

LOVE Has NO Boundaries



Don't Read in the Closet Event 2013

VOLUME 8

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Love Has No Boundaries

An M/M Romance Collection

Volume 8

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 8.

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

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

Words of Caution

The stories in this collection may contain sexually explicit content and are **intended for adult readers**. They may also contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group*

strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

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

Dedication

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

Ebook Layout and Navigation

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

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

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

Enjoy.

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UNDENIABLE

By Reece McKinley

Photo Description

A black-and-white photo of two young men—standing in profile—naked and nearly identical. They appear to be in their mid to late twenties; short dark hair, prominent noses. The background is completely black, the only thing visible in the photo are the two men facing each other, nose to nose in a tight embrace.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

Our sire wanted two matching pretty boys at her side forever—that's why she turned us both into vampires. We had some really good years, the three of us. But now that she's gone, the pain of her death is tearing both our minds apart. I know he's been doing stupid things. Breaking the rules our sire taught us. Risking his life. What am I going to do? He's all I have left—just like I'm all he has, but am I enough?

Sincerely,

Kallysten

Story Info

Genre: contemporary paranormal

Tags: photographer, writer, sweet no sex, friends to lovers, hurt/comfort, vampires

Word Count: 17,610

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Acknowledgements

A huge thank you to the Goodreads M/M Romance group for putting so much time, effort, and energy into making this possible. Thanks also to my lovely Beta readers, S and J. So much love for you ladies.

UNDENIABLE

By Reece McKinley

“He’s going to get himself staked out in the sun, Jack.”

I looked up from the pile of papers I was shuffling through to see Gentry, Regina’s personal assistant, filling the doorway of my office. “What’s he done now?” I asked, my voice rough with exhaustion. The combination of lack of sleep, not having fed in a few days, and the stress of watching Liam implode was like carrying a thousand pound boulder over my head.

I was keeping it together for now, but eventually something was going to give and it was going to knock me on my ass or kill me. I wasn’t sure at this point which one I preferred more.

“He was almost seen feeding at that dive bar downtown the three of you used to go to all the time. What’s it called... McCreedy’s? McGurrey’s...”

“McDuffy’s,” I supplied.

Apparently, Liam was feeling sentimental if he’d decided to grace that little bar with his presence; we hadn’t been there in years.

“Right. Whatever. Someone was going to call the police on him. Said he was accosting some guy out behind the bar. Luckily, the bar owner intercepted and was able to get him out of there, but *shit*, Jack... If Queen Ellis gets wind of Liam flashing his fangs around she’ll come down here and stake him herself. The only reason someone hasn’t intervened now is because of Regina.”

I closed my eyes, dropping my head back to rest on my high-back leather office chair.

Liam. What the hell was I going to do about him? It was bad enough that I was the one stuck doing everything I could to keep our little ship from sinking, but now he was off trying to get himself killed in the wake of Regina’s death.

He would probably tell you that he was fine. Every time I’d seen him and asked how he was doing, that’s all I got. *Fine*.

Well, I wasn't fucking fine. I was so far from fine, I wasn't sure I would know what it would look like if it came up and bit me in the ass.

But Liam. Fucking Liam, the bane of my fucking existence, was driving me straight into the nuthouse.

I was holding on by fingertips to my sanity, gluing the broken pieces of my soul together with bubble gum and a prayer. Dealing with Regina's belongings. Following out her last wishes. Just trying to fucking make it through the darkness that lived inside my head now that my Sire, my beacon, was gone.

Five years I'd been living with her, *for* her, I didn't know any other way... and now? Now. Instead of grieving together—instead of leaning on each other, the two people who knew and loved her best—I was one small tap from shattering and Liam was out attempting to break every conceivable Vampire law he could think of.

Almost exposing himself to the public. Check.

Moving into another Vampire's territory without permission. Check.

Engaging other paranormals. Check.

That last one had been a particularly fun one. I'd had to go out to some abandoned warehouse in the middle of bumfuck nowhere and pull his ass outta the ring in the middle of fighting a Were. Apparently, Were's had their own version of "Fight Club". They'd go out there, change and then fight until they were too bloody to move. Incredibly stupid? Hell, yes. And Liam had been right in the middle of all of it.

In the two months since we'd buried Regina, Liam had been spiraling further and further out of control. The Liam prior to Regina's death—straight-laced and ever proper—was nowhere to be found.

Now I was fielding calls from people asking me to come and fetch the hot mess he'd become.

"I'll handle it Gentry. Thank you for letting me know." I staggered to my feet and pulled my coat from the back of my chair, slipping it on. "I'll bring him home and do my best to rein him in."

As I was walking past, Gentry stopped me with a hand on my shoulder. “You don’t have to do this alone. I know everyone always brings it to you because you shared a Sire, but you should let me help you too. I wasn’t just Regina’s assistant you know. I was her friend... *your* friend.”

I recoiled at the note of longing in his voice. While I appreciated the sentiment, I didn’t want to deal with anyone’s unrequited love. If it had been uncomfortable while Regina was here, keeping him at bay; it was downright disturbing now that he made no attempt to be subtle about wanting me.

It wasn’t that Gentry was a bad guy. Quite to the contrary, he was a very good guy, just not the good guy for me. Despite all the subtle ways I’d tried to rebuff the petite blond, it never seemed to stick.

I moved past him to get out of the forced proximity and turned to face him. “I appreciate what you are offering Gentry, but I just... I can’t. Liam’s... he’s dealing with this just like we all are. He just... we just need some time.”

It was hard to miss the look of disappointment on his face. My first instinct was to try to soothe the sting of my continued rejection; I hated hurting him when he’d always been close to Regina. I knew though that giving into that instinct would be a mistake. I didn’t want to lead him on, knowing I had no intention of ever following through on anything other than friendship.

Without saying another word, I turned and headed for the garage to get Liam’s car. I’d be damned if I got blood or God knows what else on my leather seats.

Thirty minutes later I pulled up outside McDuffy’s and shut the car off. I hadn’t been here in close to two years, but it was as if I’d never stopped coming. I had intimate knowledge of every nook and cranny. Of each scar that graced the bar top. The way the hinges on the door squeaked with every arrival and departure. The fact that the second I walked through that door Lew would smile at me, showing off a row of crooked teeth and raise a hand in greeting before fixing me a tall glass of Guinness.

I gave the outside one last look and smiled, locking up the Mercedes and pocketing the keys. It was as if I’d never left.

The faint sounds of music and singing got louder with every step toward the entrance. I picked up my pace wanting to get this over with as soon as possible. No telling what kind of shit Liam was getting up to inside, and at a human bar no less.

The sight that greeted me upon entering was one I could say with absolute certainty would be branded across the back of my eyelids until I died. William Andrew Levensworth III—Liam—was crowding around the microphone with the local band and singing Bon Jovi *at the top of his lungs*. Who would have thought he would even know the words to “Wanted Dead or Alive?”

The jacket of his two-thousand-dollar Tom Ford suit lay crumpled at his feet. Half of his white dress shirt had come untucked from his pants and his shirtsleeves were rolled to the elbows. His short dark hair, that he normally took such care with, was standing on end, like he’d been running his fingers through it all evening.

His eyes were scrunched shut, one hand raised in the air while he sang like he was Cher doing her farewell tour.

And shit. He could actually *sing*!

Who knew such a tight-ass could unwind enough to let loose and sing like that in this packed bar. I shoved and wound my way through the crowd over to where, sure enough, Lew was standing there holding my beer.

“You’ve missed a great show!” he yelled over the music, his barrel chest shaking in laughter. “He climbed up there about an hour ago after I pulled him in from out back, and the band’s adopted him I think.”

“How much has he had to drink?” I yelled back.

“It’s not ‘how much’ that you should be worried about, it’s what he’s planning on drinking. That, my boy, is the question.” I could see the amusement shining in his eyes, a twinkle there as he gazed up at Liam and then back down to me.

“All right,” I drawled, playing the old man’s little game. “What is he planning on drinking?”

Without saying another word, he shot a finger at a man standing in front of the stage just off to the left. He was good looking; big, muscular, long shaggy

blond hair... and a fucking Were tattoo on his neck. What an asshole! Who the hell tattooed themselves with their pack symbol, and on their neck no less.

Way to be inconspicuous!

That's when it hit me why Lew had called. It wasn't because of the attention Liam was drawing to himself, hell, at this point he could be just another drunk guy as far as anyone else was concerned. And it hadn't just been because he'd had to pull Liam from out back for almost getting caught feeding. No, it had been the Were he was eye-fucking from the stage. If he was planning on going home with a Were, which by the way was taboo enough, he was sure as shit planning on taking a sip while he was there. I would bet our house on it.

I looked over at Lew, sweat making his bald head shine, still smiling at me. "Clean up duty aisle nine. You better bring a mop, boy. This is sure to get messy," Lew joked.

"Har, har, old man. You think this is funny?" I asked, the beginnings of anger stirring. Not at Lew, oh no, this was all about Liam. Maybe I'd been going about this the wrong way; letting Liam work his grief out how he wanted. I'd never had much family to speak of and was not an expert at dealing with emotion. I did know, though, that what Liam was doing to himself wasn't going to end well. Whether Liam liked it or not, he needed to pull his head out from where he had it wedged in his ass.

Lew waved me in close so we didn't have to yell quite so much. "Jack. You showed up here six years ago, a little runt of a thing. I gave you a job. I looked after ya. Then Regina and Liam showed up and they were your family. Regina, she was real special. She loved you a lot, anyone could see that. It's the only reason I didn't try to keep you away from her when you decided to..." he waved his hand at me, glancing around to make sure no one was listening.

I appreciated his discretion. He'd been a nosy old bastard back then, hovering over me as if I was his baby chick. He knew there was something different about Regina and Liam, kept on top of me to stay away from them. Regina, knowing Lew was the closest thing I had to family, had eventually explained what she and Liam were and what I was going to be. We'd come

here a lot after I'd first been turned. I think I was trying to hang on to my old life a bit back then, but eventually as time went on, we'd come less and less.

"Now, I know you boys are messed up with her gone. But he's out of control, Jack. You need to get a handle on him before someone else does. I don't know much about your... situation, but I do know from what Regina told me that you aren't supposed to be waving your freak flag like he is." He waved his finger to and fro in an imitation of said flag, and I couldn't help the burst of laughter.

"Lew, you always have such a way with words." I rolled my eyes as I watched Liam do a little shimmy and start rocking his hips and shaking his ass, while Shaggy Doo stood in rapt attention next to the stage.

"Lord save me from this idiot, Lew!" I reached over the bar and drew him into a tight hug. "I'll try not to be such a stranger. Thanks for calling Gentry to let me know."

Lew nodded before waving me off and getting back to his customers.

I took a second to think over my options before finally settling on one. Quickly, I wandered around the back and along the far wall until I was standing next to the Were.

I swept my hand over the small of his back and down his ass, giving it a firm squeeze.

He turned to look at me, giving me a thorough once over. He was surprised at first; looking back and forth between Liam and I. Gauging the similarities. Trying to determine if we were brothers... twins? We both had green eyes; mine a shade or two darker. Same high cheekbones and a full mouth. We were about the same height; I was an inch shorter, though it was hard to tell unless we were standing directly next to each other.

That's where the similarities ended though; I was the grungier version of Liam. Where Liam wore three-piece suits, I wore threadbare jeans and concert T-shirts. Liam had a three-hundred-dollar haircut. I hadn't had my hair cut in months. It was a much shaggier version of Liam's—starting to grow over my ears and brush the collar of my T-shirt.

Still, I could tell he liked what he saw. He flashed me a sensual smile before sidling closer. "Hey," he said in full flirt mode.

“I was watching you from back there and I thought I’d come say hi. So hi.” I shot a quick look at the stage before I turned us so that my back was to Liam. I needed to get rid of the wolf so I could deal with Liam before he wrapped up his singing debut.

I dipped my head to run the tip of my nose slowly down his neck, to the soft spot where shoulder and throat met. I gave it a quick lick, trying to conceal how repulsed I actually was by the act. It wasn’t that he wasn’t attractive, he absolutely was a looker—he smelled wrong to me though. Blown pupils. Rapid, shallow breaths. He was obviously high on something.

A groan rumbled through his chest at the contact. Relieved that he was going to make this so easy for me, I traced the line back up his neck until my lips were just brushing his ear. “You wanna get outta here?”

He gave a quick nod and I grabbed his hand, pulling him toward the back exit that emptied into the alley behind the bar.

The door hadn’t even slammed closed before he was on me, straining to reach my mouth, his hands reaching for the button of my jeans. Knowing I needed to handle this quickly, I grabbed the arm he had wrapped around my waist, used it to spin him around and pushed him face first into the brick wall of the bar.

“Mmmmm, I love this game,” he said with a throaty purr.

“Yeah? Put your fucking hands on the wall and don’t move them,” I demanded.

“You want a taste, Vampire?” He tilted his head to the side and offered me his neck. I wasn’t surprised that he knew what I was—once you knew what to look for, spotting paranormals was fairly easy.

I couldn’t stop the shudder that tore through me at the thought of tasting shifter blood, despite the fact that I wasn’t attracted to the Were. This Were was offering to let me tap a vein. I hated that I was tempted—just another thing I was going to hammer Liam about.

Were blood was an aphrodisiac for Vampires, inciting a lust that was impossible to contain. You lost yourself completely to the high of it, simply fighting for your next orgasm. I had never had Were blood as it was outlawed

by our Queen, and I tried to do my best to keep my nose clean. I did not ever want to shame Regina or bring trouble to her door. As my Sire, she had been just as answerable for our mistakes as we were.

I took a cursory look around, making sure we were alone before I crowded in against him. “Oh, there are so many things I want to do to you.” I rubbed my left hand down over his very obvious erection, stroking and squeezing while my right hand snaked up his hip and then up over his opposite shoulder, holding him tight against me. “You ready for me, little shifter?” I whispered in his ear.

He nodded jerkily, his hips thrusting into my hand. “Good.” And with that, I slid my arm up and pulled it taut across his neck, cutting off his air.

He immediately struggled, his hands shifting into claws, scratching up my forearm before he tried to go for my face. It was too bad for him that I was so much taller. He may have been more muscled, but I had the leverage.

He continued to resist for another few moments before he blacked out—sagging in my arms.

I saw a couple of turned-over crates the bar used for empties near the back door. I dropped his limp body down over them, propping him against the wall. I checked to make sure he still had a steady pulse and headed back inside.

The band was finishing up their set so I parked myself in Shaggy Doo’s old spot. Liam spotted me immediately, rolling his eyes in annoyance. We’d been through this mothering routine enough over the last two months that he knew what was coming. I crooked my finger and pointed to the spot just in front of me.

He ignored me.

Without hesitation, I jumped up on stage.

In my Rolling Stones T-shirt, black canvas jacket, jeans and black Converse, I looked like just another member of the band. I smiled at the guy on the other side of Liam, before hooking a finger into Liam’s trouser belt loops. I pulled him in tight to my body; keeping him close.

I sang along until the song finally ended, before waving to the band and pull-dragging a very drunk Liam from the stage. If he’d been completely sober

I wouldn't have been able to manage it quite so easily, but his coordination was for shit and I was insistent. I didn't stop until his ass was firmly planted in the passenger seat of the car.

“Hey, asshole.” I started congenially. “So, *wow*. Good times huh? Just singing with the band. Who knew you could even sing. I mean wow. All these years together and I had to learn about it with everyone else at McDuffy's? I'm hurt, Liam.” I feigned disappointment.

Liam reclined his seat back until he was almost flat, his eyes closed, “Oh fuck off. I know Lew called you. I was fine.”

“Well, see that's not what I heard. And it wasn't Lew who told me, it was Gentry.”

Liam cracked open an eye to look at me, disgust written clearly across his face. “Gentry? What does that fuckwit know about it? What were you two doing together anyway?”

I couldn't help but smile at Liam's description. It wasn't exactly a secret that there was no love lost between those two. While Liam and I had a somewhat strained relationship before Regina had passed, Gentry and Liam couldn't even occupy the same space without trading insults.

I couldn't pass up the chance to needle him though, call it a small bit of payback for having to pander to all his craziness. “Picture this, I'm at home, letting off some steam, balls-deep in Gentry's ass—”

Liam was on top of me before I could finish. Fangs bared. Snarling at me. A hand wrapped tight around my neck, pinning me to my seat. He took a long slow trip from my ear to my chest, sniffing as he went.

There was something heady about being the sole focus of Liam's attention. His green eyes locked with mine as he traveled down my body, nose and lips just brushing my skin and front of my T-shirt as he went; the beginnings of heat doing a slow crawl through my blood. All of that frustration, the anger, the adrenaline—all that emotion—was morphing into something else entirely.

Then as abruptly as it had started, it stopped. He was back in my face, glaring at me. “Fucking liar.”

“Fine, so I was working in the office and he stopped by—doesn't change the fact that Lew had to step in and save your ass.”

Liam jerked away and moved back over into his seat, still glaring at me in disgust. “I don’t know why you let him linger around the house. His job is done. He needs to move on.”

“Speaking of lingering around the house, why don’t you give that a try? If you’re there, Gentry will be sure to make himself scarce.” I dangled that carrot in front of him, trying a different tactic since apparently threatening him with pain of death had not been working.

“I don’t like him being in our house, Jack.”

“Then stick around, Liam.” I got a noncommittal noise in response. Fine. “So, should we talk about the fact that you were going to get fangy with the wolf in there?”

His head popped up from the seat to look at me, “Fangy? Really? How old are you?”

“Old enough to know better, but too young to be dealing with your shit.” I rolled my eyes. “Seriously, how much longer are we going to do this Liam? I’m exhausted. I’m hungry. I’m riding a fine fucking line of sanity myself. For fuck’s sake! I can only handle so much more and then I’m heading straight over the edge and if I go because you have no impulse control, I will drag your nappy ass with me,” I finished in a huff, dropping my head to the steering wheel—all out of steam.

“My ass is not nappy!” he said indignantly.

“That’s all you got out of what I just said?” I reached over and punched him in the arm. “You are *such* a dick!”

“Yeah, yeah.” Liam waved me off.

I cranked the car, waiting to see if he was going to offer any other explanation, instead a moment later I got snoring.

Figured.

“You look like shit.”

“Well that’s handy because I feel like shit.” I cracked open an eye to stare up at Liam looming over the sofa where I’d fallen asleep last night after we’d

come home from McDuffy's. I'd briefly debated whether or not I felt like going out to hunt, and had decided it was entirely too much effort. Instead, I'd satisfied myself by curling up with the comforter off Regina's bed and watching reruns of *The Walking Dead*.

The comforter still held faint traces of her perfume and when I was having a particularly hard day, I'd curl up with it and close my eyes and pretend she was there. *The Walking Dead* had been a favorite show of ours. Liam couldn't stand it, and had made endless fun of us for making such an event of every new episode, but in the last few weeks, I'd caught him pausing in the door to the media room while I was watching. Not saying a word. Just standing there watching.

"When's the last time you fed?" He poked at the hollows of my cheeks before sweeping my T-shirt up and staring pointedly at my protruding rib cage.

"Stop." I swatted his hand away before smoothing my shirt down. "I haven't much felt like it. I've been a little busy. Between taking care of the house, work and oh, I don't know—bailing your ass out of suicidal situation after suicidal situation—"

"I'm not suicidal," he said evenly.

"Oh really? Should we run through the list of shit you've been up to in the last two months? Because, believe me there is a list!"

Liam leapt over the back of the sofa and landed in a crouch over my lap, his arms bracketing my head, a high flush on his cheeks. "I'm doing the best I can, Jack. I'm sorry I'm not handling this in a way that is convenient for you, but it's not up to you to clean up my messes. No one even asked you to, okay? I'm a big boy. I've been taking care of myself a hell of a lot longer than you've even been alive. So just stop."

"Well, you may have been around longer, but you're wrong about the rest of it," I replied in a clipped tone, unbelievably pissed at his little tirade. I think I preferred a drunken Liam to this one. He was so much easier to talk to without the whole holier-than-thou attitude. There was only so much shit I was willing to put up with from him.

He blinked down at me in confusion, “About what exactly?”

“Regina asked me to look after you.”

Liam looked skeptical. “When?”

“Do you remember when you were gone last Christmas for two weeks to photograph that little South African village?”

Liam nodded.

“While you were gone, Regina brought out a bunch of photo albums to show me pictures from Christmases past, some of your old work, even a picture of you in your confederate uniform—she said it was about a year before she’d met and turned you.” Liam jerked back, gaze shuttered. I paused at his reaction, not sure if I should continue. As mad as I was at him and wanted to hurt him, I didn’t want to really *hurt*, hurt him.

Liam swung his leg around so he was now kneeling next to the sofa, legs tucked underneath him. He took a moment to settle before gesturing for me to continue.

“I asked her about what you were like then.”

Liam looked up at me from underneath dark sooty lashes, a sad smile on his face. “What did she say?”

I sat up and scooted around so I was facing him. “She said you had confidence in spades, a swagger to your walk and never met a challenge that you didn’t like.” I smiled down, remembering the expression on her face as she had talked so animatedly about the Liam from one hundred and fifty years ago. “She said you were honorable above reproach, a great soldier and were loyal to your friends.”

Liam shot to his feet, moving around to the other side of the coffee table, putting space between us. He refused to look at me, just ran a rough hand through his hair before he started pacing.

“Di-did you want me to continue?” I stuttered out. Liam gave me a jerky nod.

“She said you were like a lake, all smooth on the surface, but with so much going on underneath. That you had nightmares and never asked for help. That

you always tried to bear everything alone.” I paused, steadying myself as emotion crept into my voice. Despite all our differences, despite Liam’s best effort to keep us at arm’s length, I still cared deeply for him and I hated seeing the pained expression on his face. “She said you deserved more love than she alone was capable of giving to you. She wanted everything for you, Liam. She made me promise to help her love you,” I finished softly.

“She had no right to ask that of you, Jack,” Liam said in a tight voice.

I stood and walked around the coffee table until we were face to face. “She didn’t have to ask me. You are my family, Liam. The only family I have left. I already loved you.” Liam jerked back like I’d hit him. Staring at me, stunned. “If I didn’t, I would have thrown your ass out a few weeks ago,” I joked, in an attempt to wipe that look off his face.

Liam didn’t laugh, just stood there silently staring at me for a few moments. Then, before I knew what was happening, he grabbed me by the hand and dragged me back to the couch.

“Sit,” he ordered.

I sat down, a little wary at the now blank expression on his face. I’d just dumped a lot of emotion in his lap, and I wasn’t sure how he was going to handle it. As a rule, Liam played everything close to the vest. I could count on one hand the number of times I’d heard him tell Regina that he loved her, and it had always been in an abbreviated “love ya” sort of way. And obviously, we’d never had that sort of relationship. The conversation twenty seconds ago was the most intimate conversation we’d ever had in the five years we’d shared this house, and it had been entirely on my side.

I watched in disbelief as he tore open his wrist and held it out to me, blood welling and then dripping slowly down his arm.

“What are you doing?!”

“Drink.”

“Uhh, what?”

“Drink.” There was no indication on his face or in his voice as to what he was feeling. He just waved his bloody wrist at me. “You haven’t fed, Jack. You need to drink.”

“From you?” I was embarrassed at the way my voice pitched at the end, but excuse the fuck out of me for being completely confused.

“Let me do this for you Jack. Okay?”

I studied his face, searching for some sort of clue as to what he was feeling. When it was apparent I wasn't going to find anything there, I slowly reached forward and pulled his wrist in close, maintaining eye contact the entire time.

I shuddered at the scent of blood, licking my lips in preparation. I quirked my eyebrow in question, giving him one last chance to change his mind.

When he didn't draw back, I took his wrist to my mouth. I moaned as the first taste of fresh blood hit my tongue. I couldn't help myself. It had been so long and I was so thirsty. I lapped at the delicate droplets of blood at first, savoring the taste and the feeling of euphoria I got every time I fed. Then, when I couldn't take it any longer, I moved to taking long slow pulls and then stronger and faster, digging my fangs in deeper.

Liam was an older Vampire, his blood far richer than what I was used to in feeding from humans, and the more I drank the more I had to have. I wanted to gorge myself on it. I cradled his wrist with two hands, before turning away from his probing stare, losing myself to feeding.

Against my will I felt my body flush with arousal. Drinking was always a somewhat erotic experience, no getting around it, but there was something powerful happening here and I wasn't sure exactly what it was—I just knew I didn't want it to end. I'd never felt this flushed with power or arousal before.

Before I was ready, Liam was calling to me, “Jack.” He gently tugged at his wrist. When that didn't work he tried a more firm approach. “Jack. You need to stop.”

I shook my head frantically, still drinking deeply from his wrist.

The blood was delicious. The taste, the smell, the heat coursing through my veins.

“Jack, you are going to take too much. You are going to hurt me. Do you understand?”

“What's going on in here?” The shock of hearing Gentry's voice succeeded where Liam's stern voice had failed, it was like a bucket of ice water to my face. I retracted my fangs immediately.

I felt my face flush in embarrassment at being caught like this. My lips still shiny with blood. My clothes wrinkled from having slept in them. My hair in disarray.

I turned away from the door in an attempt at privacy so I could wipe my mouth and run a hand through my hair.

Liam must have sensed some of what I was feeling, because he immediately stood and stepped in front of me, blocking Gentry's view. "What in the hell are you doing here? You just walk into our house now?" Liam growled. "You didn't even do that when Regina was here and you were her assistant. The next time you walk into my home like you have the right, I'll plant my very sizable foot in your ass."

"Oh, who do you think you're talking to, Liam? I'm not here for you! As a matter of fact, I came back to check on Jack since he had to go rescue you, yet again. Why don't you try not to be such a burden to the people in your life!"

From my spot behind Liam, I could see the almost imperceptible flinch at Gentry's last barb. It spoke to just how long Gentry had been in our lives that he knew just where to hit Liam to wound him.

As much as I wanted to hide, I forced myself to stand and face Gentry. "Okay, that's enough," I said firmly. "Gentry, I appreciate you checking on me." Liam turned to stare at me with what I'd almost think was hurt if he had been anyone else. "But I'm fine."

"Why were you feeding from him?" Gentry's face looked like "him" could have been interchangeable with "horse shit".

"I—" Liam immediately cut me off with a hand to my arm.

"That's none of your fucking business," Liam fired back.

I rolled my eyes. Clearly, this was going nowhere fast. "Gentry, why don't I walk you out?" I started to take a step around the couch, but Liam still had a hold of my arm.

"You sit and rest, while the blood kicks in. I'll see the little parasite out."

"If you aren't feeling well Jack, I can—" Gentry began to offer.

"Oh, hell no. You aren't staying. And as soon as you leave, I'm calling to

have the locks changed because there are one too many people who have access to this house.”

The ever-dignified Gentry gave Liam the one finger salute before turning his focus back to me. “I’ll call you later Jack.” And then he was gone, just as quickly as he’d come.

It wasn’t until we both heard the click of the front door that we moved. I slumped down onto the sofa. Liam still stared at the spot in the door where Gentry had been, a look of disgust on his face.

“I swear, he’s worse than a case of hemorrhoids. Such a pain in my ass!!”

I snorted at the image of Gentry as a butt irritant. While I whole-heartedly agreed, I felt badly speaking ill of him when he’d always been perfectly nice to me.

Overeager, perhaps... but nice.

“So about—” I was cut off by a knock at the door.

“If that’s the little barnacle, I’ll—”

“Why don’t I get it?” I jumped up to get the door, not waiting for Liam. There was another series of knocks on the door.

“Coming,” I called, my socked feet sliding on the marble floor of the foyer as I hurried. I winced as I caught a look at myself in the mirror hanging in the hall. I looked like road kill.

I pulled the door open just as a series of knocks started again.

“You ever seen *Hunt for the Red October*? One ping will do. I heard you the first ti—” I snapped my mouth shut at the two gigantic Vampires standing on the porch.

This probably wasn’t good.

“Uhh, can I help you?”

Gigantor on the left stepped forward, “We are here for William Levensworth.”

“Pardon?” I wasn’t sure I heard correctly.

“We need to deliver a message. He’s been summoned. Queen Ellis would like an audience with him. We’ve had reports that he’s been in violation of several Vampire laws.”

“In Chicago?” They were here for Liam. The Queen wanted him. Maybe wanted him dead. The Queen summoning Liam had always been a possibility. Still, I couldn’t help the mixed feelings of surprise and dread. This was the absolute worst-case scenario.

“She’s decided to come down and pay her respects to Regina, and will see him directly after.”

“When is this supposed to happen?”

My mind reeled at the case that needed to be built. Vampires weren’t given lawyers in these disputes. You were simply called in front of the Queen. The Vampire in question was responsible for gathering any information, witnesses, et cetera, that were needed. Then the Queen made her decision and her Guard carried out the sentencing. Wham, bam, please don’t end in Liam being staked out in the sun.

“One week from today,” the Guard answered. “We’ll send over the particulars a few days before.” Without another word they turned in unison and stalked away.

Shit! That wasn’t much time, but I could work with it. I already had a couple of ideas of what we needed.

“You gonna stand in the open door all night? Who was that?” Liam’s voice behind me made me jump.

I closed the door and turned to face him. In an uncharacteristic choice, he was dressed in jeans, a white pull over shirt and bare feet. I smiled at the picture he made standing there. Even casual was still dressy with Liam.

“So, the good news is that wasn’t Gentry. The bad news is that Queen Ellis will be here a week from today to question you about several accusations she’s received regarding your recent behavior.” I’d briefly entertained the idea of trying to soften the news, but there really isn’t any way to soften the news that you may only have a week to live.

I waited for a reaction. Anything really. An eye twitch, gnashing of teeth, clenched fists... uncontrollable sobbing. The last one was highly unlikely as

Liam wasn't a crier, but I'd really been expecting something. What I got was a quick nod of his head in acceptance before, he turned and walked upstairs.

Shit.

Silence.

That's all I had been getting from Liam for the last two days. It had become a little more than obvious that he was going to make no effort whatsoever to try to defend himself. As far as he was concerned, he'd bent, and in some cases broken, several Vampire laws—knowingly. Maybe he thought it was right that he be held accountable.

“So you're just going to roll over and take it?” I couldn't believe what I was hearing from him. It was one of the rare occasions we happened to be home at the same time and were eating dinner together. “Liam, you were—are—grief-stricken. Obviously, Regina's passing hasn't been easy for you. It hasn't been easy for anyone. Queen Ellis is reasonable. Just tell her the truth,” I pleaded.

“She knows the truth, Jack.” He didn't even look up from cutting his very rare steak.

“How do you even know that? You don't know what she's been told. You don't know if things have been skewed or someone lied. We need to prepare, Liam. I'm begging you. Please.” I reached across the table for his hand.

The second my fingers brushed the tips of his, his head shot up and he pulled his hand into his lap. “Don't, Jack.”

“I keep telling you and you don't seem to hear me. I need you, Liam.” My stare was hard and direct. I wanted him to see that I was earnest; that I had an emotional stake in what happened to him. When it had been the three of us, our lives had revolved around Regina—like the Earth revolved around the Sun. That constant. That critical. Now our Sun was gone, and without that huge burning presence holding all my attention, I could look around. I could see Liam, and not just who he had been as a part of the Regina-Liam dynamic.

Had I cared for Liam when it had been the three of us? Absolutely. Had I loved him? Of course. Now though—now there was some spark that I hadn't

seen before. And despite the fact that Liam kept a wall between us, it didn't stop me from seeing the kind of man he was—loyal, self-sacrificing, arrogant but in the best possible way.

Losing Regina was the hardest thing I'd ever had to deal with, but now, losing Liam—it was more than I knew I could bear. When I'd been human, I'd been really good at being alone. Then Regina and Liam had come along and changed all that for me. Being alone now would be torturous after living and loving them these past five years. And this is what Liam was sentencing me to.

I didn't care if it was pity that finally brought Liam back from the brink. I didn't care if I had to use emotional blackmail. I was willing to do whatever I had to do to save Liam.

I just didn't know how to make him see that. “Does that mean anything to you?” I asked in a whisper.

“You have no idea what that means to me.” And with that he got up from the table and left the room, his food untouched.

I threw myself back in my chair with a sigh, rubbing at my tired eyes. I'd thought after the whole feeding thing that maybe we were over being cordial roommates, but he was back to icing me out. I hated how alone I felt right then. After Regina's death, I'd thought Liam would eventually recover and we'd move on.

After Liam feeding me, I'd thought maybe we'd not just recover and move on, but that we could move on *together*. Like maybe Regina's death wasn't in vain. Here we were again though, right back to Liam keeping his distance.

As I saw it, I only really had two choices; wait and see what happened with the Queen, or fight for Liam.

I stared at the empty chair across the table. If Liam wasn't going to fight for himself—then it was left to me.

I picked up the phone.

“Lew? I need your help.”

I had two days until our meeting with the Queen and I'd been busier than a one-legged man in an ass kicking contest. My problems were twofold. First, Liam was even more of a recluse than I had originally suspected. He had plenty of acquaintances; plenty of people who he saw on the wine and cheese circuit, but no one who really spent time with him outside of those functions. For someone so at ease with the whole social scene, he had surprisingly little to do with anyone outside of it.

Second, the thought of facing the Vampire Queen made people a little twitchy. I had contacted some of the regulars from the club we frequented—nothing. Past and current customers of Liam's—nothing. Old Vampire friends from before I'd been Sired—nothing. I knew that last one had been a stretch. They didn't know me and were instantly distrustful of some newly-turned Vampire calling on them. The only way I ever even made it in to speak with them was mentioning that Regina was my Sire, and that only got me into the entryway. As soon as I brought up Queen Ellis, I was promptly shown the door.

I was rapidly reaching the point of desperation.

Liam had been making himself scarce since our last dinner. I had no idea where he was going or what he was doing, but I knew he came home every morning based on the empty coffee cup in the dishwasher.

I sifted through the mountainous stack of books on my desk, looking for something I'd missed. I had dug through Regina's library looking for any books on Vampire law; pulled all of them and scoured through them. I'd learned very little from them. It wasn't because they were ambiguous or difficult to read, but because the law was written so exactly that there wasn't any room for interpretation.

You expose yourself to humans—execution.

It was that cut and dry.

The only thing Liam had going for him was that he'd been close to outing himself but not exactly caught... unless you counted Lew. And Lew had known about us prior to Liam's unraveling so I wasn't sure where that left Liam. The fact that Lew knew what we were was due to Regina—not Liam.

The issue with the Werewolves' cage-fight had been resolved and to be honest, I couldn't see the Weres contacting the Queen with their grievances. No one wanted to mix species.

Moving into another Vampire's territory to feed was a serious offense, but that too had been resolved by me when it had happened. Once I'd explained about our Sire dying recently, he'd grudgingly understood and simply told us not to come back again without permission.

I still had no idea who had spoken with the Queen, and I wasn't sure that it mattered at this point because the proverbial cat was already out of the bag.

The shrill ring of my cellphone broke the quiet of the study. I looked down where it was lying on the desk and saw it was Lew.

"Hey, you have good news for me?"

"Nothing yet, but I'm still looking."

Tension coiled tightly inside me. Another dead end. Perfect.

"I just wanted to call and give you an update," he finished.

I pulled roughly at my hair in frustration. "Thanks anyway, Lew."

"Don't give up kid. You'll figure something out."

I grunted in response. I didn't want platitudes; I wanted a solution to my problem.

"Hey," a voice came from behind me. I spun my chair around to see Liam dressed in a black pin-striped three-piece suit. "What is all this shit?" he asked.

"Hey, Lew? I'll call you back." I disconnected the call and dropped my phone back on the desk.

"Well," I drawled, "I'm trying to find something usable in all this mess."

"For what?"

It was a toss-up what I wanted to do more; punch him in the face or hug him. "I'm trying to find something in these old books of Regina's to try and help us on Saturday."

His face twisted with a look close to pain before it was gone again, "Why?"

“*Why? Whyyyyyyy?*” Decision made. I was going to punch him in the face for being such a dumbass. “Are you fucking kidding me, Liam?”

He crossed his arms in a defensive gesture and gave me a hard stare. “There is no point in this, Jack.”

“Fuck you, Liam! Fuck, fuck, fuckfuck, fuck you!” I jumped out of my chair and stormed out of the office, grabbing my phone and keys as I went. I needed to get out of the house and take a break from all of this.

He made me insane. Totally. Effortlessly. Insane.

“Jack. Jack, wait.” I could hear him calling after me, but I didn’t stop.

If I stopped I doubted I’d be able to start again. In the months since Regina’s death I’d learned that the key to surviving was to just keep moving forward. I’d become an expert at keeping myself busy.

I pulled out of the driveway on autopilot. I wasn’t sure where I was going, but I needed to be away from the house for a while.

For the second time in a week I was walking into McDuffy’s. It was Wednesday night, so there weren’t many cars in the parking lot and the blaring music was missing from last Friday.

I pulled open the squeaky front door and waved when Lew saw me. Dropping into an empty bar stool, I took a long drink from the Guinness Lew slid in front of me.

“It’s feast or famine with you boys,” Lew teased. “I don’t see you for years and now you’re back again already. We need to work on your consistency.”

I gave Lew a half-hearted smile. “What can I say? I like to keep you guessing, old man.”

“So, we going to dance around that bug up your ass all night or you wanna talk about it?” Lew leaned forward, resting his forearms on the bar—settling in for the come-to-Jesus that I was due.

“No luck finding Shaggy Doo huh?”

“In the last hour since I talked you? No.”

I knew I wasn't fooling Lew, but he was patient—just waiting on me to start.

“He isn't going to fight, Lew.” I said simply. It was the thing that kept running through my mind; like the ticker tape on the news channel.

“So?” Lew stood up, crossing his arms across his chest.

“So? So, what? He's probably going to die, Lew! How dare he just give up and leave me here alone.”

“Ahhh, so this isn't about him. This is about you.”

“What? No. *No*. Well, yes, but no—”

“You ever think that all his running around isn't about working things out, but about trying to find an end to it?”

