it, the shape, the texture—all were known to Trev, as familiar as his own.

Shane gasped. “I’m not going to last.”

“I know.” Trev slid down to suck him.

“Wait. Turn around. Here.” Shane undid Trev’s pants and pulled them down over his hips.

Trev took them off, then knelt and removed his shirt.

Shane skinned out of his pants and tossed them on the floor. They were both naked, except for their socks. “Let’s suck each other off.”

That sounded like a great idea. Trev gripped Shane’s cock at the base. It was magnificent—long, thick, and curved. He kissed the tip.

Shane gasped. He wrapped his fingers around Trev’s cock.

Oh, God. Shane’s hands. No one had ever touched Trev the way he did. His long fingers danced up and down Trev’s straining shaft with the grace and dexterity of an artist.

Trev’s cock throbbed. He wasn’t going to last either. “God, Shane.” He tilted his head and rubbed his cheek against Shane’s warm, velvety length.

Shane licked Trev from base to tip.

Trev curled his toes. Already arousal pooled in his belly, a warm fizzy feeling that spread throughout his body. He opened his mouth and sucked Shane down to the root.

“God!” Shane jerked.

Wet heat enveloped Trev’s cock as Shane took him in his mouth.

Trev swirled his tongue around the head of Shane’s cock, circling in to lap at his slit. The sweet, sharp taste of precum filled his mouth. Meanwhile, Shane’s wet suction on Trev’s cock made the pool of need in his belly simmer. Trev thrust shallowly and pressed his tongue to the cleft on the underside of Shane’s cock head.

Shane moaned. The sound made Trev’s skin tingle all over. He knew that moan. Shane was going to come soon.

Shane bobbed his head, dragging his lips up and down Trev’s shaft. Trev’s balls tightened. He was going to come soon, too. He pulled off Shane and flipped around so they were face to face again.

“What are you doing?” said Shane.

“I want to see your face when we both come.” Trev took Shane in hand and stroked, his fingers gliding over the hot, damp flesh.

Shane opened his mouth, and his eyes went wide. He grabbed Trev’s cock and pumped him.

Trev flexed his hips, thrusting into Shane’s hand.

Sweat glistened on Shane’s chest and ran in little trails down the side of his face. His eyes clouded over with desire. His breath was warm on Trev’s face.

Trev could scarcely believe this was happening. How many nights had he dreamed of this, only to wake up alone?

“Oh God, Trev, I love you so much!” Shane’s cock swelled.

“I love you too.”

Their eyes met.

Desire, heartbreak, and joy mingled together in the pit of Trev's stomach, swirling around until he couldn't tell one from the other. It all boiled over, spilling through him in a rush of warmth and sweetness.

They came together, shooting cum all over each other's chests. Shane pulled Trev close, and they clung to one another through the aftershocks.

Trev closed his eyes and breathed deep the smell of their mingled bodies. Shane shivered.

"Here. Get up for a sec." Trev pulled the covers down and got in, holding them open for Shane.

Shane climbed in and wrapped his arms around Trev. They lay entwined together, sticky with sweat and cum.

Lightness filled Trev like a helium balloon. He could float right up into the sunny blue sky with Shane, the two of them shocking airplane passengers. He giggled. Had he ever felt like this before? "I think this is the happiest moment of my life."

Shane rested his head against Trev's. "It is mine."

They must have dozed, because the next thing Trev knew the room was dark and Shane lay beside him, gazing at him with a soft smile on his lips.

"Did I fall asleep?"

"Mmm hmm."

Trev's stomach growled.

Shane grinned. "Room service?"

"Why not? Just tell them to leave it outside the door so we don't have to get dressed."

Shane ordered burgers and fries and, in a fit of guilt, fresh fruit. He threw on a robe to retrieve the food. They picnicked on the bed, feeding each other

fries and throwing grapes at each other. Trev caught one in his mouth and then spit it out at Shane. He hit him in the eye.

“Oh. You’re going to get it now,” said Shane. He picked the tray up and set it down on the coffee table, dipped a fry in ketchup and advanced on Trev.

“What are you doing?” Trev scrambled across the bed. “You’re going to get ketchup on the sheets.”

Shane knelt on the bed and grabbed Trev by one ankle. He hauled him down until Trev was under him, and then he straddled Trev’s hips.

Trev was laughing too hard to resist.

Shane pinned him down with one hand in the middle of his chest and poked Trev on the nose with the French fry, daubing him with ketchup. Then he marked Trev’s forehead, cheeks, and chin.

“Agh! What are you doing?”

“You’ll see.” Shane ate the fry, then leaned over and ran his tongue over the tip of Trev’s nose. He licked Trev’s forehead, cheeks, and chin. His warm, smooth tongue glided over Trev’s skin.

“You’re a freak, you know that?”

Shane, his face inches from Trev’s, grinned. “Takes one to know one, Spaceman.”

Trev lifted his arms and wrapped them around Shane’s neck.