“But why?” I cried out. “I know better than anyone how much he loved Regina, but killing himself isn't going to bring her back.” I shoved my empty glass away. “Besides, he still has me. I know it's hard and that it hurts, but he has *me*. I'm not nothing, damn it!”

“No, no you aren't,” he said in that straightforward way he had.

“So what do I do?” I asked, pleading for direction.

“You've got to make him see that living is the better choice—that he has something to live for.”

“What if I can't?” I whispered, scared to death of failing Liam. Scared of having to start over. Scared that the best parts of my life were already behind me and I was staring down the barrel of an eternity dealing with that.

“You will,” he answered with a confidence that I knew was completely undeserved. “But first, you've got to get past this whole death-by-Queen thing,” Lew teased.

“Lew!” I couldn't believe him.

“Too soon?” he asked, smiling.

“Uhm, yeah!”

“Fine, so here's what you do,” he said, leaning forward as if to whisper some big secret. I leaned forward until we were practically nose to nose. “Whatever the fuck you have to do.”

I sat back on the bar stool, just staring at him. He gave me a slow nod as if to say, *you can do it*.

I dug in my back pocket for cash before sliding a twenty across the bar, amid protests from Lew.

I reached over and grabbed him—pulling him into a hard hug. We said our goodbyes and I left with my resolve renewed.

Lew was right. I'd been complicating something that was at its base, simple. I would do whatever I had to do to hold on to Liam.

“Good evening. My name is Jack Miller, and I'd like to request an audience with Alpha Merrick, please.” The tall Were at the gate eyed me with distrust, a sneer on his lips. I didn't blame him. It was highly unusual—read: never happened—for a Vampire to be visiting a Werewolf pack. Still, proprieties had to be observed. He couldn't just throw me out on my ass. It would reflect poorly on his pack.

He radioed in.

I'd gone home after my talk with Lew, changed my clothes and grabbed the Were Alpha's address I'd found yesterday. I stood patiently in front of him, trying to look as non-threatening as possible. I'd actually dressed up for the occasion. I'd traded in my usual slim leg jeans for a pair of khaki pants that I'd had to borrow from Liam's closet. I'd topped it with a white button-down shirt, but in a nod to my more casual style, I'd rolled the sleeves to mid forearm.

I wanted to look presentable, but not formal. This was my compromise.

“He says he'll see you.” The Were gestured with a nod to a smaller female who had been tucked inside the small building located just outside the front gate. “Serena will escort you in.” I nodded my thanks before turning to greet the dark-haired woman.

“I'm Jack, it's nice to meet you.” I offered her my hand, which she stared at and then ignored.

“Don't care,” she replied flatly. “Get in the truck; it's a good fifteen minute drive up to the Alpha's house.”

Five minutes later we were tucked inside a white Suburban, bumping our way down a long winding road. If you could even call it a road—it was pitted with holes and tree roots and surrounded by tall grass and trees.

“So you get many visitors?” I asked as the truck bounced over a particularly large rut. I’d long since given up my nonchalant act of simply resting my arms on the armrests and was now actively gripping the oh-shit handle located directly over my head while bracing my legs on the floorboard.

“Nope.”

“You guys just stay out here alone?”

“Yep.”

“Not much of a talker, are you?” I tried again.

“Nope.”

I turned to look out the window to hide my smile.

“I can see that,” she said drolly, her eyes never leaving the road.

We were just rounding a large copse of trees when a white plantation house came into view. It was beautiful with its tall white columns and dark grey roof. Rocking chairs were tucked in perfect symmetry on either side of the front porch. There were neatly trimmed shrubs and flowers edging the front walk and flower boxes at the windows.

I’m not sure what exactly I’d been expecting to find, but it hadn’t been a scene out of *Gone with the Wind*, that was for sure.

We rocked to a stop at the end of the walkway up to the house. “Get out.”

“Is this it?” I asked, unbuckling myself and climbing down from the truck.

“Yep.” And before the door had finished closing, I was left to choke on a cloud of dust as the Suburban U-turned and headed back out the way we had come.

“Werewolves,” I muttered before walking up to the front door and giving a firm knock.

Here went nothing.

The Queen arrived at sunset, a full complement of Guard surrounding her. I didn't like to think of myself as weak, but the sight of all the Guard sent shivers of apprehension down my spine. They were the biggest, fastest, meanest sons of bitches the Vampire race had to offer. While most Vampires were in peak physical condition with a little bit extra of everything thrown in on the side, these men were more.

The Queen gave me a warm smile as she exited the black Hummer she'd arrived in. I found no small amount of amusement in the fact that a woman who absolutely exuded class, poise, and elegance arrived in what amounted to a tank.

I rushed forward to kneel in front of her, extending my hand up in greeting. "My Queen, we are honored to have you here in our home."

She made a small *tsking* sound, pulling me up and into a warm hug. "Jack, how many times must we go through this? You need not be so formal when I'm not here in an official capacity, *begotten* of my sister. Well... at least not yet I'm not," she teased, and I couldn't stop myself from hugging her just a little tighter for the briefest of moments before releasing her.

Queen Ellis and Regina were so similar in face and form that I allowed myself just for a second to pretend that it was my Sire there, hugging me close to her heart.

I stepped back, but she reached for my hands, holding them in her own. "So tell me, how have you been?"

I debated how to answer her question. I wanted to be honest, but I needed to protect Liam and Regina. "I've been better, my Queen." Honest... but vague.

"Of course, the loss of one's Sire is not such an easy thing to bear, is it young one?" With one last squeeze to my hands, she released them before tucking an arm through mine, allowing me to escort her around to the back of the house to Regina's garden, the Guard trailing along behind and beside us.

As we rounded the corner of the house, the first thing I saw was the pergola Liam and I had spent hours putting up for Regina for her two hundred and fiftieth birthday. It was black to complement our large colonial-style house that was trimmed in black as well.

Regina had loved being outside and built her own night-blooming garden. It had been the place that made her happiest, so it had been an easy decision on what to get for such a monumental birthday. Liam and I were no carpenters, and despite the fact that the trellis listed a bit to the left no matter what we did, she had loved it. She'd glowed with happiness every time she'd come out and sit under it, claiming it was the best gift she'd ever gotten.

So when it was time to lay our sweet Regina to rest, we spread her ashes over her garden, knowing this was what she would have wanted.

"I can't—I just can't believe she's gone," the Queen whispered softly, hugging my arm tightly to her chest. Her eyes were shiny with unshed tears, her bottom lip starting to quiver. "It was just so senseless, Jack. It was her own stupid fault for being so careless."

I wanted to defend my Sire, but I understood the sentiment. We lived forty-five minutes outside the city on fifty acres of land, our house smack dab in the middle of it. The roads leading out of town were fine, but as you got closer to the turnoff to our house, the roads turned winding and narrow, crossing a few wooden bridges along the way.

Regina had always said the best part of coming home was the drive getting there. Under a full moon, the hills and winding turns, the shine off the small rivers... it was gorgeous.

No one knows exactly what caused Regina to lose control of her Porsche 911, but she'd clipped the side rail and spun across and then off the bridge into the shallow water below.

The fall alone wouldn't have killed her. The impact of her car hitting the pebbled river bottom wouldn't have killed her. She might have even made it despite the fact that water had half-filled her car. However, all of those combined with the fact that she was probably knocked unconscious just before sunrise...

There had been no hiding from the sun.

When we'd finally been able to search for her, after hours of waiting and being trapped inside as the sun made its way slowly across the sky, we'd spent an hour searching along the route home... and we'd found her car. And a pile of ashes. That had been all that was left of our sweet Sire.

So I understood the Queen's anger. I knew she wasn't really angry with Regina. It had obviously been an accident. A horrible, tragic accident, but nonetheless she'd left us all.

"I miss her," I whispered.

"Me too."

She gave one last look out over the garden, squeezed me tight, and then nodded at her Guard. "Let's get on with this business about Liam, shall we?"

"Bring the accused forward." The Queen's voice echoed loudly through our formal living room. Most Vampires would have been brought to the Queen's court, but being that we were Regina's, the Queen was making what small concession she could to take care of this quickly and quietly.

I had no doubt that every other rule and tradition would be observed however. We might have a closer relationship than most with our Queen, but she was still the Queen and could not afford to be accused of favoritism by letting accusations against Liam go unanswered. She was wildly respected and popular because she was fair and upheld the laws that had been governing our race for centuries.

Liam was led into the room by two of the Guard. He'd been in the study until now. I had no idea what he was doing in there, but it was customary for the accused to be sequestered until just before the trial.

He was dressed formally in another of his seemingly endless supply of designer suits, his hair styled perfectly, his face without expression, his hands relaxed at his sides.

The second he came around the sofa, he knelt in front of the Queen, extending his hand in greeting. "My Queen."

"Stand William Levensworth, and we shall begin." My gut clenched at the hard tone of the Queen's voice. The sweet woman of just a half hour ago who was mourning her dead sister was gone. The woman I was looking at now was the Queen of Vampires.

She motioned to one of her Guard to bring forward a folder. She pulled out a sheet of paper and began to read. "William Levensworth, you have been

accused of the following: making yourself known to humans, feeding out in the open with no thought given to discretion, entering a Vampire's territory without permission, engaging a Were in a situation that was *not* in defense of your life, and finally feeding from other paranormals outside our race. How do you answer these accusations?"

I didn't give Liam time to answer anything. I could tell just by the way he was holding his shoulders that he was prepared to accept everything the Queen had offered up, suicidal bastard.

"My Queen, if I may?" I stood from my spot behind Liam, ignoring the sharp look he shot at me.

I waited for her permission before I moved forward and gave her my own folder that I'd been compiling over the last week. "What is this, Jack?" she asked without looking inside.

"First, may I know the accuser?"

"Why?"

"Queen Ellis, it is no secret that Liam and I have had a hard time coping with the loss of our Sire." I hesitated to see if she would acknowledge the fact, hoping she would as a large portion of my defense was built on the fact that breaking Vampire laws was something completely out of character for Liam. When she didn't indicate one way or the other, I continued on. "Here I have provided character witnesses that will attest to the sort of Vampire Liam was before Regina died—"

"We are not here to discuss what sort of Vampire he *used* to be, Jack. We are here to address whether Vampire laws have been broken." She gave me a hard look. "If that is quite all then—"

"No my Queen, it is not." I hurried on, "Every instance that you have called into question I have been witness to."

She waved a hand at me to proceed.

"Queen Ellis, I don't think—" Liam interrupted.

"I would like to hear what he has to say, Liam. Wouldn't you?" It was obvious in the way she didn't allow him time to reply that she didn't much care whether he would or wouldn't.

Liam wisely kept his mouth closed.

“As I was saying, I was called to each of these instances.” I waved at her list of offenses. “On the accusation of making himself known to humans—while Liam may have been a little cavalier while hunting, to my knowledge he has not made our presence known to anyone outside of other paranormals.”

The Queen turned to Liam. “Liam, is this true?”

He stared at me for a beat before nodding.

“Continue, Jack. You apparently have quite a lot to say...” The subtle softening of her tone when addressing me was the first hint of my Sire’s sister that I’d seen since we’d entered this room. While I knew it wasn’t much, it helped me to relax a bit.

“On feeding out in the open. He did feed at a couple of human bars, *but* it was always in secluded sp—”

“According to the accuser, they were not so secluded.”

I looked to Liam, hoping he would explain. While it was true I’d shown up at most of his shenanigans, I couldn’t swear on *every* single feeding for the last two months.

“I wasn’t seen,” he replied simply.

“Do you have any proof?”

“Does this accuser have any proof that he was? Or simply the accusation?” I countered.

“Jack, I’m doing you the favor of humoring you. You will do me the courtesy of not being disrespectful. Are we clear?”

I was instantly contrite. “Yes, my Queen.”

“Entering a master Vampire’s territory? Engaging and feeding from a Were? What about those?” She focused her full attention on Liam now, completely ignoring me.

“Everything is true, but feeding from the Were.”

“I see.” She tapped her blood-red fingernails against the folder in her lap. “You were aware of the punishment for such actions, Liam?”

“Yes, my Queen.”

“And this changed nothing for you? Were you not afraid of the repercussions?”

It was a question I myself wanted the answer to.

“It’s a bit more complicated than a simple action-consequence.”

“Uncomplicate it for me, Liam. As it stands now, I’ve only one option open to me.”

“Forgive me, again, for interrupting, but I’ve asked the people in question to come and speak to you. If you permit it, my Queen.”

I couldn’t tell who was more surprised—Liam or the Queen.

“You have missed your calling, Jack,” she replied dryly.

I turned to the Guard standing at the door. “Would you please bring the guests from the sun room in?” As soon as the guard left the room, Liam strode over to me; shoulders back, hands clenched into fists, tension evident in every jerky step.

“What do you think you are doing, Jack?” he whispered angrily

“What does it look like I’m doing? Saving your dumb ass,” I whispered back. It was useless whispering as every Vampire in the room could clearly hear our conversation, but some habits die hard.

“Why can’t you let this go gracefully? I broke the law, Jack. Vampire law is black and white. Why are you dragging this out?”

“Why *aren’t* you?” I volleyed back. “I’ve never seen someone willing to just throw his life away without a fight.”

“You don’t even need to be here.”

“The hell I don’t—” The door clicked open and five people walked into the room, followed by the Guard.

The Alpha Werewolf was the last to enter the room and the moment he did, the two Guard posted behind the Queen moved in to surround her, flashing their fangs in warning at the Were.

“What is the meaning of this, Jack?” The fact that I was hosting the Alpha in my home wasn’t just unusual... it was unheard of. There had to be a lot of

trust on both sides to make it possible—I was exposing where I was laid to rest during the day and the Alpha had conceded to only bring one of his own guard, in the form of Serena.

Despite the circumstances, I couldn't help myself when I saw Serena—the Werewolf who'd driven me to Alpha Merrick's house—I smiled and waved. She refused to acknowledge me, eyes straight forward.

She and I were going to be good friends someday. I could tell. Not really.

The Queen stood and moved forward. "I am Queen Ellis. It is a pleasure to meet you Alpha..."

"Merrick. It is a pleasure to meet you as well." The man dwarfed the Queen, he was easily as tall, and a bit wider than the Queen's Guard. "I must say, Jack here is quite persuasive." He nodded his head at me in acknowledgment, a smile on his face.

"I'm coming to see that for myself." She shot me her own small smile before turning to focus on Alpha Merrick. "Please, let us all begin."

One by one, each went before the Queen to explain their part in Liam's story. Alpha Merrick from the Were fight, the Were from the bar—who thankfully Lew had been able to find for me—the Vampire elder and Serena, who coincidentally had been in the bar with the Were who Liam had fought in their little cage match. Then Lew, who was in fact the only human as far as anyone knew that was aware of what Liam and I were.

With each testimony I studied the Queen's every expression hoping this was going to be enough for her. Liam, for his part, interjected nothing. I don't know what frustrated me more—my inability to read the Queen's reaction to each witness or the fact that Liam sat in his seat, resigned.

An hour and a half passed and the Queen thanked everyone for coming before excusing them.

The Queen then turned her attention to me. "You have been quite the busy boy, Jack. It's admirable the way you took care of everything. Smoothing everything over, taking care of Liam. Liam, you have had surprisingly little to say during this process."

"I've had little opportunity." He shot me a pointed look.

“Be that as it may, I’d like to hear what you have to say.” She turned to me, making a shooing motion with her hands, “Jack, be a good boy and run to the kitchen and bring some tea, will you?”

I wanted to refuse. I was scared to leave Liam and the Queen alone together. Scared of what he would say. But you didn’t tell the Queen no.

I stood and walked to the door, moving as slowly as I dared, trying my best to eavesdrop without appearing like I was eavesdropping.

Sadly, subtlety is not my strong suit. I felt fairly certain that everyone knew what I was doing, but thankfully no one cared. As long as I was moving in a forward direction, I was doing as the Queen asked. With that being said, you can bet your sweet ass I was going to break the sound barrier getting to the kitchen and back with her tea.

“Now Liam, what’s this about getting your affairs in order? While I understand leaving everything to Jack, you have no idea what my decision is even going to be. Why?”

I had just made it to the door when what the Queen was saying hit me. Stunned, I twirled around to face Liam and ended up getting twisted in the rug by the door. I flailed my arms wildly, trying in vain to catch my balance before I took a header into the door.

I could actually feel their stares like laser beams to the back of my head. “I’m fine,” I grunted out. “Just—just give me a minute.”

I’d been living with Liam long enough to know exactly what he was doing without even having to look, “Stop shaking your head at me, asshole,” I grumbled, reaching up to brace my hands on the door to stand. I wanted to give the offending rug a kick, but instead gave the Queen and Liam a curt nod, opened the door and sprinted through it.

I made it back to the formal living room in exactly six minutes. Thank God, Regina had an electric kettle; if I’d had to wait on a teapot to boil I would have probably brained myself, my nerves getting the best of me.

I kicked the door open with my foot, Regina’s silver tea service balanced delicately in my hands. As soon as I cleared the door, one of the Guard hurried

over to take it from me. I'm sure he was more concerned with the probability of me spilling scalding hot water on the queen than the mess I'd make of Regina's Persian rug based on my graceful exit.

I shrugged it off and moved back to my seat to try to catch up on what had been going on in my absence.

"Thank you, Jack."

My smile was strained, but I couldn't bring myself to care. The tension in the room was palpable. There were small stress lines bracketing the Queen's eyes. It was clear she wasn't happy.

"As the Queen, it is my first duty to keep our race safe. Personal feelings can't be given consideration. I cannot let indiscretions go unanswered. Not only would I be seen as weak by our race, but by other paranormals as well. They need to know my control is absolute." She paused to lean forward and take Liam's hand. "Liam, Regina loved you for as long as I have known you. You brought her happiness and gave her purpose. For that, I will be forever thankful. However, in the last two months you have let loose the reins on your self-control. You have brought attention to us, you have walked a precarious line and in some cases, tipped over it. You have shown no remorse and no evidence that you have any intention of getting yourself together moving forward. The law is clear—the answer for that can only be execution. I am sorry."

Before I knew my intent, I threw myself at Liam; standing between him and the Queen. "No," I told her in a voice so low, it barely registered. "You will not take him from me. Regina is gone—that is enough! I will help him, I will care for him. I'll keep a closer eye on him, but you will not take him from me!" I could feel Liam pulling on my arm, trying to get my attention.

"Jack. *Jack.*" His voice hissed in my ear. I grunted in acknowledgement, but didn't take my eyes from the Queen.

She remained seated, hadn't moved an inch since my outburst, but I could see the tiny flush of color in her cheeks. Anger, to be sure. I knew I was being disrespectful. I knew I was walking a fine line. I fully expected the Guard to come and remove me at any moment, but I couldn't stop myself. I couldn't

lose Liam. I'd practically killed myself this past week gathering information, building a case for Liam's defense. And it had been for nothing.

Pure rage took over; a haze of anger making it impossible for me to think rationally, to calm myself.

I was acting on pure instinct when I reached back and pulled Liam into my arms. For just that split second, I stared hard at the Queen, daring her with my eyes while I ducked my head and struck.

I buried my fangs hard and deep, through his white dress shirt, directly into the delicate skin over Liam's heart.

"What in the fuck are you doing?!" he yelled, his voice hitting notes I didn't know guys over the age of fifteen were able to produce.

I drank.

Liam struggled, trying to get away from me, but I was determined.

Still I drank. I was waiting for the Queen to stop me, for her to signal for the Guard, but she didn't.

She just watched, a look I wasn't sure how to interpret on her face. Satisfaction? Acceptance?

I drank so much that Liam's movements became lethargic, "Jack, you need to sssstop," he slurred.

I didn't stop until he was dead weight in my arms, and then I ripped open my wrist and held it to his mouth. Tipping his head back, I forced him to drink. Sealing our bond.

At first nothing happened, his mouth slack in his unconsciousness, but then, slowly, a muscle twitch, a soft lick... and then he was back, sucking greedily at the blood I offered so freely.

A minute later, he was fully back to himself—staring at me like I'd lost my damn mind.

"What in the hell have you done, Jack?" he yelled, fury rolling off him in waves.

"Whatever the fuck I had to, Liam," I said just as fiercely.

“We’re bonded now. I die, you die. You get that?”

“Yup. And that’s how I want it.” Finally, after weeks of worrying myself sick about what would happen with Liam, I finally felt my first bit of peace.

In a move that I never thought to see in all the days I lived, Liam dropped himself to his knees before the Queen. Not out of respect, but to humble himself. “My Queen, he—please have mercy on him. He didn’t mean—” Liam was floundering with what to say, what to do. He was at a complete loss; pulling fistfuls of hair, shaking his head in disbelief. “He—he shouldn’t be punished for what I have done. It isn’t right. He’s kind and selfless and beautiful and funny and—” Liam gulped audibly, his gaze frantic on the Queen, desperate to make her understand.

I don’t know what I’d been expecting, tying Liam to me. I hadn’t actually thought past the moment that I knew I wasn’t willing to live without him, but hearing him begging—for me—was unconscionable. Without so much as a look to the Queen, I crouched down in front of Liam. “Get up, Liam,” I demanded quietly.

He shook his head, his eyes swimming with unshed tears, hands visibly shaking. “No. I will stay here until we figure out some way for the Queen to break our bond.”

I jerked back as if I’d been slapped, dropping my hands from where they’d been resting on his shoulders. “You don’t care for me at all!” I cried. Even now, after everything I’d done, the lengths I’d gone to—he was still holding me away. Keeping a wall between us.

I was gutted. Utterly. Completely. “You don’t get it!” I yelled. “If you aren’t here, I don’t want to be here. The kindest thing you could do”—I turned and pointed to the Queen, who was still watching this whole scene unfold in complete silence—“That *she* could do, is sit us out in the sun together. I’m *not* living without you. You die? I still wouldn’t be living. That’s what you seem to not understand. Regina died and took half of my heart with her—you die? I’m done. There is nothing left.” Anger started to eclipse my devastation. “Now you get up off your knees. You don’t humble yourself—not for me. Get up.”

I jerked him to a stand beside me. I straightened his suit, smoothed his hair and we turned, with shoulders back, to face the Queen. “My Queen—”

She waved at me to stop. She looked like the witness to a train wreck, and perhaps that’s what we were. Her mouth hung open, wide-eyed... she was stunned. It was an expression that I’d never actually seen from her before now.

“*You—*”

The Queen was cut off by a commotion at the door. “I have to get in there.” I heard just before the door burst open and Gentry hurried in. “My Queen, please excuse this interruption. I was caught in the evening traffic.”

“What are *you* doing here?” Liam demanded, finding his voice again. “You aren’t welcome in this house.”

“From what I can tell you won’t have long to care about it anyway,” Gentry sniped back.

Before things could escalate any further, the Queen, once again, stepped in, “That’s quite enough. Gentry Durian, say what you came to say.”

Gentry hurried forward to kneel before the Queen, keeping his head bowed in respect. “My Queen, it is my understanding that Liam will be executed. When that happens, it will leave Jack, a fledgling Vampire, alone. I would petition for him to be made a part of my house.”

I shook my head in an attempt to clear it, certain that I hadn’t understood correctly. “I’m sorry, what?” I asked

Gentry didn’t move, simply kneeled in front of the Queen, awaiting her response.

“Why?” she asked.

Wouldn’t the better question be, *Does Jack want to be made a part of your house?* I thought to myself.

Being made a part of Gentry’s house would be the next closest thing to a Sire and would give him dominion over me—a situation I was in no way comfortable with. Thankfully, I was now bonded to Liam so I wasn’t worried about his petition, but it chapped my ass that he’d stepped around me like that.

“I think Regina would have wanted someone to take care of him, my Queen. I would like that honor to be mine,” he said simply.

“Have you spoken with Jack about such an arrangement?”

“I have tried, but with all of Liam’s troubles,” Gentry practically sneered at Liam’s name, “there hasn’t been a good opportunity.”

“You’re too damned late.” Liam strode forward until he was practically standing beside the Queen. “He’s *mine*.” Liam ripped his shirt open, exposing my fang marks over his heart.

I was getting whiplash with the way this conversation was going. Liam was about to die, then we were bonded, then Liam’s pissed, then Gentry’s here and now Liam’s downright *gleeful* that I bonded us—and *still* I had no idea what the Queen was going to do about my impetuous decision. My heart could only take so much of this emotional rollercoaster. “You two,” I all but shouted, “stow it.”

“Gentry, you need to leave,” I insisted. “You have no right to be here.” I needed things settled and Gentry was doing nothing except muddying the waters.

“Well, technically, as the accuser, he had the right to be here,” the Queen informed us.

“*It was you?*” I cried. “Even while you were ‘helping’ me, you were reporting back to the Queen?” I didn’t know which I preferred; junk-punching him myself or finally unleashing Liam on him after all these years.

Gentry said nothing, just stared at the bite marks over Liam’s heart.

“Liam is going to be executed. Jack will die,” he said softly, almost as if he was talking to himself. “How could you let this happen?” Gentry turned, glaring at the Queen.

“How dare you speak to me with such disrespect? I am your Queen and I will be treated as such. The portion of the trial in which you would have been a part of has already concluded. You may show yourself out.” Gentry stood, shamed in front of the Queen.

“I’m so—”

“I’ll hear nothing else from you. It would be in your best interest to stay out of my sight until you are told otherwise, is that understood?”

“Yes, my Queen.” Gentry stormed out, glaring at Liam as he passed, slamming the door behind him.

“Well,” she said wryly, “now that that’s been settled. Jack, what you have done, cannot be undone.”

I felt Liam’s hand reach for my own, twining our fingers together tightly. Shit must be getting real for him if he was giving into public displays of affection, and in front of the Queen no less.

“I find myself in a somewhat precarious position. Liam, you have to be punished, there is nothing that can be done about that. Given the tie you share with Jack, however, I cannot in good conscience allow you to be executed. Plus, there is now the issue of *your* disrespect Jack.”

I flushed in embarrassment. “Please, forgive me my Queen. I just—I couldn’t—”

“I think it’s quite obvious to everyone here what you *just couldn’t*,” she said dryly.

She tapped a finger to her lips absentmindedly, studying us both. “Please leave us,” she directed the Guard.

“My Queen?” the Guard closest to her asked.

“Just outside the door. Thank you.” When the door closed behind them and the three of us were left alone she started again. “Liam. You may think you are smart and awfully good at keeping things hidden, but you aren’t as good as you think.”

“I’m sorry?” Liam said as if asking a question, but it was obvious in the way his shoulders suddenly hunched forward that he had some idea of what she was talking about.

She glanced quickly from Liam to me and back, a small smile playing about her lips. “My hands were tied regarding the trial, but you, dear Jack, have given me something I can work with.”

I had no idea what was happening—and what was with all the cryptic comments? I just wanted to know our fate one way or the other.

“Here is what I can offer you. Liam, you are no longer the head of this house.”

I gasped in surprise. “But that makes me—” I couldn’t believe this newest turn of events. Outside of death, this was the harshest punishment a Vampire could be given. It meant loss of status, loss of honor. It made Liam answerable to me. I was given authority over him—and me a fledgling Vampire—it would be humiliating for Liam.

I was a mix of emotions. Elated at Liam getting to live. Horrified at the shame of this punishment for him. Worried Liam would resent me for forcing this on him. Anxious about whether I would be able to handle this new responsibility—if I would embarrass Regina’s memory.

“Yes. You are going to be responsible for this house now, Jack, and that in turn means Liam. His dishonor is yours, his punishment is yours. You understand what I’m saying here, Liam. You want him,” she flicked a hand in my direction, “to live a long life, you are going to have to start getting yourself together. No more half-baked ideas. And I want your word that you will explain everything you’ve been keeping to yourself to Jack here.”

His face flushed a bright fiery red. “Yes, my Queen.”

“*Well.*” And just like that, her posture relaxed and she was our Sire’s sister again. “That was really something, huh?” The Queen looked downright gleeful at this point. I think if she could have high-fived herself she would have. She was that proud of herself. “I didn’t know *what* I was going to do when Gentry called and told me what was going on, but Jack—you found the one thing, the loophole I could work with.”

My mouth fell open in shock at what I was hearing. “You mean, you *knew* you could have gotten around the law if we were bound? I—I worked myself to the bone this week, worrying and researching and you couldn’t even send a note or—”

“Jack. How, as the Queen, could I possibly have done that? I still have my duty,” she reprimanded gently. “I will say though, I know you. And I know Liam. Let’s just say, I had high hopes it would all work out.”

“High hopes!” I screeched. “I just—I can’t even... I need a drink.”

The Queen closed the half a foot distance between us and pulled me into a tight hug, whispering in my ear, “Thank you, Jack. You saved him. Regina would be proud.”

She pulled back before I was ready, to give Liam a hard look. “I’m serious about you telling him everything. You both need this, and it’s time.” Liam looked nervous, but he nodded in agreement. “Now, I’ve got a plane to catch. I expect to see you two in Chicago. Just because Regina’s gone, don’t think you’re excused from coming to visit. Don’t make me play the whole Queen card because I’ll do it, and I’ll make sure it’s painful for everyone,” she teased. “Now give me a proper farewell and then I’ll be gone.”

We walked her to the front door, each of us kissing her cheeks before she was whisked off in her black Hummer.

We stood in the doorway together, watching until the dust settled. “Now,” I said turning to face Liam directly, “what’s all this cryptic ‘tell Jack’ shit?”

“I’m sorry, come again?” I asked.

After the Queen had left, we’d decided to change clothes and meet downstairs in the media room so Liam could tell me whatever it was that Liam needed to tell me.

“You heard me.”

“Uhm, no I’m pretty sure I didn’t. You mumbled something and then proceeded to turn a fiery shade of red.”

“I’m sorry, Jack. I’m just not ready for this.” Liam jumped up from the couch and made a beeline for the door.

I leapt over the back of the sofa, blocking his exit. “Ohhhh no. We’re going to hash all this out right now.” I smiled as a thought occurred to me, “Under the authority as head of our house, I’m *ordering* you to tell me.”

“Really? This is approximately forty minutes old and the power has gone to your head already?” Liam asked, rolling his eyes.

“Yup. So cough it up buddy. What could be so bad that you are *this* uncomfortable about it?” I asked. The last few weeks aside, it took a lot to ruffle Liam. It must be something really big for him to be this worked up about it.

“Can I—can I show you instead?” he asked softly, his eyes avoiding mine.

“Okaaaaay,” I drawled.

“Go sit back on the couch, I’ll be right back.” Before I could reply he was out the door.

Three minutes later he was back and had a small wooden chest in his hands. He walked around the sofa and sat down next to me, handing me the chest.

I took a moment to study it before opening it. The box wasn’t anything ornate, just a simple wooden box with an aged golden hinge holding it closed.

I unlatched it and flipped the lid open. At first, I wasn’t sure what I was looking at. The box was filled to overflowing with newspaper clippings, restaurant menus, ticket stubs, pictures, and even an old black T-shirt.

I glanced up in time to catch Liam’s wince. “What is it?” I asked.

“Just—” He reached into the box and picked up a concert ticket stub, showing it to me. “What’s this say?” he asked, handing me the ticket.

I looked closely and saw that it was a ticket stub from the Led Zeppelin concert we’d all gone to for my twenty-fifth birthday. “I still don’t understand.”

He reached into the box again and pulled out a newspaper clipping, handing it over. Again, I looked it over and saw that it was the first article that I’d ever written and had published in the city Arts paper, featuring an up and coming local artist.

This time, I didn’t wait for Liam—I dove back into the box. There were other news clippings of my articles, ticket stubs for theater shows I’d seen, a coaster from McDuffy’s, and then the most surprising—dozens of candid pictures of me or me and Regina together. Pictures I’d never even known Liam had taken. And I had no doubt that Liam was the photographer in question. No one else would have been able to take such private pictures of us, plus, Liam had a style of taking pictures that was more than evident—even in these candid.

In some we were laughing and playing, some were of us outside in the garden. One in particular—worn around the edges from too much handling—

was a picture of me asleep outside in one of our Adirondack chairs. It must have been during winter because I was wearing my grey hoodie.

“What is all this Liam?” I couldn’t help but ask, staring at him in amazement.

“I think that would be fairly obvious,” he replied quietly.

“No. No it’s not obvious at all. This is a whole box,” I shook it at him, “of excuse-me-what-the-fuck-is-this.”

A bubble of laughter escaped Liam before he had a chance to choke it back; I couldn’t help but return it. This entire situation felt completely surreal. If someone—anyone—else would have shown me a box like the one I was holding, I would have known what it meant, but with Liam, nothing was obvious.

“You’re a smart guy, Jack. You know what this means.” He slid his hand forward slowly until the tips of his fingers rested over the tips of mine.

I started to reply, but realized I was not going to let him out of saying the words. I was not going to be doing all the heavy lifting in this conversation alone. “I don’t think so, Liam. I want you to tell me what this means. Please.”

Liam stared at me hard, his eyes focused on mine. Searching. “I am in love with you, Jack.”

My heart lurched hearing him say those words to me. The sincerity of them—the look in his eyes. I mean I’d loved him in some form or another since the beginning myself, but then something occurred to me.

Without warning, I hauled back and nailed him straight in the jaw; the force of the hit knocked him back into the couch.

“Motherfucker,” he cursed, rubbing his jaw. He sat forward again, “What the hell, Jack?”

“You *asshole!*” I screamed at him, jumping up from the couch, dumping the box and all its contents on the floor as I paced in front of the sofa. “How *dare* you tell me that you love me, now? You were going to let the Queen execute you without so much as lifting a finger. What? You thought you’d leave me everything and then, hey, when I got to clean out *your* belongings

and I found this little box-o-love, I'd get to see how you truly felt? Then what do you suppose would have happened? How do you think I would have felt knowing you *never* said anything, *never* gave me any indication of how you felt..." I trailed off, losing steam as more and more thoughts bombarded my mind.

I didn't even notice when Liam stepped in front of me until I bumped into him on my next turn to the other side of the rug. "*Oohmp.*" Liam reached up, cupping my face in his hands. I tried to knock them away so I could step around him, but he held tight. He shook me a bit to get me to focus. "What?" I asked.

"Just want to make sure I have your attention." And with that he brushed the softest kiss imaginable across my lips. There was no teeth, no tongue—nothing like any other kiss I'd shared. It wasn't a stepping stone to getting in my pants. It wasn't used to persuade or cajole... it just *was*.

"For five years I've wanted this and then today—you handed it to me, Jack. Like a fucking gift, you just handed it to me. I got out of bed today and I thought this was going to be it for me. Then you bonded us. I just—I don't even know how to feel about it."

I nodded, trying to understand, to keep up with what he was saying, but Liam loving me didn't make sense. My whole world looked a certain way this morning and now everything was turned on its head. "I'm sorry if you didn't want to be—Okay, no. I'm not sorry. I'll take you however I can get you, so I'm not sorry I saved your life, but I'm sorry if you weren't ready."

Liam grabbed my hand, turning to sit on the sofa. He pulled me down with him, so we could face each other, tangling our legs together.

He reached forward to grab my hand, holding it tight in his own, took a deep breath and then started. "Regina knew, from the beginning, that I wanted you." He shot me a shy smile before he continued, "When we walked into McDuffy's that first night, you were back behind the bar and I swear to God, Jack. I couldn't draw a steady breath. You were gorgeous. You were pouring some guy a beer and he was telling you this story, and you were listening and laughing." He didn't say anything for a moment. "You still do that, you know."

“What? Laugh? Not lately I haven’t.” I reached forward to pinch his leg in mock punishment.

“Hey!” He flinched at the flash of pain before grabbing my hand and lacing his fingers through my own again. “Not the laughing, the way you listen, Jack. When someone tells you something, you are totally there with them. Focused. Your eyes trained on them. Like whatever they are saying is the most important thing in the world. All those times, I’d come into your office and needle you, it was only because I wanted your attention. I wanted you to look at me. I wanted your eyes on me. I wanted to be the only thing you saw.”

I couldn’t stop myself from leaning forward for a quick kiss. Liam and I may have had no physical relationship to speak of until sixty seconds ago, but that was going to change. Soon, I hoped. “I was always watching you, Liam. You are impossible not to watch. You’re like a magnet. You walk in? Everyone’s eyes are following you.”

Liam was shaking his head before I was even through speaking. “No. This is different. Even with Regina. I loved her. I owed her everything. She saved me and remade me into what I am now, but as much as I knew that, I couldn’t stop myself from wanting you. She deserved to be loved with someone’s whole heart, Jack, and the second I saw you—I didn’t love her less, but I wanted you *more*. Every second I’ve spent wanting you has felt like a betrayal, and I couldn’t get myself to stop. And then she died, Jack. She was alone in that ravine and she didn’t deserve to die that way,” Liam cried.

“She deserved better than that. I couldn’t let myself have you after that, Jack. You are more than I deserve. *She* was more than I deserved. I never said anything to her, never would have, but she’s Regina so, of course, she knew—she knew I wanted you. And so she pulled you into our family... for me. *That’s* why we kept coming in and coming back,” Liam finished in a whisper.

I was stunned at what he was telling me. Regina had always joked that because Liam and I had looked so alike that she simply had to have me. She wanted matching bookends—arm candy guaranteed to make the other Vampires jealous. I always rolled my eyes when she would laugh and tease me with about it. I knew she was full of crap. Regina might be a lot of things, but she wasn’t shallow. I always thought we’d connected and that she loved me, but turns out, she didn’t or at least not at first. Not in the way that I thought.

My gut churned at the thought that perhaps we were less than I had always imagined, but then Liam was there, squeezing my hand. “She loved you. I can see on your face what you are thinking. And I’m not telling you she didn’t ever love you. Of course she did. You, Jackson Aaron Miller, are impossible not to love. And when you think back over the last five years, you’ll see it for yourself. I didn’t mean to muddy that for you. I just wanted you to know that I’ve been loving you—undeniably, completely, head over heels in love with you, from the beginning.”

I blinked up at him. Taking in what he was saying. Holding it against the memories I had of the past five years, trying to see the truth in it from his side. It was like someone took the lens on my camera and changed it, changed the light, changed the focus and now, I could see all the subtle things I had missed; the looks, conversations, touches...

“Yeah?” I smiled tentatively, wanting to believe what he was saying. “Well, for the record—in case you haven’t figured it out by now...” I crawled forward, straddling his hips, to sit in his lap. I wrapped my arms tightly around him. “I love you too, Liam.”

He squeezed me tight, dropping his head to my shoulder. “I can’t—I can’t lose you, Jack. I came out of losing Regina by the skin of my teeth, but you, love, you I would never be able to get over.” Liam grabbed two handfuls of my hair and jerked my face down to meet his own, capturing my mouth again. Using lips, tongue, and teeth, he kissed me until I couldn’t breathe, until I couldn’t think and the only thing I could do was hold on, letting him take what he needed.

I pulled back slowly until we were nose to nose, my lips brushing his with every word, “You aren’t going to lose me, Liam. I’m right here and I’m not letting you go—we’re bonded. Understood?” I waited for his nod before I let myself kiss him again. “It’s you and me together from now on, Liam.”

“*Just* you and me, right? No one else?” he asked, a smile building bigger and bigger on his face.

“Yeah. Why?” I asked, confused about where he was going with his question.

“No more boyfriends or girlfriends coming over.” His smile at this point was out of control.

“Not if you want to keep all of your dangly parts,” I assured him.

“So, Gentry—” I clapped a hand over his mouth, temporarily stopping whatever he’d been about to say, but then I thought about it and dropped my hand.

Normally, Liam’s smug I-told-you-so attitude would have gotten him a foot in his ass, but damned if he didn’t deserve the right to gloat, he’d been right about the asshole.

I nudged him with my elbow. “Go ahead,” I murmured.

“See! I told you. He’s an asshole. Grade A asshole. But that’s not what I want to hear from you, baby. Oh, no. I want to hear my three *very favorite* little words.”

I sighed in resignation and rolled my eyes. He was going to be completely unbearable to live with after this. “Fine, *but* you will reward me with the best sex of my life immediately following this, and we will never speak of this again. Agreed?”

He leaned down to give me another quick kiss. “Agreed.”

“You. Were. Right.” I muttered softly.

He tapped his ear like he was having trouble with it. “What was that? I couldn’t hear you. You are going to need to speak up.”

“You. Were. Right,” I all but yelled at him, “Satisfied?”

“Not yet, but I have high hopes for the future.” He waggled his eyebrows at me, grinding his hips against mine.

“Me too, Liam. Me too.”

THE END

Author Bio

Reece was raised in Northern Florida, but courtesy of Uncle Sam (and her husband) she's been moved coast to coast and across oceans. She has been an avid reader since she was old enough to crack open a book. It was only as she got older that she discovered that she loved telling stories as much as reading them. Her stories originated as songs, but a well-meaning friend told her to put down the guitar and pick up a pencil. So she did. And it stuck.

Contact & Media Info

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[Email](#) | [Blog](#)

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THAT GOOD EARTH

By S.A. Meade

Photo Description

No photo

Story Letter

Dear Author,

I would love to read a sweet, kisses-only story about two British young men serving together during WWI. Surviving in the trenches, sitting out a long night under fire, etc. I also have a weakness for WWI pilots, if you decide to go that route. :)

Thank you!

Sincerely,

Hollis Shiloh

Story Info

Genre: historical

Tags: military, WWI, pilot, closeted, disabilities, sweet no sex, farming

Word count: 14,295

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THAT GOOD EARTH

By S.A. Meade

PART ONE

I crawled through the thick, soul-sucking mud of no-man's land, glad of the sudden downpour that bought me enough time to escape from the smouldering wreckage of the Airco. I didn't even glance back; I needed to find shelter before the *Boche* realised I'd survived the landing and started shooting. God alone knew where the allied trench was. All I could see was mud, mud and more mud, pockmarked by the occasional crater, twist of barbed wire or blasted tree stump.

The fighting, such that it was, seemed to have stopped for the moment on that section of the front. The splatter and whisper of rain was broken occasionally by the faraway crump and whistle of mortar fire, followed by a stuttering barrage of gunfire but, mercifully, my particular bit of no-man's land seemed to be on hiatus—perhaps everyone was too busy gawping at the broken plane. I hoped that was the case. I'd always thought that I'd die in the air, shot down in a dogfight. It wasn't in my plans to drown in the mud or die the death of an infantryman. That's why I'd volunteered for the Royal Flying Corps, to soar above it all.

The downpour eased to a desultory, icy drizzle. I glanced over my shoulder. The rain had doused the flames, leaving a smoking pile of struts and charred wings. The *Boche* were already venturing out of their trench to poke around. Time to hurry up before they realised the pilot who'd bombed their trench wasn't dead in the wreckage.

I took a deep breath and surveyed my surroundings. The allied trench was a distant tangle of wire and sandbags. I doubted very much that they could see me inching my way through the mud. If the enemy refrained from firing, I'd probably make it. Until then, I was on my own.

The sudden whistle of an airborne shell jolted what little optimism remained in me. I threw my arms over my head and prayed. The ground

trembled and a fountain of soil bloomed into the dark, grey afternoon sky. I prayed a bit more when the enemy decided to open fire. The mortar's ultimate destination forgotten, I scabbled on my hands and knees, haste dictated by the mosquito whine of bullets as they sprayed into the mud around me. Now everything was down to luck and sod all else.

“Hey! Over here!” a voice called out from somewhere to my left.

I changed course without hesitation, scrambling for purchase. I raised my head to see someone waving above the lip of a crater before they ducked down when the enemy acknowledged that person's presence with another burst of gunfire.

Ten or so feet remained between me and salvation. Crawling would take a lifetime. I scrambled to my feet and ran, then dove headfirst into the crater as bullets spat all around me. I tumbled arse over tit into a foetid puddle; cold water rank with the unspeakable stench of the trenches, of dead men, unshed tears and futility.

“Are you all right?” Someone grabbed my collar and hauled me up.

I wiped the filthy water from my face. “Yes, thanks. Nothing a nice hot bath wouldn't cure.” And suddenly, that's all I wanted. To be back home, reclining in a deep tub filled with steaming hot water.

My companion laughed bitterly. “I'd rather have a whiskey first.”

His well-modulated voice spoke of officer rank, not what I expected to find at the bottom of a bomb crater in no-man's land. The two pips on his epaulettes confirmed my suspicion, a lieutenant no less. His pale cheeks were cloudy with stubble and exhaustion etched grim lines around his mouth. Mud streaked his skin, making his blue eyes even more remarkable—silvery-bright and ringed with sapphire.

He extended a gloved hand. “Lieutenant William McCall.”

“Second Lieutenant Arthur Reed.”

His grip was warm and firm. The first human touch I'd experienced for weeks.

“What is an officer doing in this god-forsaken hole in the ground?”

McCall glanced towards the far end of the crater, at a huddled bundle of sodden wool. "Private Harris. He came a cropper when we tried to take the *Boche* trench yesterday. I tried to help him... I sat up all night but there's only so much one can do when someone's guts are spilling out of him. The medics couldn't get to us because of the bombardment. All I could do was sit with him until he died."

"I'm sorry." There seemed little else I could say.

"These things happen." He removed his helmet and ran one hand through short, blond hair. "Now I'm stuck."

"How far is our line from here?"

"About fifty yards but the enemy is particularly active here, which I assume is why you were sent to bomb them."

"It was. Sorry it didn't work. One of the bastards caught my engine. I had to put the thing down where I could. It was either in no-man's land or behind their lines. I didn't fancy spending the rest of the war in a prison camp." I wasn't sure that a bomb crater was much better.

McCall leant back against the crater wall. "It's all right. There should be another push just before dawn tomorrow. That's the plan. We can make a run for it then."

I stared at the lowering clouds as they boiled and swirled, driven by a cold wind. I wondered if I'd ever be warm again and wrapped my arms around my knees. "As long as we don't drown. I think it's going to rain."

"We'll be fine. Better to be here than up there. Hopefully by this time tomorrow, I'll be back in my trench and you'll be on your way back to your squadron."

I thought with longing of the squadron's makeshift HQ, a nice warm, dry shed. There'd be mugs of strong, hot tea and perhaps a sandwich or two. "I hope so." My stomach rumbled in memory of those longed-for sandwiches.

"You'd best make yourself comfortable. It'll be a long night."

As if I needed reminding. I stole another glance at McCall.

He reached into his greatcoat and pulled out a water bottle. "Want a drink?"

“Thanks.”

He handed me the bottle. “Sorry there’s not much.”

I took a sip of the warm, brackish water then handed the bottle back. “I’m sorry. All I have is my sidearm.”

“That’s all right.” He returned the bottle to his coat. “So, sir, why the RFC?”

“Because I didn’t want to end up in the trenches. Because I’d always wanted to fly.”

“I think the odds are a bit better down here in the mud from what I hear.”

“You’re probably right. It’s just I spent most of my boyhood up to my knees in mud, helping out on the farm. It was just nice to think I could get away from it for a while. What about you?”

McCall shrugged. “Family tradition. The day war was declared it was expected that I’d sign up, join my father’s regiment. I was as excited as the next fool, thinking we’d whip the *Boche* and be home in time for Christmas.”

“I think we all fell for that. I couldn’t wait to get out of the front door.”

“Neither could I.” He settled against the wall of the crater once more. “What will you do when this is all over?”

“I have no idea. There’s the farm I suppose, but I’m the younger son. My brother will inherit it all and I’m not sure I fancy working for him for the rest of my life. You?”

He quirked his lips in a thin smile. “I am the *only* child. If I survive this mess, I’ll be going home to look after the estate. Five hundred acres of arable land and a hundred or so sheep. So I suppose we’re both country lads.”

I raised an eyebrow. “I think you have a bit more countryside to your name than I do. A couple of hundred acres on a Cumbrian fell aren’t quite the same.”

“No, I suppose not. Wiltshire’s a bit less... rough.” His gaze grew distant.

I had no doubt where his mind had gone. I wish he hadn’t asked about after the war. “Do you miss it?”

“Yes.” Wistfulness had coloured his voice. The distance was still there in

his eyes. "It's harvest time. They'll be mowing the wheat. The evenings are drawing in. There'll be a fire in the sitting room."

The clouds dropped a bit more and the air was suddenly filled with a fresh volley of gunfire. A shell whizzed overhead, leaving a trail of smoke, white against the darkening sky. I braced myself for the explosion. McCall covered his ears and hunched his shoulders. The ground shook and a shower of mud splattered into our dubious refuge.

"Bastards." McCall lowered his hands and glared at the sky.

Our side returned fire. Shells flew in the other direction. McCall pulled the collar of his coat up and shrank down into his coat. I shivered, not sure if it was from fear or from the cold, which arrived with the rain. I edged back and hunched myself up, hoping that less of the rain would reach me.

The firefight receded to a few desultory exchanges. Rain brought a swift twilight. I rested my chin on my knees in an attempt to stop the shivering. My companion was clearly miles away, no doubt thinking of a fire in the drawing room. There was no chance of a fire in the crater. If there'd been anything to burn, it would've been drenched. I closed my eyes and tried to think of warm things, of afternoon sunlight spilling through a window, of a summer morning in the Eden Valley. Anything other than the hell I'd found myself in. I prayed that sleep would find me.

"Reed?"

I lifted my head. "Yes?"

McCall shrugged out of his coat. "I think you need this more than I do."

"No, I couldn't. It's yours. I'll be fine." As much as I would've welcomed the warmth, it would've been selfish to accept such a generous offer. My own coat was a shredded mess, abandoned with the wreckage.

"Come on, man, I can hear your teeth chattering."

"I'll warm up soon enough."

"No you won't. You're already soaked to the skin. Come here."

As a lieutenant, he outranked me. I couldn't deny the order. I inched my way towards him. He leant forward and placed the coat over his head, then over mine when I settled beside him.

“Better?”

I resisted the urge to huddle against him like a child seeking comfort from its mother. His presence and the coat provided shelter enough. I didn't wish to dwell on McCall's proximity. It had been a long time since I had enjoyed the closeness of another. Even though he smelt of the trenches, of sweat, of death, I couldn't ignore the sheer *presence* of him. “Yes, better.”

“Good.” He shifted until his shoulder rested alongside mine.

I drew my legs up once more and stared into the gathering darkness. The rain offered a constant whisper in the sudden silence, as both sides bedded down for the night. It seemed that sleep would be a possibility after all. I closed my eyes to shut everything out.

“Reed?”

I woke from my brief doze, cold once more. “What?”

“You were shaking again.” He put his hand on mine. “You're bloody freezing.”

“Sorry.”

McCall put his arm around my shoulders. “We need to share our warmth.”

I edged closer until my body rested against his. “Yes.”

“I'd murder for a cup of tea right now.”

“So would I.” Hot, sweet, steam rising into the cold morning air. God, yes.

“When we make it to our trench, we'll celebrate with a mug, yes?”

“Sounds good to me.”

“I have a little flask of whiskey in my dugout. I think we've earned some of that too.” I could hear his grin rather than see it.

The memory of whiskey stole through my mind, the gentle burn, the taste, the way it settled in my stomach like embers. I imagined sitting in a room somewhere, legs stretched out across the hearth rug, before a blazing fire. I'd be cradling a glass of whiskey...

“You're thinking of whiskey, aren't you? I'm sorry. I shouldn't have

tempted you like that.” McCall released a gusty sigh. He was close enough that I felt his breath caress my cheek.

I swallowed and fought back the sudden and unexpected surge of desire that bloomed within me. How long had it been? The summer before the war, a sunlit riverbank and... Richard. I pushed the memories away. Richard was long gone, killed at Mons, a mere six months after that idyll. “Yes,” I lied, “I was thinking about whiskey.”

I wanted to close my eyes again, to sleep and wake up in the morning. Then we’d be rescued and I could return to my squadron. I would hopefully never have to sit in the mud and stink again.

McCall shifted, settling closer, his leg pressed against mine. “Don’t worry. By this time tomorrow, it’ll all be over.” His voice had been gentle, coloured with quiet hope. “I’d like the whole bloody war to be over. It’s dragged on for far too long.”

“Three years too long. I wish it had never happened, that we’d never rushed into it.”

“You sound like you’ve lost someone to this war.”

I considered my answer while I stared at the ghostly outline of his face. “Yes, I have.”

“Childhood friend? College friend? I’ve lost so many.” He turned away and looked towards the remains of his comrade. “That’s the trouble with being a bloody infantry officer. It’s not just friends, it’s the men under my command. Harris is just one of many, but I feel each death, every sodding wound. So who did you lose?”

“A... good friend... at Mons. He was with the British Expeditionary Force. We met at college.” My voice caught in my throat. For a moment, Richard was there, standing proudly in his uniform. The pain of that good-bye twisted in my gut. Three years had passed, yet the sharpness of that knife never diminished. He’d been my first and was probably my last.

McCall remained silent, perhaps thinking of his own losses. I stared into the pitch-black night. The cold rain fell on my face. For once, it was a relief. It washed away the tears I’d been trying to fight.

A shell screamed overhead, leaving a streak of light in its wake.

“Bloody hell.” McCall threw himself over me, slamming me into the mud.

The ground trembled violently. The previously empty and silent sky filled with debris, which rained into our refuge. I heard it slam into the mud even beneath my companion’s laboured breaths. He flinched, fingers tightening on my shoulders. “Shit.”

Another shell, presumably one of ours, passed over. The night descended into a chaos of gunfire.

“I think I’ve been hit.” McCall pulled himself off me. Pain had tightened his voice.

I sat up. “Where?”

“Leg.” He took my hand and guided it to his thigh.

I smelt blood, felt it.

He hissed when I touched the wound.

It bled too freely for my liking. “Do you have something I can dress this with? I can do that. It needs to be covered up.” I fumbled in my pocket and realised that my scarf had been left behind in the plane.

“A filthy handkerchief, that’s about it.”

“Hang on. I know.” I unfastened my tunic in a hurry, then pushed it away. I hadn’t realised how many layers of clothing I’d put on until I had to strip them off. Finally, I pulled my undershirt over my head. “This will have to do.”

“Put your clothes back on, man. You’ll freeze to death.”

“You could bleed to death.” I tore into the garment. “Can you drop your trousers?”

He rose unsteadily and unfastened his trousers, before pushing them down carefully.

“I wish I could see properly. There might be shrapnel in there.”

“I don’t think there is. I think it just sliced through. It doesn’t feel like there’s anything in it.”

“I’m not about to try and pull anything out in the dark anyway, especially with that racket going on ahead.”

McCall sat back down. I knelt before him, barely making out the gash on his leg. There was no time or water for the niceties of wiping the blood away. I wrapped the torn fabric around his thigh as tightly as I dared. He placed his hands on my shoulders and gripped tight when I applied pressure to the wound.

“Christ.”

“Sorry. It needs to be secure. With any luck, the bleeding will stop.”

“It bloody hurts.”

“I’m sure it does.” I finished dressing the wound to the accompaniment of sporadic gunfire and the occasional distant roar of the big guns further down the line. “There, hopefully that will help until you can get a medic to have a look at it.” I was almost sorry to have lost the excuse to touch his skin, the hardness of his thighs beneath my fingertips.

The grip on my shoulders eased as his hands fell away. “Thank you.”

I climbed to my feet and wiped my hands on my trousers, regretting the absence of his touch.

McCall scrambled into his trousers then refastened them. Beyond the crater, the noise of battle faded away. My companion retrieved his coat and placed it around us as the rain returned with a miserable vengeance.

“Are you all right?” I huddled against him again more, seeking warmth.

“I’ll be fine.” His voice had sounded tight. He put his arm around my shoulder once more. “We should try to sleep. We’ll need our wits about us in the morning.”

I closed my eyes. Silence returned to the battlefield as both sides bedded down for the night.

“It’s all right,” he whispered. “You can rest your head on my shoulder. It’ll be more comfortable. If you don’t find it repellent.”

I complied, grateful for the comfort. “Not at all.”

“I thought as much. You didn’t shrink away before.”

“Why would I?”

McCall shifted. "Most men would."

"I'm not most men."

"Your friend... the one who was killed at Mons... he was..."

"Yes, he was more than that."

"I'm sorry." His hold tightened and, for the briefest of moments, I felt the feather-soft brush of fingers on my cheek. "It's hard to lose someone you care for."

I couldn't think of anything to say. The events of the day finally caught up with me. In spite of the hellish discomfort of our refuge, I fell asleep.

I woke shivering and to a light touch on my hair.

"Reed," McCall whispered. "Are you all right? You're shaking."

"C-c-cold."

"I know." He gathered me close and wrapped his coat around us both.

The rain had finally stopped, leaving an inky sky glittering with icy stars. Back home, the tang of autumn would be in the air, all wood smoke and damp leaves.

McCall rested his chin on my head. I hid my face in the warmth of his neck and prayed that those peaceful moments would last.

"Sometimes, even in war, there are good things," he murmured.

"Is this one of them?"

"I think it is." He slid one hand beneath my chin and tilted my face up. "May God forgive me. Perhaps it's because I'm exhausted beyond all measure and I can't think straight, but I feel a... bond between us."

I returned his steady gaze, seeing only the glint of his eyes in the fickle starlight. I could no longer deny the attraction, the comfort of his touch and the promise of his parted lips. "I think so too."

He lowered his mouth to mine. There was nothing tentative in that first touch. It was all fire and desperation. I responded in kind, curling my fingers into his short hair, seeking purchase, something to hold onto. He forced his

tongue between my lips and I yielded, welcoming the intrusion. For a few moments, I forgot that I was sitting at the bottom of a foetid, sodden crater in the middle of no-man's land.

“Lieutenant McCall! Are you there?” The fierce whisper from somewhere beyond the lip of the crater broke us apart.

McCall pressed his forehead to mine and cradled my face in his hands. “Bugger. I guess it's time to make a run for it.”

Fear rose inside of me, quelling the desire instantly. “I suppose so. Will you be all right?”

He rose stiffly and hissed. “It might be a bit painful.”

“Don't worry. I'll help you.” I would've carried him if I had to.

“Don't put yourself at risk for me.” He shouldered his rifle, then turned to face me. “One last kiss?”

“Yes.” I slid my arms beneath his coat and drew him close.

We took our time, even though time was something we didn't really have. Someone waited beyond our refuge, someone who could guide us to safety.

When McCall released me, he sighed. “Let's go.”

We scrambled up the slippery side of the crater. McCall grunted in pain with almost every movement. I made myself climb faster and bellied up into the churned mud at the top before he was even halfway. I reached down and held out my arm for him. He pushed himself forward and seized my hand. I braced myself and pulled him over the edge and into the mess beside me.

“Lieutenant?” Someone slopped through the mess towards us. “Are you all right? Are you ready to make a run for it? They're going to start the shelling soon.”

We both got to our feet. McCall leaned into me.

I put my arm around his waist. “The lieutenant caught a bit of shrapnel during that last round of shelling. He's going to need our help.”

“Oh, sorry, mate... I mean, sir.” The soldier must've seen the pips on my epaulettes. He hurried to McCall's other side. “Right, Lieutenant, are you ready?”

McCall took a deep breath and smiled at me. “Are you, Reed?”

“Yes.” I just wanted to be out of there before the *Boche* realised what was afoot and before the mortars started flying.

“Come on then,” our cheerful saviour said.

We broke into an uneven run, trying to find our way through the maze of tangled, broken wire and craters. McCall gripped my shoulder and I knew that if I could see him clearly, his lips would be compressed with the pain. He maintained a stoic silence as we hurried towards our trench, closer now. Close enough that I could hear the *snick* of guns being made ready, the whisper of men moving into position. A thin, pale sliver of light coloured the eastern horizon.

My back prickled. I wasn't sure if it was from fear or precognition. I quickened my pace, pulling McCall with me. We tumbled headlong into the trench as the first round of shells flew towards the enemy trenches.

“I'm going to fetch a medic for you, sir.” Our rescuer saluted and wheeled around, heading off into the mass of soldiers.

“Quick,” McCall shouted, “to the dugout.” It was his turn to take the lead, pulling me past the rows of waiting men, splashing over warped duckboards.

Those who weren't manning the parapet were rushing for cover in anticipation of returning fire. We were caught up in the rush, winding through the maze of trenches until McCall wrenched me off to one side into a small, dark space.

“Thank Christ.”

I heard him fumbling about, then a whiff of sulphur and a sudden flare of light. The delicate clink of glass was just about drowned out by the roar of an incoming shell. A lamp flared into uncertain life as clods of dirt tumbled into the dugout.

“That was close.” McCall handed me a tin helmet. “You'd better put this on, just in case the buggers manage to hit us.”

“Thanks.” I watched my companion slump onto his cot, wincing as he touched his wounded leg. “Shall I go and see about that medic?”

“No, it’s all right. I daresay he’ll be along when he can. I’ve survived this long.” He nodded towards a battered chest at the foot of the cot. “I promised you some whiskey. You’ll find a flask in there. I’ll light the stove so we can have that mug of tea. The lads will be too busy to be fetching us biscuits.”

I opened the trunk. A thin, elegant silver bottle rested on top of neatly folded jumpers and scarves. It sounded and felt reassuringly full. McCall lit the stove and poured water from a jug into the kettle. Then he took a small tin from the top of an upended crate, opened it then spooned tea into an incongruously pretty teapot.

“I’ll make it good and strong.”

“Yes, please.” I handed him the flask.

He opened it and splashed generous measures into two chipped and scratched enamelled mugs. The aroma of whiskey stole through the tiny space.

Another shell shook the dugout.

McCall glanced up at the boards that separated us from a tonne or two of dirt. “The sods are getting altogether too good at this shelling lark.” He rummaged around on the top of the crate, through a haphazard collection of jars and tins. “Ah, here it is.” He opened a tiny tobacco tin. “The sugar. Do you like your tea sweet? I think we need sweet after all we’ve been through.”

“Please.”

“You can sit down, you know.” He patted the empty space on the cot.

Outside, the rifles roared into action with a relentless volley of shots. I didn’t think the medic would be along any time soon.

I sat, grateful to sit on something dry and comfortable.

McCall carried on sorting through his jars until he found a small blue jug. He raised it to his face and sniffed. “Good, it hasn’t gone over.” He poured milk into the mugs and retrieved the kettle from the stove.

I tried not to flinch at the racket taking place outside. My host seemed impervious as he went about the age-old ritual of making tea—adding water to the teapot, gently shaking said pot and pouring the liquid through the strainer when he judged the tea was strong enough.

“Here you go.” He handed me a mug.

I cradled the chipped and worn cup in my hands, relishing the warmth of it. The whiskey’s presence was obvious. I raised the mug to my lips and took a cautious sip.

McCall watched me, half a smile on his face. “All right?”

The whiskey hit my guts like a steam train. “Excellent. Just what I needed. Thank you.” Warmth rushed through me. I felt my blood begin to circulate again.

“It bloody well is.” He set his tea down, then reached beneath the cot. “Here we go.” He picked up a biscuit tin and gave it a tentative rattle. “I think I’ve some biscuits left.”

“Perfect.”

McCall popped the lid of the tin and held it towards me. “Biscuit?”

I picked out a digestive and realised I was starving.

The gunfire ceased outside.

Someone shouted, “Hold your fire, lads! They’re pulling back.”

I glanced at McCall, who blew on his tea.

“Thank Christ for that,” he muttered. “Bastards.”

We drank in silence. The whiskey settled like a comforting fire in my gut. I wanted nothing more than to lie down on the creaking cot and sleep for days. I wanted McCall to lie beside me so that I could rest in the shelter of his arms. I wanted to wake to his kiss and to the stunning wintry blue of his eyes. Instead, I resigned myself to the fact that we would never see each other again, that war would inevitably see to that.

McCall sighed and set his tea down. “Do you think you could write to me? Would you do that?”

I grabbed onto that little bit of hope, that tenuous link we could share. “Yes. I’d do that.”

He smiled, his eyes warm. “Good.” Once more he searched for something, this time under his thin, flat pillow. He drew out a small leather-bound book and opened it. A fountain pen tumbled out. He picked it up and gave it a

shake. "I think it should have enough ink left." McCall licked his thumb, then dabbed at the pen's tip before scraping the nib across the paper. "Here we go." He found a blank page and scribbled away, then tore the sheet out and handed it to me. "My address for here, and my home address. Hopefully, when this whole sorry mess is over we can still keep in touch."

I took in the regimental address and the grander one for home, then folded the paper and placed it in my pocket. He passed me the pen and book. I spelled out my addresses and handed the journal back to him. He studied it for a moment, then returned the book to its place beneath the pillow.

"I hope we see each other again." McCall moved his hand over the coarse wool blanket and threaded his fingers through mine.

"So do I." I wanted that touch to last for a long time and hoped that the medic was occupied with other injuries. However, the slop of feet through wet mud outside made things otherwise.

"Lieutenant McCall?"

"Come in." He sighed and withdrew his hand.

I felt cold once more. The effects of the tea had faded quickly. I glanced up as a soldier stepped past the sacking that acted as a door, accompanied by a harried-looking medic. We all saluted each other.

The soldier turned to me. "Sir, we're standing down now. Someone will take you to your squadron HQ. So if you'd like to come with me."

I nodded. There wasn't really anything I could think of saying.

McCall extended his hand and shook mine, all formal and an Infantry officer once more. "Good luck, Second Lieutenant Reed, and thank you."

I saluted him again. My throat hurt. "Good luck to you, sir." I took those few too-short moments to memorise as much as I could, comforting myself with the fact that I would never forget his eyes or his kiss.

The soldier waited, holding the sacking back for me to pass through. I followed him out, leaving McCall with the medic and leaving a bit of myself behind.

Dear Arthur,

Well, I've managed to survive another offensive, this time without having to take shelter in a hole in the mud. I'm sure you've heard all about it anyway. Every time I hear the rumble of a plane, I look up and wonder if it's you, if you're looking down at us poor sods in the trenches and looking for me, if you're my guardian angel with canvas wings. I hope that you have your own guardian angel, keeping you airborne, keeping you safe from the guns and the mess.

Then, here in my dugout, when I can grab a few precious hours alone I reflect on our friendship and am grateful for that quirk of fate that brought us together. Anyway, I'm sorry this note isn't longer. I can hear someone shouting for me. Good old Lieutenant McCall will sort it all out, yet again.

Please write and let me know that you're safe and well.

I remain your most faithful friend...

I tucked the smudged and travel-worn postcard into my tunic pocket, close to my breast. I silently cursed the beady-eyed censors for ensuring that William could do little more than write something polite and as free of emotion as possible. God forbid that anyone read something more revealing.

“All right, Reed?” Squadron Leader Willmott stared at me over the top of the dog-eared book he'd been reading for the past three months.

“Yes, sir.”

The lowering, thick mist had put paid to any sorties for the day, which left us kicking our heels in the shed.

He shrugged and raised his book. “Could've fooled me. You look a bit gloomy.”

“Sorry, sir.” I stared through the cobweb-draped window and was glad for the feeble warmth of the small stove. It could've been worse. I could've been in a muddy trench somewhere. I wondered how William was doing, whether he was snug in his dugout or resting somewhere behind the lines. I would've

traded the shed for that dugout in a heartbeat, even though I had no reason to think that what accord there was between us was little more than gratitude to each other after surviving that damp, miserable night. I couldn't help wishing that there was something else and wanted to read more into that postcard than had probably been intended.

“Why don't you read a book or something?”

“I think I'll write a postcard since nothing seems to be happening today.” I rose then walked over to my footlocker. I had saved a few blank cards. There was no harm in replying. I dug my pen out of my diary then settled down on my cot to write.

Dear William,

I was pleased to hear from you and know that you are keeping well. All is well here. We keep busy as you can imagine. I'm not sure about the guardian angel. I've certainly been lucky. If a well-placed bomb helps to keep you alive then I have done my job. I must confess, I do prefer being airborne, in spite of... well, things. At least I haven't lost my bottle.

I, too, cherish our friendship and reflect on it often. I hope that we may one day have a chance to spend some time together in more comfort than our previous encounter.

Until that day I remain,

Yours faithfully...

I set the pen down and stared at the feeble words I'd written. The constraints of space and censorship made it impossible to write anything other than banalities. But, if it kept the tenuous connection between us alive, then it was worth it.

“That didn't take long.” Squadron Leader glanced up from his book.

“It's only a postcard. Can't say much of any import.”

He sighed and set the book down. “It's frustrating. I'll be bloody glad when we're done with this war. Three years in and look at us, still alive against the odds. Do you ever wonder when our luck will run out, Reed?”

“I try not to think about that, sir.”

“I don’t blame you. It’s a damned depressing business.”

I returned to my chair. “Yes, sir.”

He rose then stalked across the room to the stove. “Do you want tea?”

“Yes, sir, that would be very nice.”

“All I want to do is go home. I miss my Edith. She misses me.”

I’d never heard the normally upbeat Willmott so gloomy but declined to point that out to him. “I can imagine.”

“Is there someone you miss, Reed?” He poured water into the teapot.

I considered this. “Not really. Just my family. But they’ll be too busy to miss me.”

“I can’t believe that.”

I thought of my father. He would be getting the winter quarters ready for the sheep, preparing to bring them down from the fell before the snows started. There’d be walls to repair, forage to be stored. The wind would roar down from the fell, the type of wind that felt like it could cut a man to the bone. No, he would be too busy to miss me, not while he had his mind on the coming winter.

Willmott handed me my tea. I tried not to grimace at the lack of sugar. The chipped enamel mug delivered me to another place.

“I’ve been thinking.” Willmott settled back into his chair.

“About what, sir?”

“About after... assuming we survive, that is. I’m going to keep flying. I can’t imagine not flying. I have a job waiting for me back at the aerodrome. Would you be willing to join me there? We always need good pilots, steady ones who can teach others to fly. Would you consider that, Reed?”

I took a sip of tea and stared at him for a moment. “Where, sir?”

“Berkshire.” He shrugged. “It’s not much of a place. We’ve a hangar or two and a decent landing strip and some keen enthusiasts. There’s a town nearby, so you’d find somewhere to live easily enough. I wouldn’t ask any of the other lads. I know you’d be an excellent instructor. What do you think?”

I considered the alternatives and found there weren't any. Berkshire was close to Wiltshire. That was enough. There was every chance that I would see William again. "Yes, thank you, sir. I'd be delighted."

Willmott grinned and leaned over, hand outstretched. "Excellent." He shook my hand. "We'll do good things there, and you'll enjoy it."

"I think I will, sir." I thought of William and prayed.

Dear God, let us both survive this mess of a war.

The engine faltered and flecks of oil quickened to a vigorous bleed, spraying across my face and into the cockpit. I wrestled with the stick, trying to nurse my stricken plane back to the airfield. The rudder control didn't seem to want to cooperate, even when I grabbed it with both hands. Pained spluttering from the engine told me that I wasn't going to be airborne for much longer. The plane dipped and swerved drunkenly. The ground loomed closer, a sweep of green. Wind replaced the sound of the engine, rushing past me, shaking the wings. It was all happening too swiftly for me to feel frightened—I was too busy trying to ensure a gentle landing. After some argument, I finally managed to bring the nose up, just before the ground rose to meet the plane. It bounced and pirouetted across the field. The world whipped past me in a blur of grass and mud. The wing struts juddered and split and the landing gear whirred and screeched as the plane careened towards the trees at the far end of the runway. The rudder snapped, sending the machine into a mad spin. I braced myself and prayed. When everything went black, it seemed a mercy.

"Second Lieutenant Reed?" a gentle, feminine voice slipped into nightmares full of chaos and splintering wood.

I could still smell oil. Everything ached. It even hurt to open my eyes to a flood of sunlight. I waited for my vision to clear, for me to realise that a nurse with bright red hair stood at the foot of a bed... a bed I appeared to be in. I stared at her, struggling to get my thoughts from my head to my mouth.

"You're in the field hospital." The nurse offered me a smile full of good cheer. "Don't worry, you'll be fine."

"I don't feel fine." My voice escaped in a croak.

“You had a bit of a rough landing.” She moved to the side of the bed before patting my hand. “You’ve broken your right leg and there’s a fair bit of bruising, but the doctor thinks you’re going to be all right.”

“My leg?”

“You were very lucky, I’m told. It could’ve been a lot worse.”

“If you say so.”

“You’ll be going home soon.”

“Home?” I tried to digest the words.

“Yes. The doctor says it’s going to take a little while to heal. You’ll be sent to a lovely place to recover. You’re an officer. You’ll get to rest and recuperate in comfort.” She touched my hand again. “You need to rest, Lieutenant. It will do you the world of good.”

I’d heard about rest homes. One or two of my comrades had enjoyed a comfortable few weeks nursing their blighties in the comfort of somebody’s home, one of many that had been converted to house convalescing officers. “I can’t remember the last time I went home.”

“Bless you.” The nurse tucked in a bit of my bedclothes. “Enjoy your little break. There are a lot of men who’d give a good deal to be where you are now.”

I glared at the shape of my leg, hidden beneath the thin, antiseptic-smelling coverlet. The throbbing, stabbing pain seemed quite a price to pay for a few weeks of being pampered. “I suppose so.” I wished I could feel some joy at the prospect. All I could think was that it would take me farther away from William.

“Shall I get you some tea? I should think you could use a cup of tea.” She sat me up and fluffed the pillow behind me.

I nodded. “Could I have a postcard? I need to write to someone. Let them know what’s happened.”

“Of course. Let me get your tea sorted and I’ll get someone to bring you what you need.” She disappeared in a flurry of footsteps, heels clacking on the wooden floor.

I leant back against the pillow and surveyed the room. I shared a ward with several other men, most of them occupied with their own business—reading, dozing, staring out of the window and, in one instance, talking rapidly and softly to himself as he rocked back and forth.

A few minutes later, another nurse arrived with a mug of tea and a postcard and pen. I scribbled off a quick note to William, informing him of my misfortune and that I would be shipped back to England to recover. It seemed to be all I could do. Returning to England just took me farther from him, away from any chance of seeing him again.

Dear Arthur,

The gods certainly smiled on you, my friend. I'm sure you don't feel lucky or blessed with your broken bones, but I envy you the respite. I'm just relieved that you didn't come to any serious harm. I hope that your recovery goes well and wish you comfort and peace.

Everything here is much the same. I grab sleep when I can, I keep my head down and my feet dry. What gets me through is the thought that one day this will all be over and we can meet again.

I remain,

Faithfully yours,

W.

Dear William,

Thank you for your kind words. I am now comfortably settled in the Ivy House Convalescent Home. I have been given a sunny room overlooking the garden and feel like I'm getting far more than I deserve. The ladies here are very kind and food is quite an improvement on the usual. I daren't say any more for fear of sounding smug and self-satisfied.

I feel rather guilty. All I did was crash my plane. Nothing heroic. Nothing to earn me this rest. As comfortable and safe as this place is, I'd rather be back in France helping to get the job done so that we can all be safe and have sunny gardens to admire.

Stay safe, my friend.

A.

Dear Arthur,

Just a quick note from me. We've work to do here so I've just time to wish you a speedy recovery and to let you know that you're in my thoughts, as I hope I am in yours. I will write soon.

Yours, as always

W.

“Good morning!” Mrs Hawthorne, one of the volunteers at the convalescent home, carried a tray into the room. “Here’s your breakfast and the morning post.”

Something inside me lifted. “Post?” I hadn’t heard from William since his last, hastily scrawled note. That, combined with news of a big push had left me fretful and worried at the lack of correspondence. I’d told myself that he was probably just too busy to write.

Mrs Hawthorne set the tray down then handed me a small bundle of envelopes. I sorted through them, hoping for a postcard. One tumbled onto my lap, addressed to me in a hand I didn’t recognise. I turned it over.

Dear 2nd Lt. Reed,

It has fallen to me to deliver bad news. Lt. McCall had asked me that, if anything happened to him, that I was to let you know. Last week we had a bit of a push on our section of the line. Needless to say, Lt. McCall decided to go over the top himself. He was always a brave soul and would never ask his men to do

anything he wouldn't. They were making excellent progress when a Boche shell hit quite close by. It was chaos. By the time it had all settled, the Lt. was nowhere to be seen and we couldn't send out a search party until we'd secured the enemy trench. As of this moment, we have found no trace of him.