Shane lay down on top of Trev. His hard-on pressed into Trev’s belly.

Trev’s pulse quickened. He spread his legs and wrapped them around Shane’s hips. Already he imagined Shane sliding inside him, fitting into place.

Shane flexed his hips, dragging his cock over Trev’s balls and perineum.

The heat and friction made Trev’s hole pulse. “You got any lube?”

“Yeah.” Shane got up and went into the bathroom. He came back with a tube of Astroglide and a box of condoms.

“A whole box?”

“Why not dream big?”

The thought of Shane buying the big box just for him warmed Trev all over. He took a condom and tore open the packet.

Shane knelt between his legs.

Trev rolled the condom down Shane’s big, beautiful shaft. He traced the vein bulging on the underside. Even through the latex, he could feel the heat.

Shane’s breath hissed between his teeth. He licked his lips. He scooted back and dropped his head down between Trev’s legs. Trev lifted his knees to accommodate him.

Shane painted Trev’s ass with his tongue, stroking and lapping at Trev’s tight hole.

It was like a warm bath to Trev’s long-neglected muscles.

“When was your last time?”

“A year ago.”

Shane pressed the flat of his tongue against Trev’s hole.

Trev quivered against him.

Shane ran the tip of his tongue around Trev’s perimeter.

Trev pulsed in invitation. Shane’s soft, full lips on Trev’s asshole made heat shoot up his body like a column of fire. “Shane!”

Shane speared Trev with his tongue. Muscle to muscle they met, and Trev melted under the onslaught. He bobbed in a sea of desire where ripples of pleasure coursed over and through him.

Shane stroked Trev’s channel with his tongue and reached for the lube. He pressed some into Trev’s hole and then coated his fingers. It was cold, but it warmed up fast. Shane slipped first one and then two fingers into Trev. He turned his hand and extended his middle finger, up, over...

A white-hot bolt of delight shot through Trev. He arched off the bed. “Oh God!”

“I knew I hadn’t forgotten.”

“That’s right.” Trev panted. “You always did know.”

Shane leaned forward and kissed Trev, his fingers still stroking deep inside.

Trev abandoned himself to Shane’s touch, his kiss. Their lips met. Their breaths mingled. Trev lifted his hips, thrusting himself onto Shane’s hand.

With a groan, Shane broke their kiss. “I have to have you.”

“Yes,” Trev said, “you do.”

Shane kissed him again and knelt back between Trev’s upraised legs. He slathered lube on his cock and more in Trev’s ass. Meeting Trev’s gaze, he lined himself up with Trev’s quivering hole and pressed in. Shane filled Trev like love should fill a home, touching everything with warmth and satisfaction.

Anchored by that love. Trev flexed, stroking Shane with his body, reveling in the feeling of that hard length deep inside him.

Shane’s breath gusted across Trev’s face, warm and sweet. He gazed into Trev’s eyes as if he didn’t dare look away for fear all this might evaporate like a dream. But it was no dream. They were here, together again.

Trev met Shane’s gaze. In those deep, dark eyes, Trev saw the boy Shane had once been and the man he’d become. And he saw himself too, then and now.

How far they’d both come.

Shane pulled back and started to move. Each thrust rolled over Trev’s prostate with majestic force. Sparks flew through Trev’s body, gathering at the base of his balls. “God. So good. Oh fuck, Shane!” He realized this was the first time they’d ever been able to be vocal together. Suddenly he wanted to open the window and yell at the top of his lungs. “It’s so good! I’ve wanted you so bad! All this time!”

“I know. Me too. You. Always you.” Shane fucked him harder, pounding Trev down into the bed with each thrust. His cock was so hard and so hot it set

Trev on fire. He wrapped his legs around Shane's hips and thrust up to meet him.

Their words were lost in a frantic tide of gasping. Something incandescent radiated from Trev's belly. He flexed his muscles, wanting to bring Shane with him.

Shane thrust up into Trev and cried out, his hips slipping from their rhythm as he pushed up and in as far as he could go. His cock swelled inside Trev as he came.

The flower in Trev's belly bloomed, and he came in a rush of joy. They held each other close.

Trev exhaled as if he'd been holding his breath since he was seventeen. It was over. That long time of being without Shane was over. Soon it would fade and take its proper place as part of the past. "Here we are. Together."

Shane smiled, and his eyes were just like they'd been when they were thirteen and had kissed for the first time. "Yeah. Finally."

The world made sense again.

THE END

Author Bio

Jessica Freely can't resist a wounded hero. As a reader and a writer, her favorite stories are of soul mates finding redemption in each other's arms. Married to the love of her life in a beautiful relationship based on mutual goofiness, Jessica also warps minds as an instructor in Seton Hill University's Writing Popular Fiction MFA program. Her dog, Ruthie, doesn't seem to care that Jessica's an award-winning and best-selling author in multiple genres. She just wants to play tug of war with Jessica's pages.

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