He spoke of you fondly, as a dear friend. I am sorry.

Sincerely,

Captain Harold Bartlett

The close, tidy writing dissolved into a blurry scribble. I stared at the card for several moments and tried to will the words away. A chill settled deep into my bones.

“Second Lieutenant?” Mrs Hawthorne touched my arm. “Are you all right?”

I swallowed and forced myself to look at her. “Just some bad news, that’s all.”

Her face was all sympathy. “I’m very sorry. Can I get you anything?”

“No, it’s fine.” I had no right to grieve. A chance meeting, a stolen kiss and a handful of postcards didn’t entitle me to feel grief. I mourned the loss of the promise, the chance of seeing him again. “I’ll be fine.”

“Let me pour you a cup of tea. That’ll help.”

I nodded. I didn’t have the heart to refuse her kindness.

She gave the teapot a gentle shake, then poured the tea into the cup. Once she’d added milk and sugar, she handed it to me. “It’s nice and strong. Just what you need.”

It wasn’t what I needed but I took a sip anyway. All the hope and light had drained out of the frosty autumn morning.

“Is there anything else I can get you?”

A bottle of brandy and a glass.

“No, thank you. I’ll be fine. I think I just need some peace and quiet.”

“I understand.” She patted my shoulder. “If you need anything you have only to ask.”

I doubted her generosity ran to brandy. “Thank you.”

Mrs Hawthorn departed. The sunny room I’d been so grateful for lost a little light as a cloud drifted over the sun. I drank my tea and stared out of the window hoping to find some joy in the autumnal colours of the garden. I ached inside, mourning something I’d never had. All that remained was a handful of postcards, tucked into my diary. I closed my eyes, ignored the tightness in my throat and tried to forget the man with the blue eyes who’d once kissed me.

PART TWO

“Arthur, there’s someone here to see you.”

I withdrew my hand from the Bleriot’s engine and looked around. “To see me?”

Willmott stood in the open doorway of the hangar. “Yes, he’s waiting outside the cafe. I left him with a mug of tea and told him you’d be right there.”

“I can’t imagine anyone would be looking for me.” I did my best to wipe the oil from my fingers. My overalls, marked with the evidence of many long hours arguing with recalcitrant engines, were beyond redemption. I hardly looked like anyone’s idea of a pilot. “Perhaps he’s wanting lessons?”

“I doubt it. Poor bugger has a game leg. Sticks straight out when he sits down.”

I tossed the oily cloth aside. “Oh well, best go see what he wants, eh?”

Willmott patted my shoulder. “Give yourself a rest, man. There’s only two more lessons today. I’ll take ’em and when Simms gets back from town, he can take a look at this damned Bleriot. You’ve been working too hard.”

Only because I can’t think of anything else to do with my time.

“Thanks. There’s a book or two at home that I wouldn’t mind reading.”

“What an exciting life you lead, Arthur. I’ll see you in the morning. Take your bloody book and sit out in the sunshine.”

I headed for the small, ramshackle shed that served as the aerodrome’s clubhouse and cafe. Watson, the proprietor, had placed a handful of tables on the grass out front. The April sunlight was kind but the breeze held the promise of rain—hardly the nicest of days to be sitting outside watching the planes.

He cradled a mug of tea between his hands. The crook of a cane rested over the arm of his chair. Fingers of breeze sifted through his pale hair. I swallowed at the lump in my throat, wishing it was true, wishing he was there. But the vision remained. William glanced up and smiled.

“Arthur?”

I advanced towards him on faltering feet, following the siren’s call of the illusion, willing to humour it—and myself. “William?” My voice was little more than a reedy, disbelieving whisper. “William?”

The illusion rose, seizing its cane and leaning heavily on it as it sank into the soft, green grass. “By God, you’re a sight for sore eyes, man.”

The voice was as I remembered, slightly gravelly but beautifully modulated. The fatigue of battle had long since fled his eyes, replaced with a brilliance I didn’t recognise.

“It really is you? William?” All I could hear was the frantic pounding of my heart. “But...”

“I’m sorry, it’s a long story.” He held out his hand.

I took it, seized it and felt the living warmth of his palm pressed to mine. His touch reignited memories, stirred the embers of a life I’d almost given up on. “My God, it’s good to see you.”

“It’s good to see you too, Arthur.” He released my hand, fingers trailing slowly away. “Fancy a tea? No whiskey I’m afraid.”

I followed him numbly to the table and sank into the other chair. The damp wicker creaked and whispered. I stared at him while steam from his tea rose between us.

Mrs Simms brought another mug and a plate of cakes. “Here you go, Mister Reed. I knew you’d be wanting your tea and I brought some cakes for you both.”

“Thanks.” I reached for the tea when all I really wanted to do was reach for the hand that rested so close to mine on the sun-warmed tabletop.

“I can see you’re full of questions.” William retrieved his mug. “Do you have time?”

“I have the rest of the day off.” I wanted to be away from the airfield, from dear Mrs Simms peering through the shed window. I wanted to be somewhere where I could touch his hand and reassure myself that he was really there.

“Good. Then let’s find somewhere a little more comfortable.”

“I have a place in town, it’s not much, just a flat but it’s warm and there’s whiskey.”

“That sounds just fine.”

I glanced at his cane and at the leg stretched out beneath the table. “It’s a bit of a walk. Will you...?”

“The doctor says the more exercise I get the better.” He rose stiffly. “Come on then. We’ve a lot to talk about and I’d rather do it somewhere a bit more private.”

By the time we reached my place, William’s face was flushed and his limp far more pronounced. He slumped into the armchair and wiped his brow with his handkerchief while I disappeared into the kitchen in search of refreshments. I found a couple of bottles of ginger beer and some bread and cheese, which I set on the small table beside his chair.

“That’s better.” He poured his beer into the glass I’d given him.

The scent of ginger rose from my glass, the smell of the summer to come. I took a mouthful and settled into my chair, waiting. Not sure whether to ask questions or let William speak for himself.

He took a long drink and stretched his good leg out alongside the damaged one. “I don’t know how much Bartlett told you in his letter.” His eyes grew distant.

I knew that stare; I’d seen it on the faces of so many survivors of the mess that was the Great War. “We’d headed off across no-man’s land, a mortar landed close by. I was blown clear. To be honest, I don’t remember much at all. I know when I came to, I was being hauled through a trench full of *Boche* on a stretcher, with my leg in shreds.”

“The *Boche*? They captured you?”

William set his glass down. “Yes, they did. They patched me up and they sent me behind their lines to a prisoner of war camp.”

“You were lucky. They could’ve killed you!”

“They could’ve, but they treated me well.” He rubbed his thigh. “Pity their doctors couldn’t do much about this, mind.”

“What happened to your leg?”

“Sodding shrapnel sliced right through a tendon. Their doctor did what he could, but it was a field hospital full of his own wounded. He probably saved my life because I was bleeding like the proverbial stuck pig. I was shipped out of there as soon as I was conscious and spent the next few weeks convalescing in the prison camp infirmary. Again, not much they could do for me there but keep it clean and help me to start walking again. They were kind but I’ll have this limp for the rest of my life. But at least I’m alive.” He turned towards me. “We both made it, Arthur.”

“Yes, we did.” I wanted to touch him, to know that he really was there, in my armchair, drinking beer. “What happened after the war?”

“We weren’t released until about a month after the Armistice. We were turned over to the Red Cross and they made sure we made it back here. First thing my mother did when I got home was pack me off to a proper convalescent home where doctors poked and prodded and decided that there’s nothing they can do. Then, after Christmas, I went home and I more or less hibernated for the rest of the winter.” He sighed and studied a crack in the worn leather upholstery. “I’m sorry, I should’ve tried to contact you then but I needed time to become the old me again, as much as I could find of him anyway.”

“I understand.”

“I missed you.”

“I thought you were dead.”

“I’m sorry. I suppose I was in a way.” His voice had been hoarse. “I wrote to you and your parents told me where I’d find you and here I am. I don’t have any right to expect anything of you.”

“It depends what you’re expecting.”

“To get to know you. A few letters and a night sharing a crater don’t really count, do they?”

“They’re a start.” Something inside me sang. “It’s enough that you’re alive. That you’re not a ghost.”

He laughed softly. “Your face was a picture. I’d thought of that moment for some time. I’d lie in my cot in that camp and imagine seeing you again. So,

I want to get to know you, Arthur. I want to know why I missed you so much, why I ached to see you again. Does that make sense?"

"Yes." Desire rose in me like fire. I pushed it away, knowing that we had time.

"I never thought I'd..."

"Nor me. How long are you here for?" I didn't want him to leave, afraid that if he did, he would cease to exist.

"I'm staying at the Stag and Hounds, just tonight. I thought we might dine there."

"I can't remember the last time I ate in a restaurant. I'd like that."

"Excellent. Then that's what we'll do." He reached for his beer.

I retrieved mine and enjoyed the novelty of company. Silvery afternoon light fell across the tired rug. The sky beyond the window was almost white and the smell of rain drifted through the open window. William looked like he belonged there, resting in that chair in his rumpled linen suit. Peace settled in the room, broken only by the plaintive call of a mourning dove and the fierce chattering of sparrows. I wished the span of the rug didn't separate us. It was enough that he was there.

Evening brought a gentle drizzle. It whispered against the windows of the hotel dining room, where lamps flickered on the tables and liveried waiters glided silently amongst the diners bearing trays and hospitality. People spoke in soft murmurs, filling the shadowed room with whispers and muted laughter.

William leant back in his chair and pushed his empty plate away. "That wasn't half bad."

I scraped the last bit of potato from my plate. "No it wasn't. I haven't eaten so well in ages."

"Do you fend for yourself then?"

"Let's just say I eat simply."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"If I can cook it in a frying pan, then I'm fine."

He shook his head. “No wonder you fell upon that like a starving man. I’m inviting you to Drake’s Hill to stay, if you can get away. You need feeding up. Mrs Clinton’s cooking will soon sort you out. Can the aerodrome spare you for a few days?”

“Willmott’s been nagging at me to take some time off so I’m sure it could be arranged.” I hoped that I’d managed to keep the excitement out of my voice.

“Then you must. As soon as you can arrange it, let me know.”

“I’ll talk to Willmott tomorrow.” I’d worked several months without a break, preferring to drown my grief in planes and being airborne. “I’m sure he’ll manage fine without me for a few days.

“Good. Some country air and a rest will do you the world of good.” He reached for his glass and brushed his fingers over the back of my hand for the briefest of moments. “We can finally enjoy the peace we fought so hard for.”

Something inside fluttered at his touch. “I’d like that.”

“So will I.” William smiled and raised his glass to me. “So here’s to finding our peace.”

The Renault trundled along the lane, leaving clouds of dust rising in its wake.

William slowed the car to a crawl, then turned to look at me. “Not far now.”

I glanced at the low hill ahead of us, rising in a lush sweep of green and topped with a copse of beech trees. Fields on either side of the track were alive with sheep, ewes and lambs that dozed at their mothers’ sides or chased each other across the grass. The warm breeze hurried clouds across the sky and their shadows raced over the downs, blotting the sun.

I breathed deeply, smelling spring and sunlight. “It’s beautiful.”

“And peaceful.” William urged the car forward and it laboured noisily along the lane, into the cool violet shade beneath the trees.

Bluebells spread in a misty blue carpet between burgeoning saplings and the smooth, solid trunks of the beeches rising in a canopy of shifting leaves

above us. For the first time since returning from France, I felt calm and content.

The woods gave way to a broad carpet of lawn. William turned the car onto a gravel drive which led towards the house, built of mellow red brick. Lead-paned windows glinted from behind a wild veil of wisteria and ivy. It was a rambling, asymmetrical collection of odd rooflines and facades, telling of many additions and changes over many years. It looked as if it had grown out of the earth itself, so comfortable and right did it look in its setting of lawn, ancient woodland and brilliantly coloured flowerbeds.

“Welcome to Drake’s Hill.” William turned off the chuntering engine and smiled before resting his hand on my knee for a moment. “It’s good to know that you’re here at last. I thought the day would never arrive.”

“Neither did I.” I couldn’t think of anything else to say. I felt close to bursting with happiness at just being there, a possibility that I thought had gone forever.

He climbed out of the car and I followed suit.

“Don’t worry about your things, Barnes will bring those in and put them in your room.” William led me towards a shadowed porch wreathed in ivy. “My mother will make a fuss. She has been wanting to meet you.”

“What on earth have you said to her?”

“It’s all right.” He touched my arm then opened the door before ushering me into a shadowy hallway, which smelt of beeswax and flowers.

“Will? Is that you?” A woman’s voice floated along the corridor, followed in short order by the soft tap of footsteps on the flagstone floor.

“Yes, it’s me and Arthur. He arrived in one piece.”

Mrs McCall hurried into view and drew me into a perfumed embrace. “Welcome, Arthur, it’s so lovely to meet you at last.” She stepped back, keeping her hands on my arms. “I’ve heard all about you. Will thinks the world of you, you know.”

“It’s nice to meet you too.” I hadn’t been prepared for the effusiveness of her welcome.

“You must be tired after your journey.” She glanced at Will. “Why don’t you show Arthur his room, dear. I’ll ring for some tea and cake. Mrs Briggs has been busy in the kitchen all morning. She does love it when we have houseguests.” Mrs McCall released me.

“Good idea, Mother.” William nodded in my direction. “Follow me.”

“Tea will be in the drawing room,” Mrs McCall called after us as we headed towards the stairs.

“We’ll be there.”

I followed William up the staircase, our feet whispering on the carpet. The oak balustrade was smooth and warm beneath my fingers. The treads creaked softly. My host paused at the top on a broad landing. Sunlight fell through a window, crowning his head with gold. My heart stopped for the briefest of moments, then the sun passed behind a cloud and he was just William once more.

“It’s just here.” He stepped across the landing and opened a door. “Just over the landing from mine.”

The room was as large and bright as the room I’d recovered in at Ivy House and the view was similar, opening onto the lawn and the trees beyond.

“Will it do?” William leaned on his cane.

“It’s very nice.” I thought of my spartan flat overlooking a tired little garden on one side and a busy road on the other. I’d already decided that it would be hard to leave Drake’s Hill.

William took a step forward and lifted his hand to my cheek. “I like having you here. I feel like I’m finally home and safe. Does that make sense?”

“Yes. I feel a lot like that myself.” I did. The war had ended months before, yet here there was peace, a deep, restful peace unlike any I had ever known or even longed for.

A muffled knock on the door broke the silence.

William lowered his hand with a sigh. “That’ll be Barnes with your things. I’ll leave you to settle in.” He backed towards the door. “I’ll see you in the drawing room, it’s at the far end of the downstairs corridor. You will be

treated to the best cakes you've ever tasted. Mrs Clinton is the queen of all kitchens."

"I'll look forward to it. It's been a while since I've had good home-cooked food."

"I guarantee you won't want to leave."

It was too late for that. Drake's Hill was already curling itself around me, drawing me in, tying me to that good earth, the downs and the sheltering woods.

It felt exactly right when William wove his fingers through mine while we walked through the woods. "So what did you think of Mrs Briggs' baking?"

"I won't dispute that she's queen of all kitchens." I found so much hope and comfort in his closeness. "I'm afraid this visit will spoil me for anything else, especially my own cooking."

"Then don't go back. Stay here."

I stopped, surrounded by beeches and bluebells. A cool breeze whispered through the trees, bringing with it the distant, contented bleating of sheep. It tugged at William's hair, lifting strands of it.

"I can't just... live here. What would I do?"

"Manage the farm with me, unless you'd miss flying too much." He glanced at the arc of sky above then looked at me.

"I spend most of my time repairing the bloody planes. The airfield owner doesn't like spending money." I stared at him, trying to absorb the implication of those two words. "You want me to stay here?"

"Can you think of any reason why not?"

"Of course not... but it's a big move. Can I think about it?" I knew my answer would be yes but I didn't want to rush headlong into it the way I'd rushed headlong into war. "It's been a while since I've worked on a farm."

"Don't you miss it?" William stepped closer and lifted his hand to my cheek.

“I don’t miss repairing stone walls on a fell side when it’s sleeting and blowing a gale.”

He laughed softly. “We have plenty of people to do the donkey work. I promise that repairing walls and fences wouldn’t be on your list unless you wanted it to be.”

I gazed at his parted lips and moved towards him. It had been two years since that first and last kiss. I wanted to be sure that it would be the same, or better. A beech wood washed by May sunlight was a far better place than a muddy bomb crater in the middle of no-man’s land.

“Arthur.” William’s voice trailed away to a whisper, a touch of warm breath on my cheek. He curled one hand around the back of my neck and pressed his lips to mine.

I pulled William closer and wound my fingers through his hair, savouring every shared breath, every long and wistful sigh.

When he broke away, he rested his forehead against mine and smiled. “If we carry on at this rate...”

Desire rose within me. I wondered how private those woods truly were because I wanted nothing more than to drop to my knees and relieve his obvious need, the need that pushed insistently against my own. “I know. Can we...? I want...”

“I want you too. But this is neither the time nor place.” William placed a gentle kiss on my brow. “But have no doubt, I intend to act on our mutual desires. Just not here.” He slid his hand down to mine and squeezed it. “But I don’t wish to influence your decision as to whether to accept my offer or not. Just know that it is made with the best of intentions.”

“I know.” I touched his face. “And I will give it a great deal of thought.”

He smiled. “Good. Now let me show you the rest of the farm.”

I was glad to escape the stultifying dullness of the vicar’s Sunday sermon. Mrs McCall had insisted on going to church and, of course, we felt obliged to accompany her. The church was in a nearby village and sat on top of a small

rise overlooking a broad green. I leaned against the rough bark of a yew tree and waiting while William and his mother chatted with acquaintances. I watched people drift across the green and enjoyed the bucolic peace. After two days at Drake's Hill and, given the opportunity to think during the long sermon, I had decided that I would be a fool not to take William's offer. I ran through my words of acceptance in my head and waited.

William's sudden and loud laugh caught my attention. I glanced over my shoulder. Mrs McCall was talking with the vicar whilst William had drifted to one side of the flagstone path and was deep in conversation with a young man. The way William had his head inclined towards him made me turn. The way he rested his hand on the man's shoulder made something inside twist and sink. William was apparently absorbed in everything the fellow had to say.

Perhaps not such a good idea after all.

I swallowed the dry, harsh lump in my throat and managed a smile when Mrs McCall strolled towards me. She paused to touch her son's arm, I assumed to remind him that he had someone waiting for him. He nodded briefly, leaned close to his companion and whispered something before catching up with his mother. I shoved my hands into my pockets and waited, forcing myself to appear unperturbed. Perhaps spending the rest of my days up to my elbows in airplane engines wasn't such a bad thing. Perhaps I wasn't meant to live with another. I had learned to live with my own company and it would suffice.

"Are you all right?" William asked.

"Fine."

"I'm sorry. I'm afraid the vicar's sermons can go on a bit. At least we've done our duty, eh? Let's get back to the house. Mrs Clinton will have prepared a splendid Sunday lunch. We can eat like emperors and then fall asleep in the drawing room."

Mrs McCall shook her head. "Some things never change. Your father was just the same, God rest his soul."

William winked at me and I did my best to return his smile. His raised eyebrow in response told that I'd failed.

“Are you all right?” William settled onto the drawing room settee. “You seem a bit preoccupied.”

I stretched my legs across the worn hearth rug and stared at my hands. “I’ve come to a decision.” That decision sat in my gut like a heavy stone. I told myself that it was for the best.

He sat forward, resting his elbows on his knees. “Something tells me it’s not one I’ll like.”

I swallowed then took a deep breath. “I think it’s best that I return to Berkshire. I owe Willmott. He offered me that job while we were still in France. He needs me.”

William ran one hand through his hair, leaving it tousled. “That’s not what I wanted to hear. I’d hoped...”

For the briefest of moments I wanted to take those words back. “I know. But I need some independence. It’s not a luxurious life, but I think I need to be on my own.” It was a terrible lie but I couldn’t think of anything else. To tell him the truth—that his brief encounter with his acquaintance had somehow convinced me that I would be nothing more than hired help—seemed pointless and silly. I had expected too much and did not want to admit that.

He sighed and nodded. “I understand. At least I’ll try to.”

I rose. “I’d better go and pack. I don’t want to outstay my welcome.”

“You don’t have to.”

“I know. But it’s best that I go sooner rather than later.” I knew if I stayed my resolve would weaken.

“Of course. I understand.” He remained seated when I left the room and headed for the stairs.

We stood on the station platform. The sunshine of the previous handful of days had disappeared, swallowed by a leaden pall of clouds that promised rain. William leaned against a pillar, hands thrust into his pockets. The damp breeze touched his hair, brushing it over his forehead. His gaze was distant and, I convinced myself, a little bit sad.

“Why?” A sigh had coloured the question. “Did I do something?”

The track rumbled with the approach of the eastbound train. “I think perhaps... that I had the wrong impression... that you wanted me there for a different reason than I had hoped.”

The train clattered into the station, steam hissing as it slowed to a stop. I picked up my bags then walked across the platform. William’s footsteps echoed behind me.

“What do you mean?”

My cheeks flamed. I turned around. The air was filled with the slam of carriage doors. “In the churchyard... I realised I had hopes that were misguided.” I opened a door and placed my luggage into the carriage before climbing on board. “Good-bye, Will. I enjoyed the visit. I hope we can stay in touch.”

The conductor blew his whistle.

“Wait! What do you mean? Do you mean Edward?”

“I mean that I hardly know you and, yes, Edward, if that’s the person in the church yard. It just made me realise that I’m not ready to take this leap in the dark.”

The train lurched forward with a hiss of steam.

William quickened his steps as the train gained momentum. “There’s nothing for you to be concerned about. He’s a friend. We’ve known each other since we were children. For God’s sake, Arthur, he’s getting married next month.”

“It doesn’t matter. That’s not what this is about.”

William trailed away, unable to keep up. He raised his hand then let it drop. He dropped his head and his shoulders slumped. Dark guilt choked me, burnt my eyes. I turned my gaze from the rapidly receding platform, suddenly unable to see anything.

“Christ, I thought that rest would do you good.” Willmott helped me push the plane back into the hangar. “You’ve not said a word since you returned two weeks ago.”

“I realised that it wasn’t for me.”

He stopped pushing and glared at me. “What wasn’t? A rest? You’ve hardly stopped since you started working here. If you’re not flying, you’re tinkering with bloody engines and bits. You look fit to drop, not the least bit rested.”

“I’ll be all right. I was bored. I need to keep busy. Sitting around wasn’t for me.”

Willmott sighed and shook his head. “You’re mad. I suppose you’re going to spend all night with your head in a bloody engine too.”

“That had crossed my mind.”

“Well, you can’t.” He took my arm and steered me away from the plane and towards the door. “I’m locking it tonight. You are going home and you are going to rest. You are not allowed back here for a week. I’ll not have you dropping with exhaustion.”

I’d served with Willmott long enough to recognise that set to his jaw, the twitch of a muscle there, the chill in his eyes. It was the same look he got when he’d been about to go hunting the enemy. I shrugged his hand away. “All right. I’ll rest. Better yet, give me two weeks and I’ll go to Cumbria. My parents keep asking when I’m going to pay them a visit.”

“Good idea.” He wheeled my bicycle towards me.

I took it from him and straddled it. “I will. I’ll see you in a fortnight.”

“And not a moment before.”

“Don’t worry.” I pedalled towards the post office to send a telegram to my parents. For the first time in years, the wild, windswept fells held some appeal.

I slotted another stone into the gap in the wall. My father had sent me up onto the fell to repair one of the walls and I welcomed the chance to busy myself. June was a relatively quiet month, a lull between the chaos of lambing and the backbreaking labour of shearing. Being high up on the fell with nothing but grazing sheep for company seemed a far better prospect than getting under my mother’s feet while she bustled about the house. My brother,

Matthew, had gone to Penrith Market and my father remained down at the farm, repairing one of the sheds. That left me alone, to lose myself in the fine art of repairing stone walls.

The land dozed in an amber haze. Everything seemed to move slowly in the heavy, humid air. Clouds towered above the crest of the fell, their underbellies dark with the threat of a storm. I chipped around the edges of another stone, crafting the next piece of the puzzle. The heat was tempered by a damp breeze and it caught at the perspiration on my skin, cooled me enough to keep me comfortable while I worked. I let myself become lost in the task—it was better than remembering the lonely life I faced when I returned to Berkshire. A life I'd stupidly chosen for myself.

The long train journey to Cumbria had given me too much time to think, to realise that my decision had been hasty and based on nothing more than a moment's oversensitivity in the churchyard.

Too bloody late now, Reed. You've made your bed...

I tried to tell myself it wasn't worth dwelling on. As William hadn't written since my hurried departure from Drake's Hill, I'd decided that he clearly thought I wasn't worth a persistent effort on his part. Too bloody late, indeed.

Another stone into the wall, the breach was shrinking piece by painstaking piece. I stepped back and took a moment or two to admire my handiwork, then look at the sky. The sun was lost behind long streamers of cloud, the advance guard of the approaching storm. The wind rose a little, whispering through the grass. Buttercups trembled while foxgloves flattened themselves to the wall, as if seeking shelter. I gathered the tools together then shoved them back into the shoulder bag, along with the remnants of my lunch. By the time I made it back to the farm, my mother would doubtless have a bottle of beer and a piece of cake ready for me, to tide me over until teatime. It was enough of an incentive for me to pick up the pace.

“Arthur?”

The wind played tricks on me, calling my name. A murmur in the grass, almost lost beneath the bleating of lambs. I carried on putting things away, then tidied up the pile of stones.

“Arthur?”

I straightened up and turned around.

William shivered in the sudden chill of the wind. He leaned heavily on his cane and regarded me with a wary, hopeful gaze. “Hello, Arthur. Your father told me I’d find you here. It’s a bit of a climb.”

I stared at him, fumbling for words, wondering if I’d spent too long working in the heat. “William?” I thought that if I spoke his name he might disappear and leave me alone with my regret. I wasn’t sure which would be worse.

He took an uncertain step towards me. “I went to the airfield. Willmott told me you were here, so I took a chance.”

I shouldered my bag. “Quite a big chance.”

“I thought it would be better to talk to you than try and write. I’m sick of letters.”

“Talk about what?” I glanced at the sky. “Whatever we need to talk about, we should probably head back to the farm. It’s going to rain and we don’t want to be caught up here in a storm.”

William sighed and fell into step beside me. We walked in silence, with nothing but the song of the wind and the bleating of sheep for company.

“It’s beautiful here,” William said after a while.

“It is at this time of year. On a cold winter’s day, it’s not quite as pleasant.” I glanced at him. His mouth was set in a thin, pinched line as he limped along, clearly struggling with the unevenness of the ground, his cane getting snagged now and then by clumps of grass and bindweed. “But you didn’t come all this way to talk about the weather.”

He paused, his chest rising as he drew a deep breath. “No. I came to ask if you would reconsider your decision.”

My heart leapt at the second chance, a chance to fix things. “Can’t you find someone closer to look after your farm?”

Something flickered in his eyes. “It was never about looking after the farm, it was...” He stared past me into the distance, where the sky had darkened. A veil of grey obscured the edge of the horizon. “I want you to be there, to be

with me. I know it's a lot to ask. All we ever did was share a kiss or two, exchange a few letters. There were no vows, no promises... nothing like that. It was—is—a lot to ask of you. But since that night we met, I've never been able to forget, to stop..." William bit his lip, entreaty in his eyes. "I'm not an eloquent man, Arthur. I'm not very good at talking about what's inside me. I can give orders, I can hold my end of a conversation but when it comes to you... I'm struck dumb."

"Why?"

"I'm afraid that if I say what I really feel, you'll say 'no' again. We've spent more time apart than together. I know we have so much to learn about each other. I know I'm asking a lot of you. I know that you'd rather be up in one of your planes than tied to the ground."

I touched his cheek, glad to feel the warmth of his skin beneath my fingertips. "I've had enough of flying. I like being rooted to the soil. I'm a farmer's son, remember?"

William turned his head and brushed his lips across my palm. "Will you come and live with me, Arthur? Will you tend that good earth with me? I have nothing to hide from you. No one from my past, there has never been anyone. Only you."

A low, rolling growl of thunder filled the waiting silence. It didn't matter that we were halfway up a hillside, surrounded by waving grass and gathering clouds. I leant forward and kissed him, taking my time, savouring the feel of his lips yielding to mine.

William's cane fell unheeded to the ground when he held my face between his hands and took a small step back, breaking the kiss. "Is that a yes?"

"I must be mad. But, yes, it is. I'll live with you. Although how you explain my presence should be interesting."

"You saved my life, remember? As far as my family are concerned, I'm repaying that debt by offering you a home with me. They needn't know what goes on behind closed doors. I think there are some secrets we can keep, don't you?"

“Now may God bless you all. May He defend the right. It is the evil things that we shall be fighting against—brute force, bad faith, injustice, oppression, persecution—and against them I am certain that the right will prevail.”

I turn off the wireless and glance at Arthur. He’s still sleeping, legs stretched across the hearth rug, *The Times* sprawled over his lap, beneath his folded hands. Afternoon sunlight touches him, finds the threads of silver in his dark hair. I want to kiss him awake, see him smile. But I don’t because I know that, before too long, Mrs Fogle will rattle along the hall with the tea tray. I’m sure she knows. But she’s a good woman, discreet and kind and loyal. Our secret will always be safe with her.

The newspaper rustles when I sit down beside Arthur.

He stirs, smiles then looks at me with those brown eyes, the ones I lost myself in all those years ago. “Hullo. Is something wrong?”

“No, just the usual. Mrs Fogle will soon be here with elevenses.”

He glanced at the clock. “Bit late for that, isn’t it? And why didn’t you wake me? Did I miss the speech?”

“Yes, it’s a bit late, and yes, you missed the speech.”

He straightens up and rakes his hand through his hair. “So, are we at war?”

“Yes.” The answer doesn’t carry the same burden that it might’ve done twenty-five years before. This time we are too old to enlist and too broken. Me with the limp that never went away, and Arthur with arthritis. I feel a guilty relief at that thought.

“All we went through.” He sighs and squeezes my hand. “It all came to nothing.”

“I don’t know about that.” This time I do kiss him—swiftly. “*We* came out of it. We may not be able to take up arms this time, but we can do our bit.”

“I told you, I am *not* joining the Home Guard.” He scowls and I want to kiss him again.

“We’re already doing our bit. We’re growing all those vegetables, raising sheep, providing food.” I move closer when he puts his arm around my shoulders and smiles.

“That we are.” He rests his head on mine and we enjoy our own peace, knowing that we will tend that good earth together.

THE END

Author Bio

S.A. Meade lives in Wiltshire and loves it. She's partial to gin and tonic, loves to cook and watches cookery programmes when she's not working, writing or reading.

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IN HIS SHOES

By K.A. Merikan

Photo Description

A handsome man in a tattered coat looks up from below a crooked top hat that shadows his other eye. His clothes appear too thin for the weather, but even worn and dusty, they seem to have been carefully chosen. There is a hint of a smile on his lips, but his intense gaze holds a promise of violence. Is it directed at the thoughtful man in the second picture, or are they joining forces?

Story Letter

Dear Author,

Do whatever you like with this one, just make my wicked fantasy of a couple of rough Victorian hotties frantically smexing each other (preferably in a filthy back alley) come true :)

Although I would like it to be set in (and have the seedy feel of) Victorian England, I am not hugely concerned with historical accuracy, so please don't be put off by lack of knowledge of the era.

No paranormal, steam punk, sci fi, or time travel please. Just a simple historical romp would be most excellent and appreciated.

Sincerely,

Danni

Story Info

Genre: historical (Victorian London)

Tags: thug, pimp, first time, sex in a seedy back alley, friends to lovers, protecting your sweetheart, greed, dark

Content warnings: graphic violence

Word count: 9,488

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Dedication

To Danni, whose brilliant prompt convinced us to participate in the Love Has No Boundaries Event.

IN HIS SHOES

by **K.A. Merikan**

“Ya go pickle yer cock s’ m’ere else tonight. I got plans!”

Frank blinked, looking up at Molly, who was too busy sewing to even spare him a glance. As if to prove her point, she crossed her exposed legs and tapped her foot on the raw wooden floor. He exhaled the smoke from his pipe, stroking one of his thick sideburns, and frowned at her barely-clad body. He could see the milky skin of her naked thighs above the stockings, and she didn’t even bother to put on a dressing gown over her corset when he and Jasper came over. Not that it was unusual for Frank to see her like this, and the dim glow of the single oil lamp reminded him of all those nights he spent between her thighs in this tiny room. Molly was a favourite and she knew it.

“Yer the one walkin’ around nekkid.”

“I got more clothes on than ’e does.” She shrugged and some of her dark curls obscured her eyes. Frank’s gaze darted to Jasper. Sprawled shirtless in a shabby armchair by the bed, he was playing around with his gun. Frank knew the thing didn’t work, but he had to admit it was good enough as a threat. Jasper was waiting to get his shirt back from Molly, yet kept his tattered top hat on.

“Well, I’m not the one selling what’s on show.” He flashed Frank a cocky grin. Jasper had the most elegant accent out of all the people Frank knew. And because they’ve known each other since he could remember, he knew Jasper wasn’t raised around people who spoke that way, though it seemed to have grown on him.

“So examine the goods and shut it,” spat Molly, squinting over the shirt she was mending.

Frank inhaled some smoke and glanced over to Jasper’s spread out form. There were still dark stains of bruising on his ribs from a fight they got into a few days ago. Every now and then, when Jasper undressed, Frank felt the urge to ask whether it hurt, but that would be a silly thing to do.

This new pimping business turned out more painful than they assumed, but it was also far less straining than factory work and Jasper certainly enjoyed the money it put in their pockets. He was buying those colourful cravats, even though he only had one proper shirt. And two weeks ago, he even got a pocket watch that looked like it was made of gold. Since then, he kept showing it off far too much for his own good, but when Frank told him so, all Jasper did was shrug. He had always been reckless, but now, every time Jasper went out at night, the wait gave Frank a giddy feeling. People killed for less than a fake gold watch, and he couldn't afford to lose his partner in business. Whom could he ever trust like he trusted Jasper?

"I'm going to get a new shirt real soon," Jasper boasted. "We're on the way up with Frank." He looked into Frank's eyes with that intense blue stare, which never failed to tighten Frank's stomach. "Just got a new girl yesterday. Expanding the business, you see. Don't worry though, you're still our best earner, love." Jasper leaned towards Molly to stroke her knee, giving Frank a good view of his pale, lean back and wide shoulders.

He could almost see the crack of Jasper's arse, and he couldn't help but stare. Jasper was lean, but not too small, nearly hairless except for his head and crotch. Speaking of the devil, once Jasper leaned back again, the soft light of the lamp cast a shadow stressing the sharp ridge above his groin and Frank's eyes were inevitably drawn lower, to the bulge in his trousers. He was hung like a donkey, and while Frank was not a little man himself, he kept thinking about that impressive girth whenever he was to breach a woman. No wonder Jasper was so popular with the ladies. Frank couldn't complain about the lack of female attention himself, but he lacked Jasper's silver tongue.

Molly's voice cut through the haziness clouding his brain. "That's all very well, but 'ow can ya look after more girls if there's just the two of ya?"

Frank opened his mouth, surprised by her reasoning. He hadn't thought of that.

Jasper was quicker to answer though. "Don't you worry that pretty head of yours. We're in business now and we already have a few men wanting to become new associates." He scratched his fuzzy, dark blond beard, probably trying to feign looking thoughtful. They didn't have any guys wanting to join,

and Frank wasn't even sure he wanted anyone else handling their money. But instead of questioning Jasper, he couldn't help but stare at him. He knew one of the reasons Jasper grew all that facial hair was that his face looked like a boy's, with large blue eyes and full lips that stretched into the broadest, most carefree smile.

Frank nodded at Molly "Yeah, we're thinkin' 'bout ya girls."

She gave him a doubtful look and shook her head. "Betta' make those fresh dollymops wear somethin' pretty, so's they get another Mister Stevens."

Jasper straightened up in the armchair. His pale eyebrows drew closer with clear interest. "Stevens? Is that the one with those fancy shoes? He's so young, too. I'm sure he could charm some girls and get muff for free." He laughed as Molly passed him his shirt. She snorted and walked over to the bed, where she laid out her best dress. It was red and far too frilly for Frank's taste.

"I'm not tellin' im to find a different muff. Pays betta' than others. Worth endurin' even if he is a pig sometimes."

Frank cleared his throat, looking over to Jasper, who was hiding his body under the shirt. "Pig?"

"Yeah, what does he do?" Jasper was always eager for filthy details. Strange how he had the nicest accent and the dirtiest mouth. "You charge him extra, Molly."

"Oh, ya don't wanna know what 'e likes to do. Trust me." She rolled her eyes and stepped into the skirt before reaching for the bodice. "Bet 'is wife's a nun."

Frank frowned, tracing his sideburns with his fingers. "But he's not makin' ya work less?"

Jasper was meticulously putting on subsequent layers of clothing. His embroidered vest was brand new and looked far too elegant combined with a coat that had seen better days. Instead of giving his garb a bit of a boost, Jasper would rather get the newest, most fashionable items. Which, at the moment, meant he could only afford the vest. "I'm not joking, Molly. We need to know. We're here to take care of you."

Curious little bastard.

She laughed out aloud and shook her head. "Oh, Frankie's takin' care of me all right, at least once a week. But 'is taste's not as strange."

Frank groaned, running his fingers through his hair. He certainly did not want Jasper to know he was pulling off his shirt only to make her wear it during the ordeal. "Shut yer mouth, Molly!"

"I want to know." Jasper put on his leather overcoat and nudged Frank with his elbow. "Does he take you up the rear?" There was a stupid grin on his lips.

Molly chuckled and Frank felt his cheeks heat. She better not say a word! He never beat women, unless it was absolutely necessary, but those things, he wanted her to keep to herself. But, of course, being Molly, she did talk.

"Frank, *do you* take me up the rear?" she teased, parroting Jasper's accent. Relieved, Frank grunted in reply.

"Betta' get dressed already so that yer pig can rip that dress off ya."

"No one's going to share any filthy fun with me, are they?" Jasper rolled his eyes and went for the door, holding his chin up high.

"Do *not* say anythin'!" Frank mouthed to Molly and followed his partner only to stop midstride. "If ya want us to talk to that hog, we will."

"Gone ya are!" She made a dismissive gesture and turned towards her mirror. There was no use arguing when she got like that. Above all, it wasn't in their interest to lose a wealthy punter.

"Wonder what he does if she doesn't wanna tell," he asked Jasper as they went down the creaking staircase. They had to be careful not to rouse Molly's landlady.

Jasper put his hands in his pockets and looked back at him with a frown. "I know! It's bloody infuriating."

"Must be somethin' nasty if he comes to a cheap girl when he has all that money." Frank ran after him, pulling his hat on when they left the building. The nights were getting colder every week, a fact even more prominent in narrow, unlit streets like this one. At least it wasn't a rainy night.

Jasper went quiet as they paced down the street. At this time of night, it was empty and silent enough to hear the rats squeak. They would be able to

hear Stevens' footsteps from afar. "Something nastier than you for sure." Steam left Jasper's lips as he spoke.

"I'm not doin' anythin' nasty!" Frank closed his coat and fished out a hip flask out of its pocket. "Nothin' wrong with plain old fuckin'."

"Yeah, though I don't fancy her. Give me some." Jasper came closer and reached out for the flask. Frank shut his mouth, spotting a blurry figure further down the street. "You like her, don't you?" Jasper turned his face towards Frank, looking him in the eyes. He was shorter, but the top hat was making up for it.

Frank cleared his throat and pulled him into an alleyway nearby. They weren't supposed to be seen. "She's... a good woman for a whore."

"Yeah, 'for a whore'." Jasper snorted and snatched the flask from Frank's hand.

"What about ya?" Frank sighed, leaning against the building wall with one arm.

Jasper smirked and took a big gulp of the alcohol, before returning the flask. "What about me?"

Frank swallowed and quickly pushed the gin against his lips. Whenever they shared a drink, he toyed with the idea that Jasper's lips touched it first, and he wasn't even sure if that was appropriate. He was a man like any other. Without a doubt, many had thoughts like those, but never voiced them, just like him. He traced the opening of the flask with his tongue before taking a large gulp of gin. Too bad the taste of alcohol was sharp enough to disguise Jasper's.

"Ya know, ya never talk 'bout girls."

"Oy!" Jasper frowned and folded his arms across his chest. "What's there to say? I'm not there yet."

If Frank hadn't swallowed, he'd probably spit the gin out. "What?" he whispered, looking at Jasper in the dark. He moved closer so they could talk without being unnecessarily loud. The lonely man he'd seen earlier entered Molly's building without having to throw small pebbles at her window, as they'd left the door unlocked.

“I’m going to have me a proper lady someday. But I’m not good enough yet.” Jasper slouched against the wall, his eyes focused on the spot Stevens was standing in just seconds ago.

Frank leaned over him, hiding the flask back in his pocket. Jasper was wrong, he was plenty good. What he lacked was the means to impress. “But yer nor savin’ yerself now, are ya?” he asked, bewildered.

“Muttonhead.” Jasper snorted and slapped Frank’s forehead with his palm. He kept moving in place to warm himself up. “I have ambition. I didn’t say I’m a monk. I’m just meant for better things.”

“Betta’?” Frank shrugged. “Isn’t what we do now as good as it can get without gettin’ that cravat of yours tied into a noose? Dunno ’bout ya, but I like my ’ead where it is, I do.”

“No. We have to expand. I can’t even afford proper shoes yet. Look at me,” Jasper complained. “I bet that toff is spending daddy’s money on Molly’s snatch and doesn’t have to worry. Did you *see* his boots?”

Frank cleared his throat, sensing the heat of Jasper’s breath on his cheek. “No.”

“Well, they’re fucking black leather. Probably gets them polished every day by his servants. It’s not fair.” Jasper kept looking into his eyes and his breath became more rapid. Frank couldn’t look away, his skin feeling tingly from the warm vapor of Jasper’s words.

“Since when’s the world fair? Poor Molly’s tradin’ her cunt, while the ladies ya want parade in their carriages for doin’ nothin’.”

“So what are you saying? That I should marry some whore and stay put?”

Frank groaned. He didn’t like it when Jasper turned his words against him. “And what when y’ave that new life? Ya wouldn’t even spare a glance at the people ya knew before.”

“I’d take you with me.” Jasper sighed and nudged him with his elbow. “You could marry her sister.”

“Ya mean her fuckin’ maid.” Frank didn’t know what to do with his hands, so he decided to smoke his pipe again. He wouldn’t take his word for it. No

one in their right mind would risk a better life for a few scoundrels from the old one. It was what it was.

“You said it.” Jasper laughed and Frank felt his eyes on him while he was packing the tobacco into the bowl of his pipe.

“I don’t favour those stiff uniforms though. Too rough on skin.”

“You like them soft?” Jasper asked, absentmindedly looking down to his battered boots.

“Women are always soft if they aren’t starvin’.” Frank looked at the cockily crooked top hat on Jasper’s head. He lit a match and let it burn for a few seconds before using it on the tobacco. “Clothes shouldn’t be hard to breach.”

“I like a bit of... I don’t like them plump,” Jasper muttered, picking at a loose thread on the brim of his hat.

“Me neither, just... the usual, ya know.” Frank kicked a stone across the street. “Pert arses and nice legs.”

“Yeah, I guess it don’t matter much when it’s dark.” Jasper shrugged.

Frank blinked at him and let out a surprised chuckle. “What, ya thinkin’ about takin’ an ugly lady?”

“I don’t know. Just think about the money, Frank. Who cares about a bit of muff, when you could have shoes like Mr. Stevens.” He finally looked up at Frank again with that familiar cocky grin. It took a moment for Frank to realize that he’d stopped breathing, so he took a huge drag of the smoke and looked away, enjoying how the fragrant warmth filled his mouth and nose. No other pair of eyes was as intense as Jasper’s, man or woman.

“Ya keep talkin’ ‘bout those shoes. Envy’s a sin.”

“Oy!” Jasper suddenly pushed at his chest. “Who the fuck are you to say?”

“What? Am I jealous?”

“You fuck around with whores and knock people around. And I’m the sinner, cause I want that toff’s shoes?”

It was Frank’s turn to shrug. “Maybe ’e doesn’t deserve ’em for whateva he’s doin’ to Molly right now.”

“Yes! Exactly my point!” Jasper ate that up. He probably just wanted to believe it. “He’s using her, she’s afraid to say what he’s doing and we don’t even get enough money for it.” He stood just inches away, with that strange glint in his eyes.

Frank licked his lips, becoming tense, like when Jasper undressed in their shared room. “We might go after ’im and take ’em as payback. He’ll think twice before piggin’ around again.”

“Yes? You’d do that with me?” Jasper was standing so close to him, it was bordering on uncomfortable. Or *too* comfortable for that matter.

Frank tried to bring the pipe up to his mouth with so much haste that he nearly dropped it when he knocked his hand into the wall. “Ya know yer like a brother to me,” he replied, pretending that nothing happened.

“Molly says he carries a lot of money. Maybe even a real gold watch...” Jasper slowly moved away, allowing the raging flutter in Frank’s stomach to quiet down. That last bit however, made Frank look up with wariness.

“Only if ya promise to keep it ’idden. I’m not buryin’ ya anytime soon.” Frank spat to the ground and chewed on the bit of his pipe.

“Aww, you’d miss me?” Jasper laughed and playfully patted Frank’s cheek. His hands were cold. The bastard wasn’t wearing any gloves. The strangest thing was, if it weren’t such a dooming perspective, Frank would gladly turn his face into that cold palm and warm it with his breath. Instead, he just stared.

Jasper’s face became more serious, but before he could say anything else, they heard a thud of a door, followed by quick footsteps. They geared up, ready to follow Stevens, but it turned out it was someone else altogether and the strange mood dispersed like fist-fighting thugs at the sound of a police whistle. After that, they kept to routine topics, discussing further plans, family matters and so on. Frank was glad, and the conversation engaged him so much he almost overlooked Stevens passing by about an hour later, but Jasper was like a bloodhound, instantly on the man’s trail.

They kept their distance, trying to be quiet on the cobblestones. The fog was their friend, though they didn’t need it much, as Stevens seemed awfully

careless for a toff walking through a seedy neighbourhood. Maybe he and Molly shared a glass of gin or two?

It was deep in the night and the streets were deserted, so as soon as Stevens' dark silhouette took a turn into a narrow alleyway between two rows of buildings, Frank gave Jasper a squeeze on the shoulder. That was the perfect spot for what they intended to do, and he wrapped his thin neck cloth around the lower half of his face, just in case.

Jasper nodded and did the same. The moment he slouched like a predator on the hunt, Frank's heartbeat sped up. Stevens looked over his arm, stopped for a split second, and that was that. Frank dashed forward, taking out his trusted knife.

“Well, well, look what the cat dragged in!”

Jasper followed with his beloved pistol in hand, and Stevens took a quick step back, raising his arms so that they could see his hands. He was much younger than it seemed from afar. Rather handsome too.

“Wait, wait! Gentlemen, I don't want any trouble—”

“Neither do we.” Frank stopped in front of their catch and nodded, deciding to go for Jasper's favoured loot. “Take off yer shoes.”

“But... gentleme—” Stevens looked to where the alleyway met a wider street. Frank could almost hear the cogs turning in his head.

“Don't even think about it!” Jasper quickly stepped forward, circling him. “Empty your pockets and take off the fucking shoes!”

Frank nodded. “Come on, don't be daft and listen to my friend 'ere.” He folded his arms across his chest, making sure his dagger was in plain sight. Based on his experience, a display of power was more than enough to disarm someone who had loads of money back at home.

Stevens took his time looking between them. Eventually, he bent down towards his shoes, but then made a swift move and pulled out a sabre from under his oversized coat, instantly taking a defensive stance. “Back off!”

Frank froze, surprised by the man's boldness. He *was* outnumbered.

“Are you bloody kidding me?” Jasper burst out with laughter and pointed his pistol at Stevens. With such skills in bluffing, he should have become a

gambler, rather than a pimp. But Stevens saw through the sham. Within a split second, he ducked to avoid a deadly blow from the pistol and drew his arm back to give his sabre enough speed. Frank's head went blank and it seemed that his hands and legs became heavy with blood rushing through his veins. It was the sight of red flourishing on Jasper's hand in the pale moonlight and his scream that triggered Frank into action. He thrust his dagger straight into Stevens' chest, meeting hardly any resistance. The man stiffened and Frank lunged at him, ripping the knife out only to stab it into his abdomen. Time after time it went in easily, like it was soft butter, not flesh, Frank was piercing.

Stevens gurgled, blood spilling down his chin like boiling milk left on a stove, and his knees hit the cobblestones. Frank used the opportunity to kick the sabre away, and he withdrew from the cowering man, his eyes searching for Jasper. His body was pulsing all over, even his gums were throbbing along with the quick rhythm of his heartbeat. Frank's wet hands and chest were quickly becoming chilly, but he was still awfully agitated. The coppery smell mingled with the aroma of the back-alley and the sharp scent of cool air. He didn't even notice when the neck cloth fell off his face.

"Fuck! Fuck!" Jasper held his hand close to his chest and there were dark spots all over his clothes. Still, he shuffled closer and dropped to his knees onto the blood-stained cobblestones. "Is he dead?"

Frank shook his head dismissively and grabbed Jasper's arm, pulling it closer for a brief examination. There was a cut on his hand, but it didn't look even close to fatal, so with a breath of relief, Frank pulled his faded cravat loose to wrap it around the wound. He felt like his blood was boiling. "The fuck would I care? He still moves."

Jasper went silent, looking at the faded cloth, but then gave Stevens' arm a harsh shake. He didn't even stir. With the stench of gore so overwhelming, it was beyond comprehension to see a smile break out on Jasper's lips.

"Fucking toff met his match." His breaths were ragged and as their eyes met, Frank was sure it was him Jasper was talking about. The admiration in that blue gaze set his skin on fire. He felt weak and strong at the same time. His chest tightened, while it seemed that something danced around in his belly. He crouched next to Jasper, never breaking the eye contact.

And that *grin*. Jasper wouldn't stop smiling, even when kneeling in a pool of blood.

“You need a new cravat, Frank.” Instead of going for his long-desired shoes, Jasper bowed over the body and pulled at the silky piece of fabric wrapped around Stevens' neck. It was hard to recognize any details, but it had some sort of pattern and two different colours. What Frank didn't need to see though, was the softness when he leaned closer and slowly wrapped the cravat around Frank's neck. He stopped breathing, locking his eyes with Jasper, unable to even utter a word of gratitude. The touch was far more intimate than he was used to and it made all of the hair on the back of his neck stand up.

A grunt to their side broke the spell. A hooded man dressed in rags was approaching them with wobbly steps. He'd seen them. But if he saw what they did, why wasn't he running? Jasper got to his feet and grabbed Stevens' sabre. Frank could already imagine this would be his favourite new toy. It was too dark for the stranger to see their faces from where he was, so he got up as well, still clutching his now-bloodied dagger.

“Oy, you there, get lost!”

“Yes! Unless you want a taste of this.” Jasper laughed and licked the blood-stained blade of the sabre. Frank couldn't help but stare.

“What was that?”

“What?” Jasper turned to Frank with a stupid grin and it was the worst moment for him to do that. The ragged stranger was clearly mad. Without a warning, he attacked Jasper with his bare hands. The stench of someone who hadn't washed for months filled Frank's nostrils as the man's gurgle clashed with Jasper's shocked yelp.

“Oy!” Frank pulled the lunatic away, ready to intervene if the vagrant wouldn't bugger off. The stranger clutched at Jasper's jacket with a blood chilling screech, and before any of them could act, he turned his head under the hood and bit into the hand that Jasper tried to push him away with.

That was it. The rush from killing Stevens was still pulsing through Frank's veins, and he lunged forward, jamming his knife under the man's collarbone. And nothing really happened. *Nothing*. The loony was still

grabbing at Jasper, who managed to free his hand. *What was this, some fucking rabies?*

Dumbstruck, Frank watched his knife shift where it was buried in the stranger's flesh, but he snapped out of it when the man lunged at him with a strangled cry. Frank ripped the dagger out and pushed it right into the attacker's face. This time, it worked, and the assailant dropped dead at Frank's feet with a soft thud.

"The fuck was that? That's some Bedlam shit!" Jasper kicked the dead man's head, but his gaze darted up when Frank dropped his knife to the cobblestones. "You alright?"

Frank swallowed, his gaze zeroing on Jasper's face. He felt empowered. The coppery smell of blood around them, the thrill of pushing a knife through another man's flesh, being here with Jasper... it all melted into a pool of hot energy deep in his chest and he edged forward, his hands reaching for the sides of Jasper's face.

His mind was empty, until their lips touched and Frank suddenly felt too many things to name. The mouth was soft, in contrast to the prickling needles of Jasper's stubble. Still, Frank could think of nothing sweeter than that little bit of scratching, as it reminded him who he was kissing. Jasper's eyes widened and his body went rigid, yet he didn't back away. Frank pushed him against the wall, still holding his face with both hands, afraid he might try to flee any second. Instead, Jasper let out a nasal moan that made Frank's groin throb and he parted his lips, giving entrance to Frank's needy tongue.

The sabre clattered against the cobblestones when Jasper put his hands on Frank's chest and squeezed the muscle under the fabric. It was almost too much. The inside of Jasper's mouth was silky smooth and scorching hot in contrast to the cool October night, but each touch, each slide of their tongues made Frank press deeper into him, like a hungry pup desperate for its mother's milk. The heat went straight to his cock and he drew back an inch, placing his hands on both sides of Jasper's head, caging him by the wall with the kiss suddenly broken. Forehead to forehead, Frank dared to look into his friend's eyes.

Jasper's cold fingers slowly slid into Frank's sideburns, and a few drops of blood trickled down Frank's neck from the injured hand. Nothing mattered,

neither the stench of gore and piss in this back alley, nor the threat of being discovered with two dead bodies. Only Jasper's eyes and the way he panted. Frank didn't even notice when Jasper had lost his top hat. Now that he hadn't been pushed away, nothing could possibly frighten him anymore, so he bowed down to brush their lips together once more, forgetting about the cold air. He already loved the stubble that scratched his mouth and chin. It was such a new, unique sensation. One that he knew he would inevitably associate with Jasper.

Another one of those in-kiss moans sent shivers down Frank's body. So much so, that it took him that extra second to realize it wasn't just shivers that made him crave more, but Jasper's hand, cupping his crotch through the trousers as they kissed. He could hardly believe his luck. Never before had another man touched him like that.

"Fuck." Frank was surprised by the guttural, primal sound of his own voice. He grabbed Jasper's head, cradling it against his shoulder. He looked around frantically, but his smile widened when he spotted a roofed recess in the red brick wall a few feet down the alley. "Jasper."

"Yeah?" Jasper's Adam's apple bobbed, and there was nothing cold about his fingers now, one hand still on Frank's chest, the other touching his dick. It didn't feel like the confident touch he'd get from a whore. Jasper touched him like he didn't know what his hand was doing. Frank didn't know either, but the one thing he did know was that he wanted this more than anything. And he needed to say it out loud.

"I want it."

Jasper nodded, breathless as he gently squeezed Frank's cock. "I don't care. I mean..." He looked up into Frank's eyes again. "What it means. I don't care. You get me?" Jasper leaned in for a more confident kiss and it was just as glorious as the ones before.

"Don't care either." Without breaking their lips apart, Frank pulled him towards the recess and they soon stumbled into the darkness, leaning into a pile of large, wooden boxes. Now that he could touch Jasper—really touch him, not just pat his shoulder—he couldn't get enough of it. He pressed his hand against Jasper's chest and slid it lower, towards its ultimate goal. The mere thought of fondling that huge prick made him lose his breath, but the real

thing gave him a proper shudder. Even through the rough fabric it felt hot, massive.

“Good.” Jasper licked all the way along Frank’s jaw and wrapped one arm around his neck. It was more intimate than anything they’d ever done. Frank couldn’t care less about the metallic taste of blood lingering in their kisses. He wanted it all, right now. Impatient, he forced Jasper’s thighs apart with his knee and lowered his now free hand all the way to his arse. It felt every bit as tight and firm as he believed it would.

Jasper groaned into the skin of his cheek and mirrored the move. Initially, Frank arched into his body with a low groan, but felt himself stiffen when Jasper pressed his fingers into the crack of his arse, as if he wanted to push them in if fabric wasn’t in the way. Soft, warm lips brushed against his ear and Frank couldn’t hold back a moan when Jasper’s molten-lava of a tongue explored the shell, followed by a hoarse whisper.

“I’ve never been so randy.”

Frank blinked, unsure if he should be happy about this with a finger between his tightly clenched cheeks. The trousers didn’t feel like enough protection at the moment. “I’ll be the one doin’ the fuckin’,” he muttered, forcing Jasper’s thighs even wider apart. He needed this and already knew this would be something entirely new, even though he walked the back alley many times before. His blood was boiling at the sheer thought of breaching Jasper’s arse, sliding into that virginal hole and clinging to his arched back. Jasper had to be new to this. He was sure of it.

“Oh.” The squeeze on Frank’s butt eased, but Jasper pulled his thighs back together, closing them on Frank’s knee and looked into his eyes. It felt like he was being shut down and Frank didn’t like it one bit. “Because I sort of thought I would... you know.” Jasper scratched his face, only to spread more blood over his cheek. Frank looked at him, hypnotized. If it weren’t that stinking toff’s blood, but something more pleasant, he’d gladly clean the stain off his friend’s skin. The wild pounding in his ears made it difficult to understand words.

“Ya *thought*?” So he was right, he wasn’t the only man doing this. And who could possibly not want Jasper?

“Don’t you mock me!” Jasper growled, instantly defensive, but never broke eye contact. “I did think about it, yes. Big deal!” His breath was so rapid it tickled.

“I’m not!” Frank kissed him in protest, caressing his face with a hand that was trembling all too much for his liking. It felt unreal. “I want ya.” He let out a strangled breath, pulling Jasper even closer. “I wanna fuck ya.”

Jasper swallowed, trailing his fingers up and down Frank’s stomach, only fuelling the scorching heat gathered beneath the skin. His breath was unusually shaky. “You wanna throw a coin?” He gave a small smile and kissed his lips again. It was so tender, Frank hardly knew how to respond.

“Who just saved yer miserable life, huh?” He chuckled, grinding his crotch against Jasper’s with a low groan and got a nasal moan in return.

“Yeah... I suppose that was pretty impressive...” Jasper nodded, but was clearly still on the fence about it, though his cock sure knew what it wanted, rock hard in those dirty-but-fashionable trousers of his. Jasper mimicked the motion, giving Frank a glimpse of what it will be like to push into his willing body. At least he hoped it would be willing, but he didn’t know what to say, so he just unbuckled Jasper’s belt and pushed his trousers down. His breath hitched when his fingers brushed the naked skin on Jasper’s hips, letting them linger, marvelling at the unfamiliar shape.

Jasper’s cock was a breath-taking sight. Fully erect, thick and curved upwards as if in anticipation of being petted. Frank hesitated, looking at it with a mixture of hunger and anxiety pooling in his chest. “That thing could split a man in two. Don’t yer girls complain?” he breathed, daring to look up into Jasper’s eyes. It was dark, but not enough to miss their movement. Jasper was fighting a battle with his vanity, and judging from the big smile that rose on his face, he’d lost.

“They love it. You love it...?” He bit his lip, watching Frank’s face as if he expected to find answers to all questions ever asked.

Frank’s breath caught in his throat and he felt himself flush. Should he lay himself bare like that and tell the truth? Afraid Jasper would notice the faint tremors in his fingers, he decided to grasp the pulsing rod. It was thick, hot,

and so unlike his own, while being oddly familiar. So far, whenever he touched a stiff cock, it was for his own pleasure and led to his own selfish spill, but the unmistakable delight of holding Jasper's prick was coming from somewhere else altogether. "I... I think about it."

"How long?" Jasper leaned closed, placing chaste kisses all around one of Frank's sideburns, hands creeping down to unbutton Frank's vest and trousers. Every brush of fingers through the thin fabric of his shirt made Frank weak in the knees.

"Dunno... long," he confessed, gently pulling closer as he gave his partner's cock the first, experimental tug.

"Oh yeah." Jasper slid his palm onto Frank's torso and circled his neck with the other hand.

"You?" Frank gasped, touching Jasper's engorged cockhead. It was silky smooth and slick at the top. Felt like a right hot chunk of meat.

"I want to lick up your knuckles when I see you using them properly," Jasper rasped and arched his hips to the touch. Frank drew in a sharp breath, feeling excitement rush through his body as the familiar, masculine smell filled his nostrils. This had to be the single most arousing thing he had ever heard. Unable to think straight, he spun Jasper around and bent him over the large, wooden box, reaching down to touch his pale arse. It was right there in front of his cock and all he had to do was to push his way in.

"Oy! Are we really not throwing a coin?" Jasper looked back at him, but didn't try to pull away. His whole body was arching into Frank with each deep breath he was taking.

"No." Frank ground his hips against Jasper's rear and closed his eyes when his cock squeezed its way into the crack, comfortably nestling between those pert buttocks. "Yer mine."

Jasper let out a loud moan and got to his toes, giving him an even better angle, but it was the way he clenched his arse cheeks on Frank's cock that almost made Frank cry with joy. They were both willing as fuck.

Elated by this realization, Frank bowed down, covering Jasper's arching back with his body and smiled, feeling how well they fit like that. His hands

went all the way up Jasper's body and without even knowing what he was doing, he yanked the overcoat off Jasper's shoulders, releasing more of his smell. It was amazing; sweet and raw.

The delicious, inarticulate sounds Jasper was making, and the rounded stirs of his hips made Frank's blood boil. That beautiful, pale arse kept moving up and down, like it already couldn't wait to ride his cock. With his nose buried at the base of Jasper's neck, Frank searched his trousers for a small pot of ointment he used with the girls. The sensation of hard muscle straining against his chest made him light headed, and all he could think of was how tight and snug an arsehole felt on his cock. He bet Jasper's hole would feel a hundred times better than a whore's.

Jasper glanced back at him every now and then, but didn't say a word. He kept fidgeting as if to find a comfortable way to lay on the boxes. Frank swallowed, opening his pot.

"Yer cock?"

"Oh yeah, touch it. Frig me." He looked back into Frank's eyes again, his own wide open and wary.

Frank's stomach gave a funny turn and he dropped the pot close to Jasper's face on top of the box, quickly slickening his own prick with a generous amount of ointment. "Feels good in my hand," he confessed, tentatively reaching to that monstrous cock.

"It's gonna feel even better in your arse." Jasper snorted, but it wasn't an attempt to change the configuration. Frank flushed at the mental image, but the moment he grabbed the donkey-sized prick, Jasper ground his butt cheeks into him again.

"Fuck." Frank cuddled his face into Jasper's prized vest, frantically trying to get himself under control. He had to be calm, steady, but it was nearly impossible with that warm, fragrant body practically begging him to enter. So he pushed.

Jasper whimpered like a strangled kitten, and his whole body tensed, curled over the box. He bowed his head, exposing his nape even more and Frank seized the opportunity to bite on the salty flesh, breaching his partner's

resistance inch by inch. There was no way to describe how tight his hole was. Bordering on pain, the muscles of Jasper's arse clamped down on Frank's cock, keeping it in a vice-like grip. His head was spinning and he clung to Jasper's arching back with both hands, desperate not to lose his senses.

All he could hear were Jasper's desperate nasal breaths and the furious beat of his heart, now thudding through both of them, right where they were connected. His body was shivering with faint tremors and all coherent thought evaporated from Frank's mind, when Jasper reached out to grab his hand in a tight grip. It couldn't rival the way his hot insides squeezed around Frank's cock, but it was about so much more than relish.

"Shit... it's like yer suckin' me in. So fuckin' good," Frank grunted, enjoying the way their bodies spooned: chest to back, thighs to thighs, Frank's groin pressed tight against the sweetest arse he'd ever enjoyed. He held on tight, with his treacherous mind warning him Jasper might flee, and he couldn't let that happen.

"Well, you're suckin' *me* off for this." Jasper's voice shook. He kept arching his back and dragging his feet over the ground, which only added to the pressure around Frank's cock. The strained whisper was enough to jerk Frank's attention off his own pleasure. His mouth suddenly felt dry.

"Hurts?" He reached to Jasper's head to gently cup it with his hand. It was wet with sweat and hot like a freshly boiled egg.

"Well, your dick's not as thin as a thumb either." Jasper sighed, but he didn't attempt to back away from the touch and instead, rubbed his face against Frank's hand. "You know, the girls always say first time has to hurt..."

"Yer not a girl." Frank was at loss, holding on, yet unsure if he shouldn't back out.

"Yeah, so I can take it like a man."

He could sense Jasper's muscles slowly relaxing, but it was no quick process. His raspy breath was both making Frank nervous and even more ruttish than he already was. Hoping to help him out, he reached between Jasper's legs again and was devastated to find his beautiful cock had gone soft. With a silent curse on his lips, he started slowly coaxing it to life again, while

keeping his own hips as still as possible, which was no easy feat. Jasper's short hair and wet skin felt so delicate, Frank was afraid his rough hands might scrape them, so he tried to be gentle, caressing his partner's neck and ear with his fingers. He was happy that his eyes got used to the darkness enough to see the tension in Jasper's neck.

"That's better..." Jasper sighed with relief, slowly rocking into the touch, which only made it harder for Frank to keep still. He cleared his throat. "I like your cock... it's just... got intense." Jasper finally turned his head towards him and the seductive mixture of lust and vulnerability nearly took Frank over the edge. Being able to stare into those eyes while buried deep in Jasper's body was one of the single most erotic things Frank had ever done. It was as if their bodies pulsed in the same rhythm, and no one had ever made him feel like that.

"Yeah? It's good?" He was relieved to feel Jasper's prick fill again and smiled at him in the dark, stroking his free hand up and down the sweating body. He wanted Jasper to love it so he would let him do it again. How incredible it would be to fuck Jasper in the morning light, in the narrow bed they shared, free to touch all the hidden places on his body.

Jasper slowly nodded and opened his lips in a silent demand for a kiss. Frank had to pull out a bit, but when their mouths met, he couldn't think of any better combination than kissing Jasper while simultaneously having his cock up his arse.

"Try to move now?" Jasper whispered into his lips and strangely, talking about it didn't seem that awkward anymore. They had to communicate if this was going to work and he really hoped it would. His heart quickened when he drew his hips back in a slow, fluid motion, trying to focus on the hot, handsome body sprawled beneath his.

"And a bit more of that cream?" Jasper's voice wasn't so tense anymore, which had to mean it was getting better for him. His cock wasn't going soft, so it had to be.

Frank barely contained a moan at the prospect of having to pull out completely, but he obeyed, pressing his free hand against Jasper's back as he coated his aching prick with a generous amount of ointment, using up most of what was left in the small pot. "I'm gettin' in," he panted, aligning his cock with Jasper's impossibly tight hole.

“Well come on then, before I change my mind.” Jasper chuckled into his hand and looked away. That hot, lean, chunk of a man actually got to his toes again and spread his thighs to give him better access. The sight alone was enough to make Frank breathless, but he kept in mind how difficult it was for Jasper and pushed in slower, with much more care than the first time. His efforts were awarded by a long sigh of relief.

“Oh! Oh, I get it,” Jasper moaned and Frank had no idea what he meant, but with all that jelly he used, it was now a lot easier to slide in. “I like the way your hair tickles my arse.” *Did he really just say that?*

“Oh fuck...” Frank buried himself deep in Jasper’s hole, digging his fingers into the tender flesh of his buttocks. His head felt hot and light, the tightness driving him mad, but instead of following his instinct to start a furious rhythm, he moved bit by bit. Oh, how he wanted Jasper to like it, his approval was so much more important than instant pleasure. Frank hoped the tiny moans and whimpers expressed nothing but delight.

“Come on, touch my prick again.”

“Yeah.” Breathless, Frank curled up against him and gave Jasper’s cock a gentle squeeze, quickening his still cautious thrusts.

“You’re such a big man,” Jasper mumbled into the box beneath them and pulled himself up to his elbows to press closer. “So good.” Those two words were enough to make Frank prouder than when he had stolen his first wallet all those years ago. He smiled into the fragrant heat of Jasper’s neck.

“Fuckin’ good to die for.” He gasped, slipping one of his arms under Jasper’s face, cradling it gently. An unexpected kiss to his forearm got his insides melting like butter. They forgot themselves, joined by the frantic coupling, just a few yards away from two cooling corpses. They shared new secrets and an understanding that could not be formed over a glass of gin. This was frighteningly raw, real. Otherworldly.

Their heated bodies drove the cold away, joined into one in the quiet back alley. Nothing but this mattered. Jasper’s ragged breath, his pliant body, the scratching of his beard and the mind-numbing tightness of his hole consumed Frank’s whole world as he drove into his partner, overwhelmed by the experience. He could hardly speak.

Jasper didn't care much for words either and when he started grinding into Frank, it became clear he wouldn't last much longer. Frank gave his partner's prick a more forceful tug and seconds later, that tight, wonderful hole clenched around him with so much force that for a moment, he was certain his cock would stay inside forever. He groaned into Jasper's shoulder as the huge prick in his hand spilled its load, pulsing like a living being.

"Fuck, Frank. Fuck!" Jasper shivered in his arms and Frank could feel it all the way up to his balls. With a strangled moan, he pulled Jasper tighter against his chest and let himself go, pushing right into that hot arse. Each ensuing thrust felt better than the one before and the welcoming heat of Jasper's flesh drove him to a powerful blow deep within the pliant body.

Slowly, he lifted himself up, watching Jasper sprawled on the box, still panting as if he had just outran several coppers. Jasper let go of all inhibitions tonight and for a moment, Frank hung on to the hope he could keep him like this forever. Fighting the urge to close his eyes, he stretched over his partner's body and kissed the corner of his mouth, still keeping him as close as it was humanly possible. He didn't want to let go.

"So... different," Jasper muttered with a lazy grin.

Frank nodded and crooked his head to capture Jasper's mouth in another kiss. The cold air didn't make him feel any less overheated.

"Night of my life," Jasper whispered as he looked back at Frank, effectively robbing him of breath.

"Y... yeah?" His throat tightened, pulsing with the rhythm of his heart as he slowly withdrew from the comfort of Jasper's arse. Frank swallowed, pulling out completely and petted his partner's arm, unsure what else would be proper conduct. If he ever liked a girl this much, he'd kiss her senseless and then take her to his bed. Only he and Jasper already shared one. Would the arrangement change now? Would the invisible line between them disappear now that they both knew how their bodies fit together? He hoped it would. The possibility of Jasper deciding to forget about this made Frank's whole body ache.

"Mhm. Though my arse's going to be fucking sore." Jasper laughed, but Frank could see that his face darkened. "We have to sort that mess out, right?"

He slowly straightened up and pointed into the alley where they left the bodies.

“Yeah.” Frank took a step back, groaning at the sight of Jasper’s buttocks, juicy and pale. He wanted to pet them, but didn’t dare. Instead, he tucked his cock back into his breeches, still slippery from the fucking. “We do.”

Jasper bent over to pick up his trousers and Frank couldn’t help but wonder if he’d done that on purpose. “Those shoes are fucking *mine*.”

Frank chuckled, still too overwhelmed by what they just did to think about anything else. Stevens wasn’t the only man with good shoes in London.

They both quickly got their clothing in order, even though Jasper was having some problems with the buttons. His injured hand was swelling, but he didn’t complain and just got on with it.

“We’ll get some ice for this.” Frank reached over and helped him with the top trouser button. He could swear he’d never smelled anything more arousing than the mixture of their combined sweat and spunk.

“Yeah, it’s fine.” Jasper stirred in place, before giving Frank one more quick kiss. He walked back into the alleyway, followed by Frank’s mesmerized stare. The sudden change of dynamics in their friendship was incredible.

“We need to find our ’ats.” Frank spotted his dagger and quickly bent over to pick it up.

“Yeah, mine’s here. And this sword? It’s fucking brilliant!” He could hear Jasper swish it in the air, acting as if nothing was out of the ordinary.

“Ya need to learn to stab.” Frank kicked the loony’s body. He was just as dead as it seemed.

“I know how to stab. He came out of nowhere,” Jasper complained and poked Stevens’ head with the tip of the sabre. God knew when he became so bloodthirsty. Frank smiled at him with a soft sigh. He needed some hearty late-night dinner, but his thoughts inevitably gravitated to the bed they shared and his heart skipped a beat. Would they just lie down like nothing happened? What would Jasper do if Frank reached out to touch him in the dark?

“Just get on with it and let’s go.”

“Wait.” Jasper fished out a pocket watch out of Stevens’ vest. He already had the boots on. Frank didn’t even notice when he swapped his old shoes for the new ones.

“Don’t forget ’is money.”

It took a few more minutes of scavenging through the toff’s clothes and Jasper stood up proud. He put his top hat on and walked up to Frank, swaying to the sides with a cocky grin.

“Here you go, luv.” Jasper dropped the golden pocket watch into Frank’s palm and snorted. “For your effort.”

Frank rolled his eyes, unwilling to let emotion show as his stomach clenched. “Now that’s a curious nickname.” He put the watch into the inner pocket of his coat.

“I enjoyed your services.” Jasper nudged him with his elbow. It felt like a blow to Frank’s chest.

“Would ya enjoy ’em again?” Frank forced himself not to break the connection between eyes.

“You did say I need to practice stabbing.” Jasper wiggled his eyebrows.

Frank gritted his teeth nervously, but didn’t look away. Jasper was not a woman to be denied the chance to practice some stabbing. “That’s what I said.”

“Good.” Jasper’s grin widened and he dashed toward the way out of the alley. “Let’s go. I don’t want to end up on the noose before I get to stab you.”

“Yeah well, we’d need more ointment,” Frank grumbled, still feeling both agitated and dubious about that whole stabbing matter. At least with him on the receiving end of things. And watching Jasper walk all queer wasn’t helping.

Once they reached the nearest street lantern, they took some time to make sure no traces of blood were in plain sight. Frank had to scrub his face a bit, but with their outer clothes being dark, no one would notice any stains without daylight.

Having cooled off after the frantic coupling, the night felt colder than before, and they rushed through well-known streets. None of them said it out

loud, but it was obvious they were both intent on reaching their room as soon as possible.

“Do you think Molly will ever tell us what Stevens did?” Jasper held his injured hand close to his chest as they walked through the silent streets. It wasn’t yet time for the city to change shifts.

Frank snorted and briefly touched his arm. Maybe they could buy Jasper a new top hat with the money they got? “I don’t give a fuck.”

“Not even a bit curious? What kind of pervert he was?”

With a shrug, Frank slid his arm around Jasper’s shoulders, tense with the effort to keep the gesture seem casual. There was no one around anyway. He didn’t yet know what to do with the new freedom to touch Jasper, but he couldn’t deny himself. “I’m curious about too much now.” The fact that Jasper didn’t pull away, made him all tingly inside.

“Like what?” A smile lingered on Jasper’s lips, but it dissolved when a siren pierced the air with its deafening cry. Frank pulled away, his body tensing up, ready to fend off anyone who dared to attack them. Were the sound just a bit more high pitched, it would probably break windows.

“Fuck, the coppers,” was the first thing that came to his mind.

They looked at each other and didn’t have to say one word, before dashing into a sprint, determined to get as far away as they possibly could from the crime scene. Everything blurred in the haze of vapour and fog, but as they ran, Frank stole a glance at Jasper when they were passing one of the rare streetlights. Surprisingly, Jasper did the same and when their eyes met, a grin was shared as well before darkness swallowed them again.

THE END

Author Bio

K.A. Merikan is a joint project of Kat and Agnes Merikan, who jokingly claim to share one mind. They finish each other's sentences and simultaneously come up with the same ideas. Kat and Agnes enjoy writing various kinds of stories, from light-hearted romance to thrillers. They love creating characters that are not easy to classify as good or evil, and firmly believe that even some villains deserve their happy endings. It is easiest to find them in galleries, good restaurants and historical sites, always with a computer or notebook, because for Kat and Agnes, every day is writing day. Future plans include lots of travel and a villa on the coast of Italy or a flat in Paris where they could retire after yet another crazy venture, only to write more hot homoerotic stories.

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FINDING THE TIME

By Summer Michaels

Photo Description

Two dark-haired men are lying on a bed, one on top of the other. The man on the bottom is on his belly, propped up, reading a book, while the other man uses him as a mattress.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

They have been together for several years and very comfortable with each other (as shown in the picture ;)). But lately, work and life in general made them see each other less. The picture is shown where they were finally had free time together. Even though one of them was tired, he still made an effort to be close to his boyfriend by napping on him.

I would like the story to be a slice of life with some background on how they met. I would like them to be in their thirties and act like it. More of a story of how the couple makes efforts to spend time together.

Preferably, no misunderstanding or miscommunication.

I would like that when you get to know them, you knew they will be together and have a HEA.

Sincerely,

Pete

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: romance, law enforcement, teacher, established couples, men with pets

Word count: 6,995

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FINDING THE TIME

By Summer Michaels

CHAPTER ONE

“Can I have an iced caramel latte, please?”

The small redhead behind the counter of Coffee Grounds looked me up and down like I was a drink of water, and she was a woman dying of thirst. Licking her lips, she thrust her barely-there breasts higher in the air.

“For you honey, anything,” she purred.

As I rolled my eyes at her outlandish behavior, I was thankful for the last minute decision to grab a pair of sunglasses from the airport. Don't get me wrong, it's flattering to be flirted with, but the over-the-top antics made my stomach turn. Guess I shouldn't tell her that the nasty concoction she was preparing was actually for my boyfriend.

The front pocket of my khaki pants started to vibrate. “US Deputy Marshal Donovan.”

“Hey Memphis, just letting you know that we've located the silver Scion you put the BOLO on. It was just spotted turning into West Phoenix High School.”

“Thanks Randy, I'll head over there now.”

“No problem, I'll see you at the office. Don't forget we have that asset forfeiture today.”

I groaned as I tucked away my cell. The U.S. Marshals Service is the nation's oldest federal law enforcement agency. One of our responsibilities is to manage and dispose of seized and forfeited properties acquired by criminals through illegal activities. Currently, the department manages over two point four billion dollars' worth of property and assets. I loved being a United States Marshal, but asset forfeitures were my least favorite part of the job. We were basically landlords evicting our tenants. Not many criminals were happy to see us coming, so we were always on guard when handling this type of situation.

I normally don't handle forfeitures since I mainly work in fugitive operations, but as a marshal, we all chip in where we are needed. I often volunteered to assist other departments since I don't have a wife and kids to go home to. It never bothered me until recently. For the first time since I became a marshal I desired to be at home more, and I felt torn between the man I love and the job I love.

"Cops get their drinks for free, Sugar," said the redhead as she pointed to the silver star on my hip.

"Well thank you, ma'am."

Red leaned over the counter. "I wrote my number on your cup. Give me a call and I'll show you how to really use those handcuffs."

I felt my face turn as red as her hair. "Thanks," I mumbled as I ran for the exit.

The traffic was light as I drove to the local high school. I knew I would catch hell for using a BOLO to locate Jake's car. When you put the boss's son on a BOLO, it tended to be noticed quickly. His Scion was easy to spot in the nearly vacant parking lot. Jake was always one of the first teachers to arrive. I had no clue why he enjoyed getting to work so early.

Recognizing my SUV, he stopped walking toward the school, rested his lean frame against the trunk of his car, and waited. After nearly a month of not seeing this man, I slowly examined every inch of him. I could tell he was doing the same.

His usually-short, dark hair seemed longer, and I was glad to see he hadn't shaved in a while. I love the sensation of his facial hair against my own. His green eyes held mine as I walked to him. Over the weeks we'd been apart, we had been able to talk on the phone and Skype, but to actually be able to touch him... there just wasn't any comparison.

"Your hair is longer," I said out of nervousness. He smiled knowingly.

"I brought you something," I said handing him his iced coffee. "The lady at the shop even gave you her phone number."

He tossed his head back and laughed. "I'm sure the number is for you."

Crowding his personal space, I grabbed the back of his head then crushed his lips to my own. At first he seemed surprised by the blunt gesture. Even at thirty-three, I wasn't one for public displays of affection. But something about Jake just made everything right. I hadn't had to pretend with him since we started seeing one another exclusively two years ago. While Jake wasn't my first boyfriend, he was certainly the only man I ever loved.

Jake's hands came to rest on my chest as our tongues danced and his fingers soon balled around my shirt, pulling me closer to him.

After a while, Jake began to slowly pull away, ending our kiss, "Mmmm, I've missed you. Are your SOB classes over?" Being taller than Jake, I could feel his erection against my leg.

I laughed, settling my hands on his hips. "You damn well know it's SOG training, you little shit. I just got in this morning."

The Special Operations Group is a highly-trained force of deputy marshals. It is a complete honor to be asked to join their ranks. The group responds to any emergency situations where federal law has been violated or federal property is endangered. The latest situation where the SOG was called in was the Boston Bombings. Since the bombings, recruiting for the SOG has been on the rise.

"How did everything go?"

"Good. I learned a lot, I'm just glad to be home," I said brushing a kiss across his lips.

"Have you been to see your mother yet?" I knew he was trying to tone down our current situation, and as much as I didn't want to let him go, I took a step back and jammed my hands in my pockets.

"I'm headed there for breakfast when I leave here. I swear she called me as soon as we landed, claiming she knew I was home."

"She loves you, nothing wrong with that."

I knew better, but I couldn't stop myself from coming closer to him. I combed my hand through his soft hair and looked into his eyes. "Let's cook dinner at home tonight. With the way our schedules have been, I feel like I haven't talked to you at all."

“I know what you mean, but I won’t be home for dinner. It’s Tuesday. I have my night class tonight. I’ll be home around nine thirty.”

I couldn’t hide the disappointment from my face. Before I left for training, we were passersby in each other’s lives. We barely snagged an hour here and there alone and I was hoping that would’ve changed when I returned.

“You okay?” he asked quietly.

“Yeah, I was just looking forward to spending time with you. I can wait, though.”

“I’m sorry, I know how you feel. Soon, I promise.” His voice was barely a whisper, like he was afraid to jinx himself.

He stood on his toes and kissed me lightly. “I’ve missed you, big guy.”

I pulled him close. The heat of him next to me made my body ache for more. I rested my head on top of his and whispered, “You’re giving me a hard-on.”

“Want me to take care of that for you? No one is here. I’ve always wanted to be taken on my desk.” Jake moved the collar of my shirt out of his way as he licked and sucked on the cords of my neck.

I moaned, rocking my hips forward as he teased me. “As much as I would love to bend you over your desk, I’m gonna have to pass. When I finally get you all to myself, I plan to keep you there for several hours.”

“I’m going to hold you to that promise,” he warned, his green eyes dancing with excitement.

I brushed my hand over the bulge in his pants, doing a little teasing of my own. “As long as that’s not the only thing you hold to me.”

Jake snorted. “Go and get out of here while I still let you. I have to think calm thoughts until the kids arrive. I don’t want to stand at attention in front of them all day. Thanks for the coffee.”

With that, I watched him walk into the school. Something unsettling started to plant itself in my stomach. I wanted to tell Jake about how I’d been feeling about our relationship lately, but trying to put all these emotions into words was overwhelming.

CHAPTER TWO

I don't know if I was blessed or cursed to be a Donovan. Being the youngest of seven children, it felt like both all the time. With five boys and two girls, my parents, Lucy and Michael, always had a packed house. My father passed away shortly after I graduated high school. All of the Donovan children had Dad's dark brown hair and eyes, and our teachers always used to joke that they could spot a Donovan coming a mile away.

My mom still lived in the house I grew up in. The two story brick home is your typical suburban residence, white fence picket and all. At least one of my siblings is always here; we are a close-knit family. Today, my sisters Lisa and Tonya were visiting with Lisa's two children. My brother Jack and I were the only ones without children, however we were never short on nieces or nephews.

"Ma! Memphis is here," yelled Lisa from the living room. She was nursing her newborn, my godson Ryan.

I wrinkled my nose, "I'll wait until you finish before I come and steal him."

"They're only breasts, Memphis."

"Yeah, but they're my sister's breasts nonetheless." I smiled as I heard her talking softly to Ryan as I entered the kitchen.

"What's wrong?" my mother said, as she stopped stirring her eggs. Her small hands were resting on her hips. I could feel her studying me as I walked to the coffee pot. Jake likes his coffee loaded with extras, I take mine unleaded.

"Nothing's wrong, Ma."

"I don't know why you kids think you can get anything past me. I know everything. Now spill."

I walked around the kitchen island and kissed her on the cheek, then crossed the kitchen to plant one on Tonya who was reading the paper at the kitchen table.

My mother was right. She always knew when something upset us, even something as small as the feelings I was dealing with now.

“I promise nothing’s wrong. I’m just working some stuff out in my head. Are you making French toast?”

“Of course I am. It’s your favorite. Don’t try to avoid the topic. What’s got that gloomy look on your face?”

“Just tell her, Memphis. We all know she is not going to let it drop until you do,” said Tonya.

“I miss Jake.”

I turned around to find all three of the women in my life staring at me. Lisa stood in the doorway, finished with Ryan’s feeding, the baby snuggled against her chest. They each waited for me to continue.

“Did he go somewhere?” asked Lisa.

Tonya was next with her question. “Did you break up with him?”

“No, he didn’t go anywhere, and no, I didn’t break up with him. Chill out and let me say what’s on my mind.” I took a deep breath. I hated having to put into words what I was feeling. I felt stupid because I’ve never been the one who could express my thoughts and feelings well.

“Good, if you would have dumped that boy, I would have disowned you,” my mother said, flipping the toast.

“Thanks, Ma. That makes me feel really, really loved.”

“Oh hush, you know I love you. Jake is the first decent man you ever brought around. You remember Tommy?”

My sisters joined in, mentioning by name all my former boyfriends they had disliked.

“Ladies! Enough! How the hell can your husbands stand to listen to this all day?”

I swear I didn’t see the wooden spoon until my mom smacked my hand with it. “Watch your mouth, boy. I can still bend you over my knee,” she warned.

“Yes ma’am.” Lisa and Tonya snickered.

I stared at the island as I tried to explain what was going on. “Look, nothing is wrong with my and Jake’s relationship, per se. I just feel... when I was with those other guys, I felt like I was stuck with them, kind of like two dogs that get stuck together after sex. I had my fun but, I wanted to get away and... couldn’t. With Jake, I want to be stuck.”

The look on my mom’s and sisters’ faces was priceless as they tried to figure their way through my maze of analogy of emotion.

“Is the sex bad?” Tonya whispered.

“No, the sex is great,” I whispered back.

“I’m lost,” whispered Lisa.

“Why are you whispering?” asked Mom.

After a few seconds of silence, laughter filled the air. I had been carrying these feelings around for the better part of a month. Finally getting them off my chest felt like a burden had been lifted. Even if I was the only one to understand what the hell I was trying to say.

“So you want to settle down,” my mother stated.

I paused to think about it. “Yeah, I want to come home every night to Jake. We live together but we never get to spend time with one another. I feel like we are roommates and not lovers. I just don’t like it. We’ve both had our share of relationships, but this one is different. It’s like he is my missing puzzle piece.”

I looked back at my mom, who had a huge smile on her face. “That’s how I felt about your dad. When he asked me to marry him, I knew I would love him every day for the rest of my life. I still love him. Have you told him how you feel?”

“No, everything else seems to keep pulling us in a hundred different directions.”

I helped Mom plate breakfast and carry things to the table. I could hear Ryan cooing, the sweet sound made my heart melt. Ryan would be the closest thing to a son I would ever have. I was okay with that. I wasn’t secretly wishing for children of my own.

“You go and eat,” I told my sister as I scooped the little bundle in my arms. “Ry-Guy and I have some catching up to do.”

Ryan smiled and held onto my finger as we paced around the kitchen. He was two months old now. I couldn't quite get over how quickly he had developed and how different he looked from when he was born.

“Memphis, have you thought about going on a vacation?” asked Tonya.

I was so wrapped up in the changes of Ryan's features that I had forgotten anyone else was in the room with us.

Lisa agreed. “That's a great idea, Tonya. You and Jake need to go somewhere, be alone and away from the distractions in your life.”

With each step closer to them, I knew they were right. I had damn near two months of time off built up. I could feel the corners of my mouth turn up. For months Jake had gone on and on about Thailand and its rich culture and history. He even searched for credited classes so he could study abroad. Without a doubt, I knew he would love it.

“Thailand,” I finally muttered aloud.

“What?” my mother asked.

“Jake has always wanted to go to Thailand. His school is out for the summer in a few days, and the semester is coming to an end for his master's program. It's the perfect time for a vacation.”

My mom nodded and smiled. “That sounds perfect. Why don't you call Paul and have him set it up for you?”

Paul was my oldest brother, who ran a travel agency with his wife Helen. “I'll call him on my way to the office.” I laid the now-sleeping Ryan in the playpen that stood beside his mother.

“Thanks guys, I mean it. I'm going to get going.” I started to turn and run for the exit when I was pulled by the back of my shirt.

“Park your behind in that chair and eat your breakfast,” demanded my mother.

“Yes, Mother.” I laughed as I took a seat at the table. The warm syrup was like heaven to my mouth.

CHAPTER THREE

“Pee?”

“Yes, pee.” I watched in amusement as the small group of teenagers turned to one another, not believing a word I said. Who said History couldn’t be fun?

I walked up and down the small rows of desks with my hands clasped behind my back. I could almost hear their brains turning as they tried to picture why urine and history were relevant. Honestly, I was just trying to stretch time until our guest speaker arrived. It wasn’t like him to be late.

“I’m not sure I want to know, Mr. Sanford,” laughed Diego.

I didn’t speak again until I stood beside my wooden desk, and upon noticing the desk, I felt my cheeks redden as I thought about my earlier comments to Memphis about it. I dipped my head, pushing the thoughts from my head so I could concentrate on my classroom.

“Have you ever heard the sayings, ‘so poor we don’t have a pot to piss in’? Or ‘we are piss poor’?”

A few heads bobbed up and down. “In the 1500s families earned a living whatever way they could. Some families stored their urine in a pot and sold it. They were called piss poor.”

A hand shot through the air. “Yes Jacob?”

“Who the hell bought piss?” The class erupted in laughter.

“Back then, urine was used to tan hides and skins.”

“Gross!” squealed Maria.

I chuckled. “Families did what they needed to do. There weren’t Super Walmart’s on every corner, like today. Desperate times call for desperate measures.” A hard knock on the door pulled our attention to the man standing in the doorway.

“Class, I would like to introduce my father, US Chief Deputy Marshal, Morgan Sanford.” I couldn’t hide the pride that leaked into my voice.

I didn’t know how I expected my class to react to my father, but stunned silence wasn’t even close.

“Are you sure that’s your dad Mr. S? I mean, he’s so...”

“Black!” yelled Diego.

“I was going to say tall.”

My dad chuckled as he walked to where I was standing. “Sorry I’m late. Something came up,” he whispered.

“Is everything okay?” I hoped he heard what I really meant: *Was Memphis okay?*

“I hope so,” he replied.

I sat down on the corner of my desk. I knew if something were really wrong with Memphis, Dad would have said so. He was never one to play on another person’s emotions. My head was telling me one thing while my heart sang another. *He was okay, he had to be.*

It was only two years ago when my dad invited Memphis to one of our weekly dinners. For months he talked nonstop about Memphis Donovan. I practically knew him already. At first, I thought he invited Memphis because he could be the son Dad always wanted, a son in law enforcement. It wasn’t until Dad made up a lame excuse and bolted from the restaurant that we both caught on. We were being set up on a date.

It took a lot for my dad to introduce me to Memphis even though he’d never acted ashamed of having a gay child. The situation Morgan Sanford adopted me from was the cause of concern, and I shared in it. It was hard to tell a lover the whole truth about my past. Legally I wasn’t allowed to, but there were a few times where I was tempted.

At the age of eight, I had a different name, a different family, and a different life. I was the state’s only witness to the murder of my parents. My biological dad, Stephen Williams had gotten entangled in the Moretti family cartel. His need for cocaine destroyed our family. To this day, I didn’t know if my older brother, Carter, was still alive or if the Morettis had killed him as well, since his body had yet to be discovered.

Morgan Sanford wasn’t working the New York case at the time. He was a friend of one of the marshals in charge of my witness protection. Since I was

only eight, I couldn't live on my own and placing me into foster care was dangerous, so I was adopted.

Morgan and his wife Stacey had tried for years to have a child of their own. Their friend suggested I get to know the Sanford's after my case was over. I never met Morgan while the case was ongoing since they didn't want anyone to link the two of us together in case things didn't work in the end.

Stacey was an amazing mother. She never once made me feel unwelcomed or unwanted. This couldn't have been easy. The two were often asked why they had a white kid. She would calmly reply, "That's what God intended."

My mom later passed away from breast cancer. Dad said he didn't know if Memphis or I would make it as a couple, but he wanted to see me happy. It was hard being in a relationship with anyone. I always felt like I was lying to them since I couldn't tell them why I sometimes had a New York accent.

With Memphis, I could tell him everything. I had put a padlock around my past and Memphis had the only set of keys. I think my dad knew I could never have a relationship like he had with Mom unless I was completely honest with my partner. We both wanted that, that's why he brought Memphis to me. That, and the fact he was the first openly gay marshal, led my dad into taking the chance.

"You okay?" I looked up from my trance with my father looking down at me, his face full of concern.

I hadn't even noticed that the bell rang and my students had already moved on to their last class.

"Yeah, what's going on?"

"Donovan, Blevins, and a team went to one of the properties today to handle a forfeiture. Seems our local felon had objections to the marshal service taking his home. He started shooting as soon as my team walked up to the door."

I stood up so fast my chair crashed to the ground, "Was..." I couldn't bring myself to finish the rest of my sentence. I knew better than to ask just about Memphis. The Marshal Service was a family unit. Everyone involved was important. "Was anyone hurt?"

“Randy was shot in the leg. He was rushed to the hospital. I haven’t gotten news about anyone else being injured. I knew if I didn’t show you would worry, so I came here instead of heading to the scene first. I’m headed out in the field and then to the hospital. I’ll let you know as soon as I know something, I promise.”

“Thanks Dad, be safe.”

“I will, kiddo.”

I knew there was no point in trying to think of anything else for the rest of the day. For the past several months I have been taking my master’s classes at night. I had an assignment due for tonight’s class, but instead of handing it in in person, I logged onto my school account and emailed it. I know as a teacher that technology is a powerful tool, but I just enjoyed sitting in class to learn. It’s kind of like having an electronic tablet—sometimes you just need to feel a real book to be reminded why you enjoyed reading in the first place.

I had never been more grateful for having the last hour of the day as my planning period. I threw my things in my briefcase and headed home.

CHAPTER FOUR

It was now way after midnight and I had cleaned every surface of our home. After I left school, I headed over to Mama Donovan's house and waited with some of Memphis' family. Usually just being with them put me at ease, but not today. Every time I turned around, I found another reason why he had to be okay. Eventually all those faces became too much to bear. After my father called to say the situation was under control and that the suspect was in custody, I came back to the home Memphis and I share. I thought about catching up on the few episodes of *Justified* that I had missed while attending my classes, but the storyline hit too close to home for comfort.

Instead, I started in the kitchen and made my way around the house until every nook and cranny was sparkling. I scrubbed the floors by hand, wiped every baseboard, and even cleaned the washing machine. My hands were raw from the harsh chemicals and my back ached. Still it wasn't enough to take my mind off of Dad's crew.

I knew that Randy was in surgery. I didn't know the extent of his injuries, but I knew my dad had gone to Randy's wife to deliver the news. He said he was okay, but I could hear the pain in his voice as he tried to seem cheerful.

It was like a morose fog had settled onto my life. I thought cleaning would help remove that feeling. It didn't. Nothing would be right again until I held Memphis in my arms. I could tell something had been bothering him, and waiting for him to talk about it was driving me insane. Whatever it was, I was worried.

The ranch-style house we rented had two bedrooms, one with a master bath, and the other we used as a spare and office. Memphis was already renting the house when we first met, then after three months of dating, he asked me to move in with him.

Straight people always balk when I tell them how quickly we moved in together. Unlike straight couples, gay couples don't have a cloud of expectations looming over their heads when they start to date. There's no pressure to do things in order, like the assumption is with most straight

couples. I didn't feel the pressure of checking each box off as our relationship progressed, and we easily moved at our own pace.

Inspecting the living room one last time, I flopped down on the leather sofa and rested my feet on the coffee table. I could feel exhaustion pulling at me, but I ignored the weariness and picked up the picture frame from beside me.

The photo was my favorite in the entire house, a picture from the weekend trip Memphis and I took to see the Grand Canyon. We had asked the couple next to us to take our picture. Memphis was smiling brightly for the camera. His brown eyes glistened with happiness. Our arms were wrapped around one another, as the sweat from our hike slid down our faces.

Memphis didn't understand my attraction to this photo. "You aren't even looking at the camera," he would complain. I've never told him what the picture really meant to me, but it represented the moment I knew without a shadow of doubt that I would love Memphis until my last breath. I told him it was my tsunami moment. It was like everything just hit me at once.

"He's not dead," I reminded myself.

I set the picture down as my stomach did an amazing impression of a growling lion. Two o'clock in the morning was not the time to prepare a feast, so I settled down with a bowl of Lucky Charms instead. Leaning my shoulder into the door frame, I concentrated on searching for the marshmallows so at least my mind would be busy.

CHAPTER FIVE

Today had been hell. Randy was going to pull through, but he would be out for a while. He would have to learn to walk again on his new prosthetic leg. His wife and family would be at his side to take care of him and give him the drive he needed to walk again. He also would have the members of our force banging down his door willing to help in any way we could.

I kept going over every second we were at the Randall house. Was I paying enough attention? Was there anything I could have done to prevent the situation? I knew in my heart what the answer was; it was just part of being in law enforcement that drove that mindset.

I pulled my tired body from the SUV and climbed the front stairs of our home. Opening the door, I was greeted with the most amazing sight. Jake didn't hear me come in, so I had a few moments to watch him as he leaned against the doorframe in only a T-shirt and boxer shorts, eating a bowl of cereal. I could tell it was a bowl of Lucky Charms. Jake only ever ate the marshmallows before tossing out the rest. I always teased him about it.

As I watched him, I took a deep breath and inhaled the smell of cleaner and bleach. Jake had been cleaning. He always cleaned when he needed to keep his mind off something. My mom had called to say Jake was there one minute then gone the next and one of my nephews had seen him crying on the back porch before he made a dash down the driveway. My chest ached to think of him alone and worried. I never wanted my job to cause him any discomfort, and it had always been a problem in my past relationships.

All of a sudden, I felt like I was hit by a tidal wave of emotion. The simple man eating a bowl of cereal was everything to me. I needed him more than I needed my next breath. One minute I was standing in the door way, and the next I had Jake pinned to the wall.

He was startled at first, but once those green eyes caught my own, a sense of understanding calmed him. Jake's breath was shaky as he pulled me closer to him. He threw his arms around my neck and I lifted him off the floor. The best part of being six foot three was how Jake could hang from my body. He

wrapped his legs around my waist, and I held him as his lips peppered my face in a flurry of motion. He kissed every inch of my face before he touched my lips. At first, his kiss was light like the others, but then the need for comfort took over.

Jake tried to pull away but I pushed him harder against the wall. I needed him, we needed each other. Our tongues slid together, caressingly, as moans filled the air. I could feel Jake tearing at my shirt. "Skin," he demanded.

Setting him on the ground, I lifted the T-shirt over my head and dropped it to the floor. Jake ran his hands over my pecs and his mouth over the left side of my chest. He licked and sucked my nipple while pinching the other. Soon his free hand fumbled with my belt. I could tell he was torn between taking his mouth off me and undoing the troublesome buckle. I took the decision out of his hands, unfastening my buckle and then letting my pants fall to the floor.

When Jake cupped my ass he froze. "You're not wearing underwear."

"I had to change at the hospital," I explained.

"I need you," Jake pleaded. I understood how he felt.

I backed Jake into the wall once more, ripping his T-shirt from his body. I kissed my way down his torso, taking time to explore each nipple as Jake's fingers dug into my back. I loved when he did that. It was like he was claiming me in some way.

When I finally reached the band of his underwear, I yanked them down and took his prick in my mouth. Jake came to life, rocking us both forward, panting with desire. His fingers started to comb through my hair, before he tugged using my hair to pull my head closer.

"Yes," he hissed.

I moaned when Jake pulled my head away from his cock. "I love what you're doing, but if you don't get inside me now, I'm going to come."

I picked Jake up and once again his legs wrapped around my waist. Our eyes locked as I entered his body. Moving slowly at first so he wouldn't get hurt, we soon picked up the pace once Jake leaned further into the wall, using it as leverage to thrust harder against me.

I held onto Jake as he moved up and down my cock, his fingernails digging into my shoulders. When he yelled my name, I knew neither of us was going to last long. We needed to feel the other alive in our arms.

I picked up speed as the worries of the day melted away and soon Jake's spunk shot from his body and onto my bare chest. The warm seed triggered my own release as I pumped into his ass. He threw his arms around my neck as I held him until his harsh breathing returned to normal.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"I was a little shaken up earlier, but I'm solid. I'm sorry you had to worry."

Jake's sharp teeth dragged across my skin.

"Ouch!"

"I don't mind worrying as long as you walk through that door every night."

I smiled and started to carry him through the house.

"Where are we going?"

"I told you earlier that once I got a hold of you, I had no plans of letting go for hours. I'm sticking to that promise."

CHAPTER SIX

The sun streaming through the windows woke me up, our sheets a tangled mess at the bottom of the bed. I removed Memphis' arm from my chest as I got up, my body protesting as I stretched. The alarm clock said 11:23 am. I was thankful I had called my principal last night and told him I needed a sub since Memphis and I had stayed up the rest of the night talking about the shooting and other things.

The smell of coffee soon brought my brain to life. After making myself a cup, I decided Memphis needed his sleep. While he caught up on some much-needed rest, I got started on my final paper for class.

When I was halfway through the book I was reading, light kisses traveled up my back. "Morning," I laughed.

"It's more like late afternoon. Why didn't you wake me?"

"You needed the rest. How are you feeling?"

Memphis lowered his body onto mine, his head coming to rest on my shoulder. His bare chest nestled on top of my bare back. The warmth of him was welcoming. It was hard *not* to get an erection with so much of his skin touching my own.

"I called the hospital and talked to Randy's wife. He's in his own room and she suggested we stop by."

"That's good to hear."

"What are you reading?"

"A historical piece for my class, it's my last assignment." Before I could say anything else, I heard a soft snore. I laughed silently, trying not to wake him.

A soft meow sounded from my left. Our cat, Thom, purred and hopped onto Memphis' back for a nap as well. I wasn't being dog-piled, but kitty-piled.

CHAPTER SEVEN

I woke to sharp claws digging into my back. “Thom,” I yelled as I rolled off Jake.

“Enjoy your nap?” he asked, laughing at me.

“I was until your demon sank his claws into me.”

Jake sat up and stretched.

“How long have you been finished?”

He shrugged with a smile. “For a while, but I loved the feel of you on me, so I didn’t wake you.”

His smile soon faded as he took in my serious mood. “Are we going to have that discussion now?” he asked scooting closer to me.

“What discussion?” I tried to remember if I had said anything to him.

“You’ve been acting as if you’re going to say something for a few months now. I’ve been trying to wait patiently, but it’s killing me. Please, whatever it is, just tell me.” He took my hands between his, rubbing softly over my knuckles.

“I have been trying to find the right words,” I admitted.

“Just say what’s in your heart,” he prompted.

“I love you.”

He smiled. “I know that, and I love you too.”

“I hate where we are right now.”

I watched as Jake looked around the room.

“Not the house, but where our relationship is. I feel like your roommate.” Like Jake’s demon cat, I watched as his back arched.

“I’m saying this all wrong. I love our relationship, I just miss you. We’ve both become so busy with real life issues, that we’ve put our relationship on the back burner. I hate it. I want to come home to you every night and tell you about my day. I want to cook for you and hear your laugh.”

Jake moved closer, taking my face in his hands. “Is that all that’s bothering you.”

I stilled and looked into his eyes. “Is that all? Isn’t that enough?”

“I understand what you’re saying. I feel the same way. It isn’t that we don’t love one another, we’re just busy right now. With your SOG training and me taking night classes, it has cut our time together in half. We can find the time, Memphis.”

“So we rob Father Time?”

His green eyes sparkled. “We rob Father Time,” he laughed. “Every relationship has its ups and downs, we just have to ride this coaster down until we start to climb again. That’s all.”

“So you feel it, too?” I asked.

“Yes, I hated going to work in the morning knowing you haven’t come home from work yet because you were working on a case. I’ve missed everything about you. I know your work is important and you aren’t not here out of choice but out of necessity.”

“You are the first man who has made me want to balance work and a home life. I want to find the time for you. I want to make things work.”

“Then we find the time. It’s as simple as that.”

“I robbed Father Time already.”

Jake’s facial features crunched together. “What?”

“I called Paul yesterday. He’s waiting on standby to book us a vacation to Thailand. All we have to do is tell him when, and we are there.”

Jake launched himself into my arms. “Really?” he screeched.

“Really, just let me know when you want to go, and I’ll tell the Chief. I’ve already talked to him about it, too.”

“You talked to my dad?”

“Yeah, he came to the hospital yesterday. He said he was at your school, and that you knew what was going on. I just blurted out, ‘I love your son.’ He laughed and said he knew that already. I told him about my plans. He said it was about time.”

“I love you, Memphis. You are the only man I’ve allowed past my walls. You give me strength and confidence I’ve never known. You make me want things I’ve never wanted before,” he said as he pushed me onto my back.

“What are you doing?”

“Finding time to show you just how much I love you.”

THE END

Author Bio

Summer Michaels lives in a small Kentucky town best known for its horses, basketball, and whiskey. An avid reader, she discovered her author voice and unleashed her love for of all things romance. With a belief that love should be shared no matter the form, she enjoys telling stories of rowdy cowboys, reunited lovers, and steamy shifters. When she's not reading or writing, usually she can be found screaming for the beheading of King Joffery or with her four children and supportive husband.

Summer's first book, Substitute Heart, was published by Less Than Three Press in 2012. She loves hearing from passionate readers and fans of all genres.

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COASTING EAST

By Lashley Mills

Photo Description

Two twenty-four-year-old boyfriends getting ready to play a game of football with their friends stand with their backs to the camera. The man on the left is wearing a red T-shirt with “MINE 02” written in large white letters across the back. The man on the right is wearing a backward baseball cap and a red T-shirt with “MINE 01” written across his back, and is playfully grabbing his boyfriend’s ass with his entire hand.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

These guys have been together since they lived on the same floor their sophomore year of college four years ago. Real life and adult jobs keep them busy and stressed all week. They look forward to getting together with Brandt and Todd, their best friends, every Sunday afternoon to have some fun and play a game of football at the local park. A little exercise and a lot of razzing is good for them all but they’re tired of hearing words like “gay, fag, and queer”, even if they don’t say them with malice. Brandt and Todd don’t know about them so they’ve devised a plan. They’re going to wear their new shirts to the park this Sunday and then they’re going to kick some ass on the field. They just hope their friendship survives.

I see this as being fun with lots of banter. Hope someone can see their story too and write it for me!

Sincerely,

Gyn

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: best friends in love, established couple, coming out, love making, group of friends, sports

Word count: 32,503

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Author's Note

This story, *Coasting East* (North Shore Series #2,) is the stand-alone sequel to the story, *North of Sure* (North Shore Series #1.) You do not have to be familiar with *North of Sure* to enjoy this story.

Acknowledgements

To the LGBTQUIA community at large and its supporters—
thank you for your strength and for being who you are.

And to you, the reader, thank you for reading.

COASTING EAST

By Lashley Mills

CHAPTER ONE

Justin Meyer and Parker Klein fell in love three years ago during the summer after their sophomore year of college in Boston, while living on the same dorm floor. They'd met, become best friends, and had been inseparable ever since.

They spent their junior and senior years of college living together in a small two-bedroom apartment off campus, where only one of the bedrooms was big enough for a full size mattress. That bedroom was theirs, the place where they shared the same bed every night. The other bedroom had a twin size bed and two desks pressed up against the wall. They used that room as their study room, and if a bed was only two feet away from where they studied together every night, well, that was nothing if not convenient.

The appearance of having two separate bedrooms was important to them though. As much as they were in love with each other, they just weren't ready for anyone else to know, and as far as they were concerned, they were still best friends and nothing much had changed. Nothing much, except for everything.

And now, three years after having fallen in love, their physical appearances had changed slightly, but their hearts hadn't.

Parker had hazel-green eyes, and his physique was the same that it had always been—long and cut, with summer-tanned skin that never seemed to fade, no matter what time of year it was. In college, Parker rarely worried about getting haircuts, only bothering to get his sandy-brown hair trimmed once it was down to his shoulders. Since he'd graduated from college last year and was a little older now, he tried to be better about keeping up with it. Sort of. His hair length would fluctuate. It would be down past his ears almost brushing across his shoulders one day, and the next he would have it trimmed so short that it was almost a buzz cut. It depended on the seasons and on his mood, and since he didn't have his own car, his overall effort to borrow his mom's or hop on the bus to go someplace to get it cut.

When their romantic relationship first started, Parker would ask Justin's opinion about his hair, but Justin would just palm the top of his head and joke with him to "shave it all off" or bet him on how long it would take for him to grow his hair to his ass. Parker got the hint that Justin didn't really care—well that, and Justin would tell him, "Wear it how you want it, Parker. You're hot either way. In every way," and then kiss him so deeply that he was left gasping for air that Parker just decided to experiment with it. He loved to surprise Justin by having long hair one day and nearly no hair the next. He would have done the same thing with facial hair if he could. He so wanted to grow out a beard and then shave it all off, just to see the reaction he'd get from Justin. He wondered if anything was capable of shocking his boyfriend. But he never had the chance, his facial hair never really grew in, and when it did, it was spotty at best.

Justin, on the other hand was completely different. He had dark brown hair, almost appearing black at times, chocolate-brown eyes, and, being half Italian on his mother's side, he had no problem growing out a mustache or a thick, full beard. When he first graduated college, he had decided to take a cue from Parker and just let everything grow out. However, he didn't really like the feel of his hair covering up his ears and cut it back to the short, cropped style that he had always worn thereafter. He did like how the beard felt on his face though. Actually, his favorite part was when his beard was first growing in, the hairs on his face still sort of rough and standing up, not yet formed into a beard—he would kiss Parker or put his face up to his, enjoying Parker's reaction to the new tactile sensation of Justin being up close to him.

Justin's rough hairs brushing up against Parker's smooth skin was a huge turn-on for him, and well, it was an even bigger turn-on to Parker. So, Justin began to sport a permanent five o'clock shadow. Using his electric razor, he kept it neat and trimmed and tidy, just short enough that it wasn't a full beard, so that when he brushed up against Parker, Parker would know that Justin was there and that his beard was for him.

Unlike Justin, Parker didn't know if his inability to grow facial hair had anything to do with his racial background because he wasn't sure exactly what it was. He was about a quarter Irish and a little German, but that's all he knew.

He only knew about his mother's side since his dad had never been in the picture. His parents were never married and although it was never discussed, Parker knew that it was his mom who had decided to have him and to keep him. His whole life it had just been him and her. And he liked it that way.

And with having Justin and his mom, Parker knew all the love that he would ever need. He knew what it meant to be a part of something bigger than himself, and he truly knew what it meant to be loved.

CHAPTER TWO

When Justin and Parker graduated from college they lost their financial aid, so as much as they loved living together and wanted to continue to do so, they reluctantly decided to move back into their parents' houses, deciding that it was best that they saved money while they looked for jobs. Luckily, they lived in neighboring towns on the North Shore of Boston and as soon as they could save enough money to move, they'd resume living together.

It was a simple enough plan, except for the part where they couldn't find steady jobs and during the summer after their graduation. Justin was getting frustrated at the lack of job prospects.

"Fuck! Why did we have to graduate into this economy?" Justin was losing his patience with the whole job search thing. "We both graduated cum laude and we still can't find work. Nobody gives a fuck," Justin raged out into the hot air of his Ford Taurus. His car air conditioner had been broken for ages and he was sticking to his seat, the heat only aggravating him further, but at least he was with Parker.

As always, Parker was in the passenger seat beside him. They had decided to take a drive east to the beach and maybe sit by the ocean. Since it was a Tuesday morning, the beach would be deserted, for the most part, because most people would be at work. Most people had nine-to-five jobs, with a salary, and benefits, and could afford to move the fuck out of their parents' houses.

"Hey, it's not so bad." Parker tried to sound uplifting, but was failing miserably.

Justin looked over at him. "Parker, not so bad?! We've had to resort to getting it on in the backseat of my car for Christ's sake. And have you seen the backseat of my car?" Justin looked behind him into the backseat. "It's tiny. I can barely manage to give you a blow job without getting a stiff neck or throwing my back out." Justin was obviously being overly dramatic, but Parker agreed that their sexual escapades, now that they were living back at home, sometimes had to be done in less than ideal circumstances. But not

always. They at least had Parker's house to themselves while Parker's mom still worked the overnight shifts as a nurse. In fact, now that Parker was thinking about it, he couldn't help but smile at the thought of how they'd been spending a lot of their nights together.

Parker reached up and gently rubbed at the nape of Justin's neck. "Oh, baby, I'm sorry," Parker let out in mock sympathy. "Don't worry, the next time you go down on me, I'll be sure to give you a massage afterwards," Parker said coyly, continuing to rub Justin's neck. He leaned back in his seat a bit, as if he thought that since he was giving Justin the offer of a massage that Justin should give him the offer of what would cause him to get a stiff neck in the first place. Parker licked his lips in anticipation of Justin's reply. He wasn't really serious about this, but since Justin was just about always ready to go, maybe he had enticed him.

"Okay," Justin said looking back at Parker, focusing intently on his wet full lips. "Take off your shirt."

What? Justin was going for this? Right now in the beach parking lot?

Yes!

"Sure." Parker yanked his shirt up and over his head. It was an old T-shirt that he always liked wearing to the beach. It was so faded and worn that it was almost see-through.

"Yeah, okay." Justin leaned over toward Parker, who was just dying at this point for Justin to touch him. How was Justin okay with this? But Parker couldn't care about that right now. All he knew was that Justin was leaning slowly over him, slowly, slowly, almost there, come on...

But Justin just kept leaning past Parker, not brushing his thigh or his waist or his now hardening dick. Instead, Justin reached all the way past Parker until his hand reached the passenger side door handle, and he flung the door wide open. This was so not what Parker was expecting.

"Justin, what the...? What are you...?" But Justin was just smiling up at him still spread over his body, and he was—*Damn it, Justin*. Laughing.

"What did you think? I was going to blow you here? Now?"

"You did that on purpose."

“What?” Justin tried to sound innocent. “It’s not my fault that just by leaning over you, you get all horny.” Justin had retreated to his side of the car, opening his own door and stepping out onto the hot pavement of the beach lot.

Damn it, Justin. Parker wasn’t really mad though. Justin was always goofing with him and pulling pranks. Parker wasn’t really expecting to get blown in the beach parking lot anyway, but since the topic was brought up, he had to at least try to make his move and get Justin to go for it.

In the beginning of their relationship, Parker had always been the one to make the first move with Justin in every conceivable way. It was he who first kissed Justin, their sophomore year of college, when he could no longer put his feelings for Justin aside. When Justin had been receptive to him, wanting his kiss and wanting them to be together, Parker knew that there would never be another person for him besides Justin.

Parker continued to make the first moves, his want and desire driving him the entire time. Not just his want of the physical act, but of Justin, of wanting to be with him in every possible way. It was Parker who was the first person to elevate their make out sessions, actually wrapping his hands around Justin’s erection, and then later being the first person to go down on him.

But when it came to having sex, the act of finally joining their two bodies into one, it was Justin who initiated it. It was Justin who wanted to be entered first, and although it was Justin who had initiated it, Parker had wanted it, had wanted Justin just as badly as Justin had wanted him.

And now, three years after they first made love, Parker was no longer the one making all the moves. In fact, more often than not, it was Justin who was ravenous and insatiable and could never seem to get enough of him. And although it had been Justin who had been entered first by Parker and although that part of their relationship at the very beginning stayed the same for a couple of months, when Justin finally felt ready to top and when Parker had been so aroused by his passion and love for Justin that the want of Justin inside of him was all-consuming, they switched their positions in bed and their relationship reached even further levels of intimacy and want and desire and the love they shared and expressed to each other had only been growing from there.

Now, when they were together in bed, and not wanting to just fool around, but to be with each other in every possible way, it was Parker who often times found himself on the bottom. Not always though, not even close, because Justin still needed to feel Parker, still needed the closeness of having Parker within him, surrounding him fully, and Parker felt the same way.

Although their job searches took longer than they had originally thought, Justin was eventually offered a job selling cars and Parker took per diem shifts as an orderly and patient transporter, working at the same hospital where his mother worked as a nurse.

Through Justin's former college roommate, Brandt Donnelly, Justin was able to score a job at Brandt's dad's car dealership, North Shore Motors. Brandt had always said that he wanted more for himself than just to work for his dad's company, but after graduation when he couldn't get a decent job either, even with his dad's numerous business contacts, he decided to take an office management position in the car dealership and immediately hired Justin on as a salesman.

Justin had never sold anything other than speakers, stereos, and CDs in the audio section of Best Buy at the mall. At first, the thought of selling \$70,000 imported cars to the swanks of Boston and the North Shore seemed daunting to him. But Brandt told him not to worry about it, that he'd train him, and that for every twenty cars he sold, he'd give him a bonus. Although Justin wasn't even sure if Brandt had that kind of authority, it at least got him motivated enough so that he could shove his nerves aside and go to work.

It was so ironic that Justin showed up to work every day to sell luxury automobiles in his beat-up Ford Taurus, a car that his grandmother had originally owned. After she broke her hip, when Justin was in high school, and didn't drive anymore, his grandparents decided to gift the car to Justin under the strict instructions that he was to buckle his seatbelt each and every time he was in the car and that he would never, ever, never text or use his cellphone while driving. To this day, out of habit, fear, or guilt, he wasn't sure which, he never used his phone in the car.

When Justin pulled into work each day, he parked behind the large storage shed in the back of the huge dealership lot, that covered well over five acres,

and let his eyes roam over the Audis and the BMWs and told himself that he'd put money aside every week in order to buy one someday. Although he was indeed able to save some money toward this lofty dream, he was trying even harder to reach a more important goal.

Justin and Parker were now almost twenty-four years old and a year had passed since they had first started working. They both still lived with their parents, focusing on their goal of saving as much money as possible so that they could live together once again.

Justin still had great memories of living with Parker, and he smiled as he remembered the memory of a time they still joked about, even though it happened their senior year.

"I'm not putting that in my mouth." Justin shook his head from side to side. "No."

"Come on, you'll like it," Parker urged him on.

"Nope."

"You said you'd try it."

"Yeah, well now that I see it, I've changed my mind."

Justin was looking down at the round, wooden table he was sitting at in their tiny college apartment. Well really, he was looking at the white plate of food that was on the round, wooden table.

Parker had recently come up with the idea of becoming a vegetarian. He said that he wanted to be healthier and now that they lived off campus and didn't have a meal plan to the college dining hall, they were always grabbing fast food—burgers, fries. Burgers, fries. Burgers.

And that's exactly what Justin wanted now.

But Justin was looking down at his plate and it was covered in what looked like a piece of brown leather baseball mitt stuffed with more brown bits of dirt, or rice? Or—"What is this anyway?"

"It's a portobello mushroom stuffed with quinoa," Parker answered, placing his plate on the table and taking a seat directly across from Justin.

"Keen-what?" What the hell? "Dude, if I can't spell it, I'm definitely not eating it."

“Yeah, well...” Parker was fidgeting with his fork in his hand, grimacing down at his stuffed mushroom creation, not looking too thrilled at the prospect of eating it.

No way is this vegetarian thing going to last, Justin thought.

“Come on, Parker, let’s just go to Five Guys. We need bacon. On a burger. Now.” Justin was half out of his seat, ready to go out to eat instead, but Parker wasn’t going for it.

“Justin, come on. I said I wasn’t going to eat meat anymore and you said you were cool with it.”

“Yeah, but I never said that I’d stop eating meat.” Nope. Burgers. Bacon. Burgers. Now.

“Yeah, because you never could. There’s no way you would make it as a vegetarian. You probably couldn’t even go a week without eating meat,” Parker said to him, his mouth still void of any fungus among-us creation.

“Is that a challenge?” Justin perked up at what Parker had just said.

“More like a bet.”

“Yeah?” Justin was loving the sound of this. “What are the stakes?”

“The stakes?” Parker’s eyes looked around the room as he thought of his idea. “How about, the first one to put flesh in his mouth loses,” Parker said, looking back across the table to Justin, deliberately making his answer sound like a double entendre.

“Yeah?” Justin ran his foot under the table over to Parker’s. Justin started at his foot, and then his shin, and slowly he dragged his foot up, up over Parker’s knee and onto his thigh, rubbing it back and forth, and right when Parker closed his eyes waiting to feel Justin’s foot nudge his cock, Justin abruptly pulled away and dropped his foot back to the floor. Parker’s eyes shot open.

“Fine. I know I can hold out longer than you,” Justin shot over to Parker, folding his hands in front of himself on the table like he was completely innocent even though his foot had just been only a centimeter away from Parker’s dick.

“Hold out longer? But wait.” Parker had to think back to his words. “So, the person who gives head first loses?” Was that right? “Or, the person who doesn’t give head loses?” He had no idea. He just knew that his cock wanted attention and now he was confused, and what sounded like a funny idea at first was now taking a turn for the worst.

Justin had to think about this. “Umm... the person who gives head first loses?” What? He wasn’t sure. “Wait, shouldn’t it be the other way around?” Justin was confused now too and either way, this wasn’t sounding so great anymore.

“So this is a no-blow-jobs bet?” Parker answered him, his hand reaching down to his crotch underneath the table, palming his half-hard dick that was pressing against the fly of his khakis. This was actually sounding like a horrible bet. And whatever the hell the stakes were or the bet actually was, he was willing to be on the losing end of it, whatever the hell that actually meant.

“I think the vegetarianism thing sounds easier...” Justin answered, sounding unsure. He took off his baseball cap and scratched at the matted, dark-brown hair underneath it. No way was either one of them going for this anymore.

“Fine.” Parker slid back from the dining table and walked over to Justin. “I’ll be on the losing side first.” He leaned down to Justin and gave him a kiss on his lips, and before Justin could pull him down further to get better contact with his mouth, he said, “Then you can take me to Five Guys for burgers. Winner pays.”

“Done,” replied Justin, reaching up for Parker, bringing him back down to him, hungrily sealing their lips together.

And that’s how Parker was a vegetarian for less than half an hour.

Two years later, as much as Justin loved reliving the memories of the time in their tiny apartment, when they moved in together this time, he wanted it to be in a house. Not on the fourth floor of a five-floor walk-up, where he and Parker barely had enough room to move around each other, let alone be able to set up a proper house. Not that he minded at the time—living in close quarters was... Convenient. Very convenient, and Justin didn’t want to be anywhere

else than right next to Parker, right up close to him on their mattress on the floor or their busted-up love seat, that after moving and angling and pushing and shoving, was just the right size to be able to fit through their narrow apartment doorways. It actually fit in their living room/dining room/kitchen hybrid space that was comprised of a wooden table, the busted-up green pleather love seat, a few folding chairs for when they had friends over and a fifty-five-inch LED flat screen TV.

In their college apartment, the TV was non-negotiable. They could save money using hand-me-down furniture and thrift store lamps and not buying a bed frame for the bed that they shared, but the TV? Non-negotiable. Justin and Parker loved watching sports, TV shows, and movies way too much to throw their money away on a crappy set. Justin was still working at Best Buy at the time and was able to get discounts on the TV, while the Blu-ray player and the HDMI cables were next to free. When he told his parents how excited he was about the TV, his dad showed up at their apartment one day after work with a low wooden TV stand that he and Justin lugged up the four flights of stairs. Justin was in college heaven. Parker. TV. Actual food in the fridge from time to time. It was all he needed.

But now, Justin wanted more. They had graduated college over a year ago and he was almost twenty-four years old, and he wanted more. There was no question in his mind who he wanted more with. Parker had been his best friend since their sophomore year in college, the one person he could turn to no matter what, the one person that he could spout off his crazy dreams to, but this dream he was having now? It wasn't so crazy.

He saw himself and Parker living together in a house with a yard, somewhere on the North Shore where they could stretch out in the backyard and stare up at the night sky and the moon and the stars. The first time he had told Parker he loved him was under the stars while lying on the red and green plaid blanket that he and Parker always shared at the Eagles college football games they went to. Justin wore his red T-shirt with the big white letters across the front saying "GO" and his number, "01", on the back and Parker wore his red T-shirt with the word "EAGLES!" on the front and the number "02" across the back, and Justin wanted more of that for them. More I love

yous and hand-holding, and kissing, and making out and touching and well—everything.

But there was a problem. He and Parker weren't out as a couple yet. Actually, they weren't out individually either, not to their family and not to their friends, and even though they still met with their friends, Brandt and Todd, every weekend for a game of football, just like they had since their sophomore year of college, neither Brandt nor Todd knew of their romantic relationship.

“Yeah, no wonder you fags like touch football so much.” Brandt looked over to Justin and Parker and said this with a curl of his lip. “I say fuck it. Let's tackle each other for Christ's sakes. That's part of the fun!”

Todd just stood with one hand on his hip and kept his other hand at his brow, shielding the unnaturally bright overhead fluorescent lights of the indoor sports complex where the guys played football each week.

“Yeah, sure, we can play ‘tackle’ instead of ‘touch’, although I'm warning you, Brandt, don't come crying to me when you wrinkle your expensive clothes. I don't get why you show up every Sunday actually wearing your Sunday best. This isn't church, you know. Except, now that I think of it, you should get down on your knees and pray that you don't cry too loudly when Parker and I kick your ass,” Justin pointed out loudly.

“Yeah, I'm sure you want me on my knees...” Brandt retorted.

“What was that, Brandt? Let me guess, another fag joke? You're so original, man. But you're the one who's the joke. Just try to beat Parker and me at this. Every week it's the same old thing, hell it's been the same thing for the past three years, a whole buncha talk and you guys always lose,” Justin sneered, to which Todd, still standing a bit farther off from the guys, looked slightly embarrassed.

“Sorry, Todd, I mean you're good, you're both good. But we both know that Parker and I were built for speed.”

“And that's why we're gonna kick your ass today when we play tackle. Your fast legs aren't gonna save you from my two hundred and fifty pounds of

muscle. Now are you and Parker gonna man up or what? Time to play some ball!” Brandt was always giving Justin shit. But Justin always gave it right back. That’s just how they’d been since they roomed together, along with Todd, during their freshman year of college and it was always in fun. They were good friends and they never took it seriously.

Brandt was always throwing around the word, “fag” or making gay jokes. It was something that Justin and Parker didn’t really care about and didn’t take serious offense to because they understood that Brandt was harmless, he was just an imbecile.

Three years after having become boyfriends with Parker, Justin knew without a shadow of a doubt who he was and it was all thanks to Parker. Justin, at first, had been at a loss, not wanting to use a label to mark his new found love for his best friend, but now, he knew that he wanted to because he knew who he was with Parker; he was the absolute best version of himself.

Some trepidation and fear still held Justin back. To the world, he and Parker were just friends, best friends and not Justin and Parker.

But that was all about to change.

CHAPTER THREE

“I told my mom.”

“What?” Justin felt like he was already in the middle of a conversation.

Parker pinched the bridge of his nose and ran his hand across his forehead. “About us, Justin. I told her about us.” He hadn’t discussed this with Justin beforehand and he wasn’t sure how he was going to take it. “Justin, you talk about us moving in together, and I’m not calling myself your roommate, not anymore. We never even talk about it anymore, us telling people we’re a couple. We’ve been together for over three years, it’s time.”

“Yeah, but.”

“But what? Justin, you’re acting like telling my mom wasn’t my decision to make.”

“Well maybe it’s not.” Justin mumbled out.

“What?”

“Since it involves me, I don’t think it is your decision to make,” Justin said looking straight into Parker’s eyes.

“It’s because it involves you that I made this decision. Justin, you know what you mean to me, you know what this relationship means to me. I can’t believe that we’re having this conversation.”

“What do you mean you can’t believe we’re having this conversation? You’re the one who brought it up.”

“No, Justin, what I mean is how can we not be on the same page about this? I need you to tell me right now.”

“Tell you what?”

“That we’re on the same page.”

Justin scratched up at the hairline above his forehead. Was he on the same page as Parker when it came to this? To “come out”? Ugh. He hated that term. To “come out” like he had been hiding, like this was all some deep dark secret that needed to be revealed. And it wasn’t. None of this was. Nothing he felt for Parker was even close to being dark or dirty or shameful.

They had both decided to keep the status of their romantic relationship to themselves while they were still in college, but now that they were older, now that they absolutely knew without a shadow of a doubt that this relationship was it for them, keeping quiet about it was no longer an option. It couldn't be. *Enough, Justin.*

“We're on the same page,” Justin answered him.

“You don't sound too convincing.” Parker was worried that Justin was just trying to appease him. And this couldn't be farther from the reality of it.

Justin walked up to Parker and kissed him sweetly on the lips. “I promise you. We're on the same page.” And Justin was going to prove it.

CHAPTER FOUR

A week after Parker had said that he told his mom that he and Justin were a couple was Valentine's Day. Justin and Parker never made a huge deal out of the holiday, but this year was going to be different. Justin needed for it to be, because he knew he had acted like an ass. Parker had let him know that he had told his mom about them and he made it about himself, just like he always did anytime any conflict came up. And he knew it, and he felt like an asshole about it.

Parker was a million times braver than he was. But that too was going to change. Justin was no longer going to be a chickenshit about this. It's one thing not to mention to anyone that he and Parker were together, to just remain neutral about it, not going out of his way to tell anyone, but not actively denying it either. The time for that was over as well. He wasn't a college kid anymore. He and Parker weren't shackled up together in a fourth floor walk-up living off ramen noodles and string cheese. Well, the ramen noodles and string cheese hadn't really changed much, but still that's not the point.

The point was that Parker was it for Justin. The it. The person. He was damn lucky to even be with Parker and he knew it.

And this thing of not calling Parker his boyfriend to anyone and not letting anyone else in on the fact that they were together as a couple, together in love, had gone on too long. Far too long. And that was going to change too.

So, the day after Parker and he talked, Justin made a trip to Boston after work. Parker had a late shift at the hospital, and Justin knew that he would have time to go, even if there was killer rushhour traffic that time of day.

When Justin reached Boston, he found a parking spot off Commonwealth Avenue, right near his old college campus, and after parallel parking his car and walking around the street corner, he was within sight of his old sophomore dorm, the one where he had met Parker. The place where his whole life had changed.

It was now close to seven PM on a cold February night. After looking at the five-story brick dorm, now only illuminated by the soft orange glow of the

curbside street lights and the pole lights that lined the walkways on the college grounds, Justin couldn't help but feel lucky. Lucky that he had met Parker. Lucky that Parker only lived five doors down from him his sophomore year in the dorm. And more than anything, he just felt lucky to be with Parker. That was the truth. He had always felt lucky that Parker wanted to be with him, had chosen him and that feeling was never going to change.

In college, along with their friend Brandt, Justin and Parker's other best friend was Todd Schmidt. Todd still worked at the custom T-shirt shop that he and Parker had worked at throughout college, and since Todd was now in graduate school at their old college, he kept his job there, making his hours even more part-time to account for his graduate school studies and the observation hours that he had to clock in.

But Todd was going to be working tonight. Justin had called him to make sure of it. Justin wanted to see him, wanted to talk to him, wanted him to be there.

So, after shoving his hands further down in the deep pockets of his wool coat to protect them from the frigid night air, and walking a few more blocks, Justin found himself in front of the T-shirt shop. The one that specialized in custom-made T-shirts, where Parker had originally designed their "GO" and "EAGLES!" T-shirts that were worn to every single Eagles football game during college.

The entrance to the shop itself was small, and people might just walk on past it if they didn't know it was there. Oftentimes, the shop didn't deal directly with individuals from the public, trying to take on bigger clients in order to do bulk orders, but it was still a family-run business and they were still happy to service people's individual requests. Plus, Justin was personal friends with Todd, and he knew that Todd would be able to handle his rush order. He needed his order done before Valentine's Day, which would be on Sunday, only four days away.

"Hey, man. What are you doing around here?" Todd asked, hearing the little bell chime over the door when Justin walked into the shop.

"I told you I was coming. Or did you forget?" Justin walked over to the large stainless steel counter, toward the back of the shop that Todd was standing behind.

“Naw, I didn’t forget, just meant what can I getcha? We just printed out some Eagles shirts, but I don’t know if they’re your style, they’re the actual school colors—you know, maroon and gold. Not the red and white shirts that you and Parker always wore.” The “GO” and “EAGLES!” shirts, that he and Parker had worn every week in college, were bright red T-shirts with large white block letters.

“Naw, thanks, I, uh, was hoping that you could just put in an order for me, a custom order.”

Todd walked from behind the counter toward Justin, after having grabbed a pad of paper to take Justin’s order.

“The only thing is I need it by Saturday,” Justin told him.

“Uh, Saturday? Kind of short notice, Justin. How big’s the order?”

“Just two. Two shirts.” Justin sincerely hoped that Todd could make this happen.

“Alright, yeah. We should be able to do that. I’m in tomorrow too, so we can get it done.” Todd was looking down at the pad of paper he was holding in his hand, already writing down Justin’s contact information.

“So what’s the occasion?” Todd looked up from the order form.

“What?”

“The occasion? Why the rush job?”

“Oh, yeah, that. Well, you know. Sunday’s Valentine’s Day. So…” Justin let his voice trail off.

“So…?”

“So I want some shirts made.”

“Well. Good to know.” Todd took the pad of paper he was holding in his hands and whacked the brim of Justin’s Patriots football cap with it. “I know you want shirts made. You just said that. What I’m asking is why? Or at the very least what do you want the shirts to say?”

“Oh, yeah. I figured I could just draw it. Isn’t that how you do it? I can design it and you can print it?”

“Yeah, we can do that. We probably can’t do anything too intricate since we only have a few days, but just tell me what you’re looking for and I’ll tell you if we can do it.”

“Do you still have red shirts?” Justin wanted to make sure that the two T-shirts Todd would print up would be red, just like the shirts that he and Parker had worn back in college.

“Yeah, red, blue, green, wisteria, chartreuse, aubergine...”

“Auburn what?”

“Aubergine. Never mind. The point is if we have chartreuse and wisteria and a hundred more colors that you never heard of, I think we can handle red.”

“Wiseass.”

“Yeah, I know. But you’re bringing it out in me. You’re not even telling me what you want.”

“Right. Well, two red shirts, size large.” Justin looked down at himself, maybe he better size up. “Well one large, one extra-large. With uhh, ‘01’ and ‘02’ on the backs.”

“Ahh, I see, making some more football shirts for our Valentine’s Day football match, huh?”

Justin just nodded.

Justin, Parker, Brandt and Todd still played football together every week or so, just as they had been doing since college. In the spring and summer, they liked to hit the park to be outside and get some fresh air, but with it still being February and freezing out, they played in the indoor sports complex that Brandt had a membership to. Since they played every Sunday and this year Valentine’s Day was on a Sunday, it was going to be a Valentine’s Day matchup.

“So you wear the ‘01’ and Parker wears the ‘02’.” Todd was taking down notes on the pad of paper. “Just remind me again of who wears the ‘GO’ and who wears the ‘EAGLES!’ that’s written on the front of the shirts.”

“Uhh, I’m the ‘GO’, but I want something different this time.”

Justin took the pad of paper from Todd and wrote in the words he wanted for the front and back of the T-shirts and then handed it back to him.

Todd looked down at the paper, saw what Justin wrote, and smiled. “Bout time.”

“What?” This wasn’t exactly the reaction that Justin had been expecting to receive from Todd.

“Dude, I was a psych major and now I’m in grad school for the same thing. I literally spend twenty hours a week just studying people.” Todd flung the pad of paper back to the counter. “This isn’t a surprise.”

Justin was taken a bit off guard. He had spent the whole drive down to Boston mentally preparing himself for some long-winded conversation with Todd about this and now with one quick glance at the T-shirt order form, Todd barely had any reaction.

“I thought, I dunno, I thought...”

“Wait, wait, I can redo my reaction if you want... Wait.” Todd cleared his throat, made a giant fake gasp, and for some reason took on a Southern accent. “Why, Justin, how could this be? I would have never known! The injustice of it all! The travesty! The—” Todd couldn’t keep the charade going on anymore and just started laughing at himself.

“Fucker.”

“Yeah, well, what else is new? These shirts will be ready on Saturday. I’ll make sure of it.” Todd reached into his pants pocket to grab his vibrating cellphone and started to fiddle around with it. “So see ya Sunday?”

The conversation that Justin had just spent the last hour and a half preparing himself for was apparently over.

“Yeah, man, see ya Sunday.”

And just like that, they said their good-byes and Justin, smiling to himself, walked back to his car.

CHAPTER FIVE

It was Sunday afternoon, Valentine's Day, and Justin and Parker were meeting their friends, Brandt and Todd, at the indoor athletic complex. Brandt still had a membership, even though it was in Boston and Brandt, Justin and Parker were back to living on the North Shore where they grew up and now had jobs. Ever since their sophomore year of college, Justin, Parker and Todd had been given free guest passes to the sports complex so that they could play their weekly game of touch, or oftentimes tackle, football. Justin always thought it was odd how they were all given free passes week after week at one of the most exclusive sports complexes in the state. But Justin's thoughts on this had changed last week, when they were in the locker room after the game. Brandt had gone to the restroom and Justin saw a filled out form resting on the top of Brandt's gym bag.

It was a membership renewal form to the sports complex. Right below the line that held Brandt's name, address and phone number was a big bold check mark in the box for a Family Pass renewal. And the names of the family members listed were: Justin Meyer, Parker Klein and Todd Schmidt.

Brandt must have been buying a family pass all along, and it's what they were, family. Thinking back to that moment, a week before, Justin knew he could do this.

Justin and Parker had come separately to the sports complex because Parker had an early shift at the hospital and would be coming straight from work. Since Parker still didn't have a car, he usually hopped on the bus to work, but since his mom wasn't working the overnight shift until tonight, she said he could borrow hers.

Justin had come to the sports complex early on purpose, knowing that he could do this, that he wanted to. But he also knew that he just needed a moment to collect his thoughts beforehand. He had told Parker to meet him there early because he needed to talk to him.

Sure enough, Parker, never one to be late, arrived at the sports complex about twenty minutes before Brandt and Todd were due to arrive and met Justin in the locker room.

Justin was sitting on the wooden bench in the aisle between two rows of steel grey lockers. It was two o'clock in the afternoon and there were a few men here and there, but Justin wasn't paying attention to whether or not anyone was around them, because when Parker walked in, Justin's heart raced in his chest just at the sight of him. He had been in love with Parker for over three years, and still, even now when Parker was around him, he had this magical way of causing Justin's pulse to quicken with nothing more than eye contact and God, that smile. The fact that Parker would even smile at him after he had acted like a total ass a few days back, and the fact that no matter what, he was Parker's and Parker was his, was making Justin's heart race even quicker. He was so happy to see Parker that he stood up from the bench and before Parker even had a moment to put his gym bag down, Justin pulled him close in an embrace, resting his face against Parker's hair, which he had been wearing short lately. Breathing in his scent, his fingertips pressed into the back of Parker's shirt, and Parker nestled his chin into Justin's shoulder.

"Jesus, I've missed you." Justin was holding onto Parker tightly, not wanting to let go.

Parker let out a small breathy laugh against Justin's shoulder. "Everyone misses Jesus, he lived two thousand years ago." Parker gave him a squeeze back and lifted his head away from Justin's shoulder so he could speak better. "And you just saw me three days ago," to which Justin only held on to him tighter. The fact that he hadn't seen Parker in only a few days but still felt like his world was incomplete without him, made him want to talk right away, and holding Parker tightly against him, he began to speak.

"I wish you had told me you were telling your mom."

Parker let his grip on Justin relax at these words. "Justin, if this is about not wanting to let her know..."

Justin gave Parker one last squeeze, then released his hold on him so that he could look him in the eyes. "No. It's not about that. What I mean is I'm sorry. I'm sorry that you told her by yourself. I should have been there with you. I'm sorry that you had to think even for a minute that I wouldn't want to be. I should have been."

"Justin..."

Justin took Parker's hands in his. He was so beyond caring what anyone else thought, he needed to say this. "I love you, Parker. If you don't know that or if you don't feel that, I'm sorry. I fucked up, and I'm sorry," Justin said, all while looking straight at Parker. Parker motioned to take a seat on the bench, and Justin sat beside him, not letting go of his hand.

"I do feel it, Justin." Parker squeezed Justin's hand in his. "It's because I feel it that I had to tell her. I needed to. It's like every time I saw her I thought I was lying, lying about who I was, who I was with. I just..." Parker looked straight at Justin. "She's happy for us, Justin. I'm happy for us." Parker paused for a moment. "And I'm not embarrassed about us. And I don't want you to be either."

Justin's heart was still beating fast in his chest and at the word "embarrassed", he felt a jolt of pain. He was anything but embarrassed to be with Parker and the fact that he had let Parker believe that was enough to stop his heart all together, and while feeling all of this, four words escaped his lips.

"Never for one second."

"What?"

"I've never, for one second, been embarrassed or ashamed of us, Parker. When we were younger, we figured it was best if we kept things between us, to ourselves, but I want that to change, and if you want that too, I say we start today."

Justin let go of Parker's hand and began to dig in his gym duffle bag that was by his feet, and pulled out two red shirts and put one on.

"Nice shirt," Parker said, looking at him.

"Yeah well, you haven't seen yours yet."

Justin passed Parker over a bunched up piece of red fabric, the same way that Parker had tossed him over his "GO" shirt when they were back in college.

It was Parker who had originally come up with their red T-shirt ritual. When they met their sophomore year of college, Parker had made them both the red T-shirts to wear to every Eagles college football game they went to.

They continued the tradition all through college, every year wearing the same T-shirts when they went down to the college football games to root for Brandt, who was the starting linebacker on the team.

After football season, even though Parker would retire his shirt to his closet or his drawer, keeping it safe until next season, Justin would still wear his around. Every time that Parker saw Justin and the word “GO” written across his chest, even though to others, this shirt made absolutely no sense, Parker knew what Justin meant by wearing it. He knew that Justin was showing that he loved him.

And now, standing before him, Justin was wearing a shirt that said “LOVE”.

Parker looked back down to the red T-shirt he was holding in his own hands and undraped the material in order to read it and saw that it said the word “IN” on its front in bold white letters. He then turned it around to see the word “MINE” written in white across the top of the back of his shirt, as if it was his last name, and a giant “01” written in white below that. Parker was all at once touched and confused by Justin’s kind gesture. “You got the numbers wrong though.”

“No I didn’t.”

Parker turned the shirt around. “Yeah you did,” and motioned toward the “01” on the back of the shirt he was holding. Parker had always been “02”, he had even picked the original shirts out that way himself.

“We always joked about the numbers, Parker. How I was number one and how you’re number two, my second in command. But we’ve always had it backwards. You’re number one. You’re my number one.”

“Justin.” Parker no longer felt any confusion, just pride and love.

“I want to make sure you’re ready, but I want for today to be the day.”

“The day for what?”

“We wear the shirts out. You and me, right now.” With Justin standing next to Parker their T-shirt phrase would read “IN LOVE” and there’d be no more question as to how they felt about each other.

This was something that Justin had wanted. He had wanted this for a long time, to be open and honest, but as much as he wanted this, there never seemed to be the right time. Although he never seemed to be at a loss for words, when it came to this, when it came to him and Parker, and what Parker really meant to him, he never seemed to have the words when trying to share this with other people. But that was all going to change. Today. And now as he was standing in front of Parker, looking into Parker's hazel-green eyes, where the green so beautifully blended into the brown, he couldn't for the life of him come up with one decent reason to go on keeping their relationship to themselves for even one more day. He still felt a loss for words right now in the locker room, the T-shirts would say enough. They said it all.

Parker looked over to him, half expecting for this to be a prank. He and Justin were always joking around with each other, and even though they weren't in college anymore, they always managed to pull pranks on each other, but one look back to Justin and his chocolate-brown eyes, and Parker knew that he was serious. He and Justin were absolutely on the same page about this. They were doing this.

"We're switching shirts though." Parker told Justin. Their relationship was equal. There was no "01" and "02", but Parker had always liked their numbers the way they were.

Justin quickly peeled his shirt off, which was snug for him anyway since Todd had made the "02" shirt in Parker's size and passed it over to Parker and took the extra-large one Parker was holding and put it on. Parker took off the hospital scrubs he was wearing and put on his gym pants and sneakers, and quickly, while facing Justin he pulled the T-shirt down over his head.

Since Brandt and Todd were both coming straight from their houses, Justin and Parker knew that they would just come to the sports complex already wearing their sports gear and wouldn't be going into the locker room first. Now that it was almost two-thirty, they knew that their friends would be out in the football area of the gym, waiting for them, and sure enough, *Yo douche we're here*. Justin received a text from Brandt and he and Parker knew that it was time.

"Ready to do this?" Justin grabbed his Patriots football cap and put it on backwards. No going back now.

Parker looked down at the giant word “LOVE” that was now across his chest and felt it inside and out.

“Ready to kick Brandt and Todd’s asses?”

Parker joked, “Yeah, I’m ready.” He still couldn’t believe that Justin had been the one to come up with this idea, but the fact that he had, made it all the more special.

“Good.” Justin grabbed Parker’s ass right in the seam of his pants. “Now let’s go play some ball.”

CHAPTER SIX

“So I see the holiday has gotten you two girls feeling all lovey-dovey today, hasn’t it?” Brandt hooted out into the air as soon as Justin and Parker approached him from across the indoor football field. Even at this distance, Brandt could see that they were holding hands.

Justin held his head up high. He and Brandt were always ragging on each other. But he wasn’t going to let him say much more. Not about this.

“Yeah, you know, nothing like a rough game of tackle football to bring out our soft feminine sides,” Justin said back to Brandt as he and Parker approached him and Todd. They were almost right up to Brandt, and Justin could feel Parker’s hand start to slip away, like maybe he was going to let go, but Justin was not going to let that happen. They were doing this. Now. Together. He wasn’t going to hide his love for Parker any longer. So, with a sidelong glance at Parker and a gentle smile, he squeezed Parker’s hand and held on to it even tighter.

But there was no way that Parker was going to let go of Justin’s hand. Ever since they left the locker room, Parker had been welled up with so much pride in Justin and in their love, that there was no way that he was going to back down from this.

Brandt looked slightly confused as to why Justin and Parker were keeping up with the hand-holding charade, but he just kept up with his banter. Same as always.

“Yeah, well, we were wondering what took you guys so long in the locker room. I figured you two fags must be off making out somewhere.” And Brandt stood there, towering in his massive height, loosely crossing his arms in front of his chest and laughing quietly at his own lame joke.

Todd was standing right next to Brandt and gave him a smack to the back of his head, matting down some of his curly blond hair. Brandt must have a pretty built up callus or something back there at this point. It seemed he is always getting whacked like that.

“Speak for yourself, Brandty,” Todd snickered. He knew that Brandt hated being called that. “I wasn’t wondering where they were. And they didn’t take

that long anyways. Besides, look who's talking. You were sitting so close to me on the bench just now that I could smell the maple syrup that you had for breakfast."

Brandt looked alarmed at this, "Hey! What?! It's cold in here. And I didn't have maple syrup for breakfast. That was for lunch." He mumbled the last sentence out.

"Yeah, Brandty, breakfast at noon, that sounds about right." Todd pressed his elbow into Brandt's waist when he said this, making the gesture that he was kidding, but at the same time, it was hard enough to make Brandt wince a little.

"Yeah. So. I slept late today. You should know, Todd, you always sleep past noon. And enough about me, anyways. Why are you two fags holding hands still?" Brandt clearly was not getting this, even though together side by side, the front of Justin and Parker's shirts read "IN LOVE".

It was then that Justin took it upon himself to turn around. He reluctantly let go of Parker's hand and pivoted around until his back was to Brandt.

Brandt brought his fisted hand to his mouth and let out a snort. "'MINE 01'?" This was all just hilarious to him. He never associated pranks with Valentine's Day, but this whole thing was a riot. "And let me guess. Parker over there is 'MINE 02'?"

Parker decided to speak up. "Yeah. I am," he said and stepped into Brandt's personal space a bit, keeping his voice cool and even. He needed Brandt to know that playtime was over and that this was for real. Extremely real. For both him and Justin.

"Whoa, Parker, cool down, dude. I mean this is all wicked funny, but seriously, what's with the shirts? Did Justin just happen to have those lying around in the trunk of his car? We all know he's a slob and has God knows what's in there, but matching shirts? And on Valentine's Day? Priceless." Brandt let out another laugh. "Hey it's like those old Visa commercials! Where's Morgan Freeman's voiceover when you need it?" It was kind of funny, but at this point, Justin and Parker just needed him to know the truth.

"No, Brandt, I didn't just have these shirts lying around in my car. I had Todd make them. I wanted something nice to give to my boyfriend for

Valentine's Day. And so, I had these shirts made and this... this is it." He and Parker turned back around to show the "IN LOVE" message on the front of their shirts to Brandt. Brandt was dense at times, but he did have some brains, and if he wasn't getting this, Justin and Parker would show him just how serious they were.

"Yeah, guys very funny, but..." Brandt tried to speak, but it was then that he noticed the way Justin had his head tilted just slightly and he could see that Parker was leaning in and was about to. To. Kiss Justin.

"Um, guys?" *How far is this prank gonna go?* Brandt thought. But he only thought it for a brief instant, right before he saw his two closest friends pressed up against each other, arms draped over each other's backs and engaging in a serious lip-lock.

Justin and Parker took a moment to embrace and then turned back to Brandt and Todd, neither one of them blushing or embarrassed, but just smiling and happy. Parker clasped Justin's fingers in his. What had taken them so long to do this in the first place?

"What we're trying to tell you, Brandt, and I guess you too, Todd, even though you do not look even vaguely surprised right now, is that Justin and I are together. As in, 'in love', together. As in, he's my boyfriend and I'm his, together. As in, this has been going on for almost four freaking years, together." And with that Justin gave Parker's hand a gentle squeeze acknowledging how wrong this had been to keep the best thing in his life a secret.

"Well, it's not really a surprise is it?" Todd was the first to say something. "I mean, I made the shirts for you guys, but even before that I knew. Hell, when Parker and I used to work together, I used to keep a running tally of how often he would mention Justin." Todd chuckled at the memory. "I think I ran out of ink a few times."

"What?" Brandt still looked like he was missing the joke.

"They're together, Brandt. A couple. Boyfriends. 'IN LOVE.' It's pretty clear, it's on their shirts," Todd said and then took a knee in order to tie his shoelaces. "And I did a pretty good job on those shirts too." Todd seemed to

be more preoccupied with the quality of the shirts than on what the shirts actually said.

“Together?” Brandt’s mouth was dry and he knew that Justin and Parker had always been close, very close, extremely close and he always teased them about it, but the fact that they were actually *together* together, together was not something that he had ever seriously considered.

“Yeah.” Justin grabbed the football that Brandt had been holding out of his hands. “Together.” Justin placed his fingers on the ball’s laces. “As in today we’re gonna kick you guys’ asses. Together.” And Parker ran deep so Justin threw him the ball and the game began.

CHAPTER SEVEN

“Well you’re full of surprises,” Parker said to Justin. They were back at Parker’s house, in his bedroom, after having dinner together and making sure that they had brought Parker’s mom’s car home in time for her to get to work. “Well maybe I have something to show you too.” Parker was palming the crotch of his pants. “Keep the lights on. All the lights.”

Fuck yes, thought Justin.

Justin was standing by the light switch by the bedroom door, the bedside lamp was already on, so he figured he would flick off the bright lights on the ceiling fan but he perked up at Parker’s request.

“Oh, a little bit of ‘I’ll show you mine if you show me yours,’ huh?” Justin would take this request. He loved looking at Parker’s body, and somehow, as Parker got older, the leaner and more cut he became, when Justin himself had just begun to notice how he should maybe cut down on the nachos. Well, not all the nachos. Maybe just some. Sometimes.

“Yeah something like that.” Parker was sitting on his bed with his hands clasped behind his head and his back leaning against the pillows for support, waiting for Justin to come over to him. Justin was still by the light switch and decided to put on a little show. *What the hell, why not?* They were both still dressed and Justin, having changed back into his street clothes after the football game, was wearing his faded jeans and an olive green hoodie with an old, ratty, grey T-shirt underneath. It was a shirt that he insisted on keeping even though there were holes that dotted the neckline and dirt and grass stains that no way in hell would ever come out.

The T-shirt had once belonged to Parker—it was a baggy shirt that he always wore when they first began their ritual of playing football with their friends, Brandt and Todd, in the park and on the college quad. Having had so many good memories of Parker in the shirt, Justin could never part with it, even when Parker had wanted to throw it away.

But Justin was willing to part with the shirt now. And fast. Standing far enough away from the bed, so that Parker could have a good view, Justin took

off his hoodie and put it over the back of Parker's desk chair. Then he grabbed ahold of the hem at the bottom of his T-shirt and dragged it up, slowly, over his head and then balled it up in his hands and threw it at Parker. Right at his face.

Parker reached up and grabbed the shirt off himself and flung it back at Justin. "Great aim, doofus."

"Yeah, well we can't all be high school MVP."

Parker replied, "You know they always put me at quarterback because I have big hands, right?" Parker then brought his hands out from behind his head to his lap to look at them. "And what is it that they are always saying about big hands? I forget," Parker grinned over at Justin.

"Big Hands...? Bigfoot. But you're not that hairy, Parker. So don't worry. Not all the Sasquatch rumors about you can be true."

Justin was pulling at the zipper of his jeans. He kicked them off his legs and then reached down to the floor to grab them up in his hands along with his shirt. He then balled them up and threw them at the hamper in the far corner of Parker's bedroom. Miraculously, the clothes made it to the hamper and went right in. The fact that Justin had actually put his clothes in a hamper was miracle enough, and it had been a good throw, too.

"Well maybe you are an MVP after all. That was a slam dunk," Parker said. "But where's the rest of it?"

Justin was standing in his blue and white checked boxer shorts. And Parker wanted those off. Now.

"Nope." Justin shook his head. "This is 'I'll show you mine if you show me yours,' remember?" Justin walked closer to the bed. "And I'm not showing mine, until you show me yours," Justin said seductively and was now standing right at the edge of the bed. Parker was still seated with his back against all the pillows, and Justin's crotch was just below eye level, only a hands-reach away from him, but when he reached out toward Justin, Justin backed away from the bed.

"Fine, if you want to play it that way." Parker got off the bed and stood up where Justin had just been. It was now Justin's turn to sit on the bed with his back against the pillows to watch the show. His dick was already enormously

hard in anticipation of what he and Parker were about to get up to. When Parker had reached over to him to feel it, it almost pained him to back away from his intended touch. But Justin showed *his*, well some of his, he was still in his boxers, so now it was Parker's turn.

Parker stood about two feet away from the edge of his twin-size bed, far enough so that Justin could look, but not touch. Leaving his shirt on, he began to reach for his belt. He reached down with only one hand, taking his slow, devastatingly slow, time undoing its buckle and sliding it through all of the tabs on the waistband of his jeans, not breaking eye contact with Justin, who was now regretting that he had wanted to drag this out rather than just taking off all of his clothes immediately.

Justin's hands were on either side of himself on the bed, but he couldn't really keep them there anymore, not while he was watching Parker like this. He found his right hand pressing down on the crotch of his boxers, finding its way inside the hole in the fabric, and began to stroke himself up and down—not hard and not with much pressure, but just to have some contact, because now Parker was taking off his own pants, grabbing ahold of his boxers too. In one fell swoop, Parker slid off his pants and boxers so he was completely bottomless with his erect penis standing tall, trying to sneak its way under the hemline of his T-shirt.

Justin was rubbing himself faster at the sight of it. And it was a tease. Parker was being a tease now. And now it was Justin who was reaching over for Parker with his free hand and it was Parker who was backing away. If Parker would just take his shirt off, they could get this whole show on the road. Parker had walked back over to the bed, not being able to stand the distance between them either. As hot as he was getting seeing Justin touch himself under his boxers, he wanted his hand to be the one touching Justin. He leaned down over Justin, guiding Justin's mouth over to his, while his right hand found its way inside the hole in Justin's boxers and took over pleasuring him.

Parker was stroking Justin hard, but slowly, so slowly. The movements of his hand were almost painful because Justin needed more friction than just slow, elongated strokes. Even though Justin's lips never left Parker's, he tried

to move his pelvis in order to better reposition his dick in Parker's hand and when Parker felt him moving, Parker knew what Justin was up to.

"Nope." Parker backed his mouth off Justin's just slightly. "That wasn't the deal. I showed you *mine*, now *you* show me *yours*." Parker was eyeing Justin's boxer shorts still wanting them off. This time in an even worse way. Justin took the hint, reached down to himself, lifted his hips off the mattress, tugged his boxers off in one manic move, and threw them across the room toward the hamper, not even coming close to it, not even aiming really, not when Parker was this close to him, sitting next to him on the bed.

"Not such a good shot after all," Parker said before bringing Justin's mouth back to his, but before he could make contact, Justin added, "I'm a *perfect* shot." And by the way he said it, Parker knew that they no longer were talking about hamper basketball.

"Want to prove it?"

"*Fuck* yes." Justin reached over for Parker, grabbing at the shirt that Parker was still wearing, wanting it off him, but at the same time just wanting Parker's mouth on his, or better yet, wanting something else on his mouth, inside it.

After kissing Parker's lips and wrangling their tongues together inside of Parker's mouth, he laid Parker flat on his back with his head resting on the pillows at the top of the bed, and while lying down next to him he couldn't even will his hands to take Parker's shirt off completely, that would take way too long, so he just pushed it up his chest and began to cascade his lips down Parker's body, down his smooth chest, his abs, his belly button. Justin usually liked to take his time when exploring Parker's body, but right now he was just too eager and his tongue was finding its way lower and lower on Parker's body, finding the head of Parker's cock and swirling it around, tasting Parker and his familiar taste and wanting to take all of him in his mouth.

Justin's head was now level with Parker's cock and lying on the bed next to Parker, he was leaning over his body from the side, massaging his thighs and stomach as his head bobbed up and down Parker's long shaft. Now that Justin had finally found what his mouth had been looking for, he could take

his time. He didn't have to rush this, and his sucking of Parker was slow and steady and it was making Parker delirious.

“Wait.” Parker called down to Justin. He was going to come and he *so* didn't want to right now. Not when he still needed to show Justin something.

Justin knew by the amount of pre-come that he was getting out of Parker and at the way that Parker's dick was beating in his mouth that Parker was ready to come and as much as he loved tasting Parker, he wanted to abide by his wishes, so he began kissing Parker's body again, this time, traveling up his body instead of down and he soon found his lips against Parker's, his tongue just as happy to find a home inside Parker's mouth as it had been when Parker had just been inside his.

Justin and Parker continued to kiss feverishly, wildly, but now Justin really needed Parker's shirt off, and while lying next to Parker, half on top of him, he reached down with his hands and brought Parker's shirt up and over his head, with Parker's back now lying flat on the mattress and his head on the pillows.

“You were holding out on me. So this is what *yours* looks like. All of you.” Justin gasped out in between kisses. He had seen Parker naked literally hundreds of times, maybe thousands at this point, but he still marveled at him, still felt special that he could be the one to be with Parker like this. The only one.

“Yeah, except there's a difference now.” Justin was still resting on top of Parker, their kisses still hot, scorching, Parker not wanting to move his body away from Justin's, but at the same time needing to.

Justin didn't understand what Parker had meant just now, but when Parker rolled over so that his belly was flat against the mattress and he was lying completely on his stomach, Justin could see what Parker had been trying to say.

On Parker's chiseled back were numbers. The numbers 02, in black ink covering his entire right shoulder blade.

“A tattoo? Parker.” Justin was speechless for once and brought his hand over to Parker's shoulder, softly touching the outline of the numbers that would be forever on him. Parker had been the one to make their football T-shirts, choosing their numbers and forever starting the ritual of Justin being

“01” and Parker being “02,” and Justin now was looking down at Parker’s back, seeing the man he loved with an “02” knowing that it would be this way forever. That he and Parker would be this way forever. Together. And this is what Parker was showing to him.

“What do you think?” Parker, still lying on his belly, lifted his head off the mattress, looking intently into Justin’s eyes, waiting for his reaction.

“I’m thinking that mine is not going to look half as good as yours,” Justin answered. He definitely was going to get an 01 on his back. Definitely. No question.

“Yeah, well if we’ve established anything playing ‘I’ll show you mine if you show me yours’ tonight, it’s that,” Parker joked, bringing Justin’s mouth over to his and re-starting their hot make out session and now desperately wanting Justin to prove to him just what a good shot he was.

Parker was still lying flat on his belly, his dick beating hard against the mattress and he couldn’t resist rocking his body into the soft bedding, but at the same time wanting Justin on top of him to push him down even further into it.

Justin was on his side lying next to him, their lips locked together, rubbing up and down his back until he found Parker’s ass and began firmly kneading it over in his hand. Upon Justin’s firm contact, Parker was pressing his hips even further down into the mattress, needing the friction and the contact and scissored his legs open, inviting Justin over to him, wanting to feel all of his weight pressed down on top of him.

Upon seeing Parker widening his legs, Justin immediately reached over to the night table drawer, fumbling with the contents inside it and grabbing what he knew to be the lube, popped it open and quickly began to apply it all over his throbbing cock.

Parker was making moaning sounds into the mattress now, his face pressed into a mix of mattress and pillows, desperate for Justin to enter him and Justin was getting the message loud and clear.

With Parker flat on his belly on the mattress and his legs spread apart like they were, Justin slid into him, angling himself in just right, just so that he was

nudging up against Parker's prostate and his mouth immediately found Parker's 02, kissing it with open mouthed kisses and swirling his tongue over each number.

Justin was absorbed in kissing Parker's back, his emotions reeling in a combination of lust and love and excitement over the fact that Parker had marked himself like that, and his thrusts were slow and steady, but Parker had other ideas and instead of pressing his body further into the mattress for friction, Parker was now doing his best to press his ass back up and into Justin so that Justin could slide in him even deeper, hitting his prostate again and again and again.

Parker was now grasping at the sheet on either side of himself but continued pushing off the mattress into Justin and Justin, feeling Parker's increased contact beneath him, couldn't stop himself from pressing hard into Parker, so much so that now Parker couldn't lift his ass up against Justin even if he wanted to, because now Justin was sprawled out completely on top of him, all of his weight upon him, slamming him down into the bed, just like Parker had wanted, *needed*, and Parker's dick was now getting all the contact he could ever need trapped against the mattress, moving up and down, up and down, right against the sheet. Justin was wild on top of him, pressing even further down into him, kissing Parker's hair and down the back of his neck, until again his mouth found the 02 and he was licking and biting at it, pressing his face right down onto it, his lips never breaking contact with Parker's skin, but at the same time still finding a way to call out I love yous to Parker in sweeping gasps of breath.

Justin's movements on top of Parker were now becoming frantic and listening to Parker's pleas from below him, he was slamming down into Parker forcefully, driven by his intrinsic need to make Parker come, and the bed was creaking violently below them like some low-budget porno, but that was in the very back of Justin's mind, because all he knew was that he was about thirty seconds away from coming, but he wanted to get Parker there first, needed to and—

“Ahhh, uuhhh!” Parker was calling out into the mattress, and Justin, spread out completely on top of him, could feel Parker's body begin to quake below

him, so he began to thrust into him even faster, even further, huffing out rapid breaths against Parker's skin, and as he felt Parker's ass clench around him and heard Parker yell out his final shout, he pressed his mouth to Parker's 02 and with one final thrust into Parker, he let himself go and the whole entire time that he was coming, Justin's mouth never left that spot.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The next morning was Monday, and as amazing as Valentine's Day had been, Justin and Parker found themselves up early getting ready to go to work—well, work and play. Upon arriving at the car dealership, Brandt immediately took Justin aside and into his office and closed the door behind them.

Justin took a seat on the brown leather sofa up against the long wall of Brandt's wood-paneled office thinking that Brandt was going to brief him about the new shipment of Mercedes coming in today, but instead, Brandt just paced back and forth in front of him, trailing up and down the grey carpet.

"If I knew you guys were serious. I would never have said—I don't really think that you guys are..."

"What?" Justin now had a feeling that he knew what this talk was going to be about.

"You know, I don't think you guys are..."

"Dude, spit it out."

"Fags." Brandt mumbled out.

"What?"

"Fags," Brandt said louder. "Okay? I don't think that. And if I knew that you and Parker were, are, together, like together *together*, like for real *together*, I would have never have said that stuff about you, I would never have called you that." Brandt was having trouble meeting Justin's eyes. He felt like a giant, well at six feet, four inches tall he always felt like a giant, but now he was feeling like a giant asshole.

"Yeah, well, you don't want to know what we call you."

"What?" Brandt's head popped up and he looked at Justin.

Justin was just trying to get a rise out of Brandt. For years, Parker and he would rag on Brandt, making fun of his choice in music or how he took everything to the extreme, but Brandt was their friend, there was never any

doubt about it. They never once took Brandt calling them fags seriously, because as big of a mouth as Brandt had, and as much of an oaf as he was, he didn't have one malicious bone in his body. Justin knew it and Parker knew it. He was just a big oversized kid who had a lousy vocabulary.

"I said you don't want to know what Parker and I call you. You know: oaf, buffoon, loudmouth, imbecile, dumb-ass, jerkoff..." Justin was just throwing out any general insult that came to his mind, he wanted to make Brandt sweat a little.

"Yeah, well..." Brandt was still sounding down in the dumps, sincerely apologetic, like he deserved each and every insult that Justin was throwing out and Justin was loving that he could get away with this, especially at work, so he decided to go on.

"Doofus, ass-hat, lamebrain, numbskull, clown-turd." Clown-turd? Ok. He was out of insults. But Brandt didn't seem to notice.

"Keep it coming, Meyer, I deserve it."

At this point, fresh out of insults, Justin was just grasping at straws. "Uhh... Ugly, stupid, dumb, Umm... Not smart, uhh, gross..." He had absolutely nothing and was just listing off adjectives at this point. He even started looking around the office trying to get ideas as to what to say next but Brandt cut him off.

"I get it Justin. I'm dumb, and stupid, and I'm sorry if I ever once put you and Parker in an uncomfortable situation." Brandt was still sounding sincerely apologetic, and for him to phrase his apology like that, Justin absolutely knew he meant it.

"Yeah, well, I forgive you. But I'm not sure about Parker. You know what a hard-ass he can be."

At this, Brandt knew that Justin was kidding. Parker was the nicest guy on the face of the planet. Everyone thought so and everyone knew it. He of course would forgive Brandt, but Brandt needed to hear it for himself.

"Parker's not gonna be on the bus to work for another hour. Let's give him a call, see what he says." Justin took his cellphone out of his pocket and speed dialed Parker.

“Still can’t get enough of me even after this morning.” Parker didn’t even bother with a “hello” when he picked up the call from Justin. “I didn’t make you late, did I? You just tasted so—”

Justin immediately interjected, “Parker! Hi! It’s Justin, I’m here with Brandt. You’re on speaker.” Because this phone call was meant to be between the three of them, Justin didn’t even think twice about putting it on speaker phone.

“Oh, Brandt.” Parker let out a cough, but still sounded like his jovial self. “What’s up, fellas?”

Justin was feeling flush at Parker’s words and pulled at his necktie to loosen it but continued on. “Brandt here was just saying how he wanted to apologize to you about calling us fags in the past, so I was just telling him about all the names that we call him.”

“Ohh, I see,” Parker answered. Parker may have been the nicest guy on the face of the planet, but he was also a prankster and a jokester too. “Did you remember jerkoff?”

“Yup.”

“Dumb-ass?”

“Ya.”

“What about moron?”

“Moron!” Justin yelled out. “How did I forget moron!”

“I’ll add it to the list,” Brandt mumbled over to them, but now that Parker was on the line, he really did want to apologize to him and he walked up closer to Justin so that his mouth was closer to the phone. “Parker, I just want to apologize to you. I’m sorry for my actions in the past and I want you and Justin to know,” he looked back at Justin, “that I will never call you fags, or use that word, ever again.”

Brandt was sounding so proper and sincere and ironically very un-moronic, but that didn’t sway Parker’s response to him.

“I’ll forgive you,” Parker let out a breathy chuckle into the phone. “Moron.”

CHAPTER NINE

A few days after Brandt had apologized to Justin, they decided to go get a beer together after work. Justin was harboring absolutely no ill will toward Brandt, and even though Brandt had made it clear that he was happy for Parker and him, he couldn't help but feel that Brandt was still feeling awful. He decided it would be nice if they just went out after work to have a good time together.

The bar they decided to go to wasn't far from work. It was called O'Leary's and was an older place with an older crowd, with dim lighting, dark wood paneled walls, orange vinyl covered barstools, cheap beer and even cheaper wings and Justin and Brandt absolutely loved it. It had been their place ever since they started working together at the car dealership, and since Parker rarely drank, Justin had followed suit and usually only had a few drinks a month, and very rarely more than a couple at a time. But tonight he was with his buddy, Brandt, and he was feeling good. On his insistence, he was buying the rounds tonight, telling Brandt, "I'll buy, if you drive."

After finishing twenty hot wings each, five beers for himself and two for Brandt, and after talking about anything and everything work related, Justin had Parker on his mind and decided to switch conversation topics.

"You know, the first time we ever hooked up was in your bed." Justin looked across the table at Brandt. The two of them were seated at a round high-top table toward the back of the barroom.

"What!" Brandt choked out, nearly spitting out his drink. He was utterly shocked. And so did not need to know that.

"Yup. The first night Parker kissed me. I couldn't keep my hands off him. It's when we were roommates in college and you weren't there that weekend and—"

Brandt cut him off, bringing both hands to his ears, "Dude! Stop! I'm so not listening!"

So Justin stopped talking, and when Brandt thought that the coast was clear he took his hands off his ears and—"I told him he could sleep on your bed, but I couldn't be without him and—"

The fact that he and Parker had first hooked up in Brandt's bed had long been an inside joke between him and Parker, and now that Justin was five beers deep, he decided to keep the joke not so inside anymore.

"Ugh, Justin! Why did it have to be on my bed? Your bed was like three feet away from mine." Brandt took another swig of his beer. "At least tell me you changed the sheets afterwards or something."

Justin thought about it some. "Nah, man. I don't know. I can't remember now." Justin took a swig of his own beer. "Funny though, I remember everything else." Justin let his mind wander back to the first night he spent with Parker, one of the best nights of his life.

"I can't believe you lost your V-Card in my bed." Brandt sounded vaguely miserable and downed the rest of his drink.

"What?" Justin looked over to Brandt. "No, man. I said it was the first night we kissed and well, hooked up. But we didn't sleep together that night. Well, we did, but not *sleep* sleep together. It was the first time I even kissed a dude, I wasn't gonna put out completely... I'm not you, you know."

"What? Me? I never once kissed a dude."

"You know what I mean, Brandt. In all the time I've known you, all you've talked about is chicks, and I saw you bring countless girls back to our old dorm room for one-night-stands, but the whole time you never seriously dated one."

Brandt was motioning over to the waitress to get another drink, thinking, *How did this conversation get on me?* But he decided to give Justin a reply.

"Yeah, well. Not everyone can have what you have."

"Huh?"

"You and Parker." Brandt was serious. "Not everyone can have what you have."

"What?" Justin was not expecting this for a reply.

"You fell in love with your best friend, Justin. If I could have that with a girl, I would."

Brandt was sounding somber and that's not what this night was supposed to be about. They were just going to hang out and drink some beers and shoot

the shit, and by no means did Justin intend to hit a nerve, and he wanted to make it right, so he maneuvered his barstool closer to Brandt and bumped his shoulder into his.

“He’s not my only best friend, you know.”

“Yeah, well, don’t get any ideas.”

“Too late.”

“What?”

“I’ve only been dating Parker for three years to get closer to you. You’re the one I really want. Oh, Brandt! Brandt!” Justin was making a kissy face leaning over into Brandt’s space and Brandt bumped Justin’s forehead back away from him with the heel of his hand. “Ow.” Justin rubbed the spot that Brandt had just hit. “Ass.”

“Yeah, well, that’s for getting my hopes up.” Brandt joked and reached into the bowl of peanuts that was set in front of him and threw one at Justin. “Clown.”

CHAPTER TEN

Now that Justin and Parker had told their closest friends about their relationship, and since Parker had already talked to his mom, the next logical step in Justin's mind was to tell his own family.

He had felt great about telling Brandt and Todd about him and Parker and after having talked to Brandt about it more at the bar, Justin knew that this didn't have to be some painful process. He had come to realize that he had control over the situation and it didn't have to depend entirely on other people's reactions.

He knew his parents and his sister loved him, and that even if they needed time, eventually they could accept this, because this is who he truly was.

Parker had asked him if he wanted him to be there, and Justin loved him for it, but Justin felt that telling his family was something that he needed to do on his own. As much as he felt like the ball was in his court when it came to this and that he was in charge of sitting his parents down and telling them, there also was a small nagging sensation in his mind. He didn't want fear to take over and prolong him telling his parents, and he didn't want it to be a painful process, but at the same time he knew that it was a process nonetheless. He was even going to Google "how to come out to your parents" but had decided against it. He knew his parents better than some search engine. He knew his parents loved him and he needed to be brave.

In the back of his mind, Justin had always rationalized that he would tell his parents when he was no longer living at home, because if they didn't react well, he could just get in his car and leave and then call them in a few days, but he would no longer prolong this. He couldn't.

So, after pacing around in his bedroom for most of the day and knowing that he would do this, that he had to, that it was the absolutely right thing to do, he just went for it.

"I've been in love with somebody for a while now and it's serious and I just want you to know." Justin and his parents, Brenda and Tom, were seated together at their oval wooden dining room table for dinner. Since his sixteen-

year-old sister, Cara, was at choir practice he figured now was as good a time as any to just come out to his parents and say it.

“Okay...” His father answered hesitantly while cutting into his chicken.

“Tom.” His mother looked over to her right at Justin’s dad who sat at the head of the table and then across the table directly at Justin and gave him a warm smile.

“Well, we knew this day was coming.” Justin’s dad put down his fork and knife and cleaned his mouth with his napkin, but he looked over at Justin, offered him a small smile, and tapped his arm with his hand.

Justin didn’t understand.

“We did. And we decided how we were going to react when it did happen,” Justin’s mom replied.

This was all above Justin’s head. He had only said one sentence to his parents and with it being just the beginning of the conversation, he had left Parker’s name out of it deliberately, and here they were talking like they already knew what he was going to say next. “I don’t understand.”

“Honey, remember that condom talk we had with you a few years back?” His mother was looking back at him from across the table.

Jesus. Justin had almost forgotten that mortifying day his parents had sat him down when he was almost a junior in college. His dad had mumbled out things about safety and respect and handed him a twelve-pack of condoms, which, to Justin’s horror, was already opened, with two missing, and he could only guess where the other two were. Why did they feel the need to have that talk with him again?

His mom was a pediatric nurse and had had “the talk” with him every year since puberty it felt like, always mentioning sob stories about young women she saw who came into the pediatrician’s office and were pregnant and scared and alone and not even out of high school.

In high school, “the talk” his mom always gave him centered around being responsible and not starting a family because he was too young and that sex was a responsibility and not a right. This talk his mom always gave him

always lingered somewhere in the back of his mind, the responsibility of it all, and even though Justin had some fun making out with girls in high school from time to time, he never took it beyond that.

But thinking back, when his parents had talked to him again in college, he remembered they never once mentioned the use of condoms for pregnancy prevention or family planning, it was always about safety and having respect for yourself and for your partner. Christ, looking back, he didn't even think they made mention of a girl. And it all clicked in Justin's mind.

"So, you knew? You knew this whole time?" Justin was flabbergasted.

"Justin, we're your parents..." His mother said.

"Jesus, I've been sweating about this for three years and you knew!" Justin was sounding accusatory, feeling stupid that he had made the decision to keep his relationship with Parker to himself when all that time his parents knew anyway. It would almost be comical if it wasn't so shocking.

"Now wait a minute." Justin's dad began to speak. "Justin, we are talking about Parker here, right?"

Yup. They knew.

Justin just nodded. *This is not going to be a painful process*, his mind chimed in. Why was he getting upset over this? It was good that they knew, wasn't it? He didn't even have to speak more than one sentence and they knew. He had to calm down, he was just shocked, almost to the point of being speechless, but—"How did you know?"

"We just had a feeling..." His mother was sounding reassuring.

"Oh, out with it Brenda. Justin's being honest with us and it's time we were honest with him." Justin's dad had spoken up. "Justin, we know because your mother overheard you two together one day." Justin's dad had balled up his napkin tightly in his hand and was not meeting Justin's eyes, and his body language alone had Justin in a mild panic.

"Together?" Justin let it out in an almost yelp. *Please mean you overheard us on the phone together. Please mean a conversation. Please mean anything other than together together. Like together...*

“In your room...” His dad coughed. “Together.”

SHIT!

“Honey, you thought I was at work, it was the summer after you were a sophomore and I went upstairs to tell you I was home and...” His mother’s voice trailed off.

“Oh my God.” Mortifying. Absolutely mortifying. Thank God Parker wasn’t here for this. *Do not say what you heard. I don’t want to know, I don’t want to know.*

Justin’s mom wasn’t sure if she should continue on, but with this being the time for honesty, she felt she must, even though she was blushing and dragging the back of her spoon around in her plate.

“And the way you were calling out Parker’s name... Asking him to—” she cleared her throat. “Telling him to—” She stopped herself.

The summer after sophomore year, Justin knew what he would have been asking Parker to do, and the same thought entered his mind now at this whole situation.

Fuck me.

“Please stop.”

“Justin.”

“Please, just... Please stop. I get it.” This has got to be the worst coming-out experience of all time. He had thought he had prepared himself for every possible reaction of his parents. He was nowhere even close to guessing that this would be it.

“Your mother told me that night how she heard you two, you know...” His dad coughed again. “So after that we kind of looked for it, looked for the signs I mean, and well, it just fit.”

Oh my God. They knew this whole time because they overheard us. I want to die. I want to die.

Justin was in some state of mind between utter disbelief, utter shock, and utter, utter embarrassment and then another thought entered his mind.

“And Cara?” Justin asked.

“Justin, this is your news to share. We never told Cara.”

“Told me what?” Of course, Justin’s sister had chosen just that moment to come into the room. It was nearly seven o’clock, of course she would be home.

This night could not get any worse, there was no possible way, but Justin didn’t think he could say any more. Literally, he didn’t think he could say any more, because his vocal chords felt like they had shriveled up to dust in his throat. He just looked up to his mom from across the table, and without even a word from him, she asked, “Do you want me to tell her?” and Justin just nodded. *This wasn’t a painful process*, his mind had chimed back in, *just a mortifying one*.

“Cara, your brother was just telling us how he is in love and we were discussing it.” Their mom was speaking to Cara through the pass-through between the kitchen and the dining room.

“Oh yeah?” Cara walked over to the fridge, retrieved a carton of orange juice from inside it, and poured herself a glass before walking back to the dining room and taking a seat next to her brother. “So how is Parker doing these days anyway, Justin?”

She knew. Of course, she knew. Everybody knew. And from somewhere deep inside, Justin just decided to embrace this fact, his family knew. There was no yelling or arguments, they knew. It sucked how they knew, it was embarrassing as hell, but they knew nonetheless. Justin still looked at Cara quizzically.

“Oh, don’t give me that look.” Cara took a drink of OJ. “Justin, you guys used to watch me for Mom and Dad all the time and would want me in bed at like eight PM, when I was like thirteen, so you guys could ‘hang out’.” Cara made giant air quotes. “I was thirteen, not five. I kinda put the pieces together.” Her voice was light and sounded like she was on the verge of laughter, like none of this had fazed her in the least.

“Of course you know. Everybody knows.” Some of Justin’s mortification was back, even his sister knew what he and Parker had been up to.

“Yeah, but don’t feel bad, I mean, Parker’s hot, I’d hit that.”

“Cara!” His mom shot across the table at her.

But it didn't matter. Justin needed to leave the room, the house, the planet.

"And on that note." Justin just pushed his chair back from the table and brought his plate to the sink. At least the chicken had been good, so the whole dinner hadn't been an entire nightmare.

"Cara, apologize to your brother!"

But Justin was already on the stairs taking two at a time and right when he reached his room, he heard Cara call out, "What! I was joking!"

It took about an hour, but after just hanging out in his room alone, Justin was feeling much better about things. The important fact was that his parents knew and his sister knew and they had known for years apparently, and thinking about this now, Justin realized that yes, his parents knew, but they had never treated him any differently.

In fact, part of the shock tonight hadn't been that his parents had known. It was the fact that they had known but had never treated him any differently and just as importantly, never treated Parker any differently. That eased some of Justin's mortification and he decided to give Parker a call, just as he'd promised.

Parker knew that today would be the day Justin would talk to his parents and when Justin called him, as usual, he didn't even bother with a "hello" he just answered on the second ring and said, "How'd it go?"

"Don't ask."

"That bad, huh?"

"I'm telling you, you don't wanna know." Justin was in his room and even though his bed was far away from the door, he now felt paranoid even talking to Parker and wondered what else his mom and dad, and maybe even Cara, had overheard during the years. He didn't think he could handle telling Parker that his mom had overheard them. If he was embarrassed, God knows how Parker would feel.

"Well, you don't sound that bad. It must not have been that horrible," Parker spoke into the phone.

“Actually.” Fuck it, he’d tell Parker. One more thing out in the open. “For years, they already knew. They both did. Even my sister knew.”

“Really?” Parker’s voiced perked up on the phone. “So if they knew, it couldn’t have been that bad,” Parker continued on, “So how did they know? What did they say?”

“Well.” The paranoia was upon him and he lowered his voice. “My mom overheard us together.”

“So?” Parker wasn’t catching on. In his mind he and Justin were always hanging out together, what was the big deal about that?

“No, Parker. Like together.” Justin cupped his hand over the speaker. “Like together, together.” *Smooth code words, Justin.*

“What? Justin, I can barely hear you.”

“I said they knew because my mom overheard us together.” Justin’s voice was barely a whisper.

“What, she overheard what?” Parker honestly couldn’t hear him.

Jesus. “Us! Parker! She overheard us! Together! Like fucking together!” So much for being quiet.

Oh God, here it comes, Justin was sure that Parker would be just as embarrassed as he was, but what he didn’t expect was... *Is he laughing?*

“Justin that was years ago, you’re not even that loud anymore.” *Yes, it was laughter. Parker was laughing.*

“Oh, Christ.”

“Okay, okay, you *are* loud, but I’m louder, you always say so.”

Oh my God. It was like he was reliving what happened downstairs, and although normally he would love any chance to have anything that resembled phone sex with Parker, right now he had to change the conversation.

“Yeah well, loud or not loud, they know, have known. So, now everyone knows. Well the important people.”

“Good. So, now that that’s out of the way, what are you wearing?” Parker was trying to lighten the mood, or get in the mood, maybe both.

“I’m wearing a new shirt I made,” Justin replied. “It says ‘don’t even think about it’.” There was no way he would do anything in his room even remotely sexual ever again, and more than ever he was convinced that he and Parker needed a place of their own.

“Yeah, well take it off and it won’t say that anymore.” Parker was breathing heavier into the phone and *fuck*, maybe Justin would do something sexual in his room. His hand apparently thought so as it was moving down his body to palm his dick without him even realizing it. But no, he had more to say.

“So we’ve been talking about getting a place together.” Justin’s voice was sounding heavier too. “Whatcha say? Wanna make that happen?” Justin almost added the words “big boy” after his line of questioning, like he was some phone sex worker. His voice had taken on a huskier tone and, *Jesus Christ*, Parker had him half hard just by breathing heavily into his end of the phone.

“Yeah, wouldn’t want your mom to overhear us anymore.” Parker swore he heard Justin unzip his fly on the other end of the phone and he did the same. “Wouldn’t want her to hear me scream your name when you pound me into the mattress.”

Fuck, this was way too hot, and even though it was painful to change the subject, Justin had to clear something up. “So, we’re moving in together.” Justin’s hand was now on his dick, raring to go, but before he could give it one more stroke he needed to make sure this wasn’t just some sex talk that they were doing right now.

“Yeah, Justin. We’re moving in together.” Parker’s tone resembled his normal voice, but only for a moment, because then his heavy breathing was back. “Now tell me what you’re gonna do to me once we find a place.”

Fuck yes. And any lingering mortification or paranoia Justin was feeling was erased from his mind as his hand tightly gripped his cock. Imagining it was Parker’s, he began to very specifically lay out details of just what he was going to do to him once they were in their new place.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Justin and Parker didn't want to waste much time looking for a place, but at the same time they wanted a place that they could be in long-term. Once again, they were starting their lives up together, and since they had the chance to live together for two years in college, they couldn't wait to do that again. This time they both knew that it was going to be more permanent and this chapter of their lives wasn't going to be in some cramped apartment in Boston. No, they wanted to live in a house together, somewhere with a yard, where they could sit out at night after work or have more than a couple of people over at one time.

Now that it was the halfway through May, rentals on the North Shore were harder to come by since so many people came to the area looking for short-term summer rentals to be by the coast for the summer. Most available houses had short-term leases that only lasted a month if not a week, so after three weeks of house searching, Justin and Parker had come up empty.

They had seen a couple of places they'd found on Craigslist after work, but none of them worked out. They were now seriously considering working with a real estate agent, willing to pay the extra fee up-front if it meant that they could find a decent place.

The previous week, they both had really liked a Cape Cod style house that they saw and it was located pretty much right in between Justin's job at the car dealership and Parker's job at the hospital. It was right within their budget, had a flat yard that would be great for playing catch or football and it even came partially furnished. It was about three miles away from the ocean and still only about fifteen minutes away from their parents' houses, and had it not been only a short-term summer lease, Justin and Parker would have signed the lease on the spot.

Justin had been really disappointed about not getting the house, and Parker had taken it even harder. At first, the house hunt had been exciting and new, but after weeks of poor prospects, Parker was getting more and more frustrated, understandably so, and Justin took it upon himself to be the ever-optimistic, hopeful one of the two for a change.

He wanted to cheer Parker up and had texted him that morning telling him that he would like to take him out to dinner that night, and now that they were both done with work for the day, Justin was waiting in his car outside the hospital for Parker.

“Where you wanna eat?” Justin had leaned over from his driver’s seat to the passenger side so that he could pop open the door for Parker who was standing on the curb in front of the hospital. Parker had taken a fresh change of clothes with him to the hospital, so he could change out of his scrubs, and he was wearing his favorite shirt from his favorite band: a black vintage Rolling Stones concert tee that had been worn and washed so many times that it looked grey. He was also wearing a braided black leather belt, his beat up navy-blue Chuck Taylors and dark-blue jeans. His sandy-brown hair was in one of its growing-out stages and was parted in the middle, tucked behind his ears, settling right at his jawline.

“Wherever’s good.” Parker was sounding sort of tired. He slid in and put on his seatbelt, but Justin thought that he might have just the pick-me-up that Parker needed.

“Ribs?” Justin knew Parker all too well. “You know, since you’re no longer a vegetarian,” Justin teased him. “How about The Blue Pineapple?”

Parker pepped up at this and smiled at Justin. “Yes, all the meat we can eat. Definitely.” He was looking forward to a plate full of the best barbecue ribs on the North Shore.

Justin put his car in drive, left the curb, and took Parker’s hand in his. “I’ll hold your hand now, before you get a gallon of sauce all over them,” he smiled over to Parker. The Blue Pineapple’s ribs were the best, and because they were the best, they were also messy as hell.

“Yeah, well at least I can keep the sauce on my hands, you just get it on your shirt.” Parker smiled back.

It was true, Justin had always been a messy eater and his clothes often wore most of his food, but that wasn’t going to happen today. He shot Parker back a coy look and Parker knew exactly what he was thinking.

“Not the bib, Justin.”

“Oh yes, the bib.” Justin gave Parker’s hand a squeeze. The Blue Pineapple offered plastic bibs to all their patrons and Justin and Parker, when they had first went there, had taken them in jest, just like they took the paper crowns at Burger King, but when Justin had found that the bib actually came in handy, he had worn one every time he went back.

“You must keep their bib supplier in business.” Parker squeezed Justin’s hand back. “A bib supplier, is that even a thing?” Parker joked.

“Hey now, I look damn good in that thing!” Justin had taken an odd sense of pride in wearing the bib that had a white background and a giant blue pineapple across the front.

“Well, you’re never gonna wear it now, you just missed the exit.”

Justin had hopped on the highway since it would be faster than back roads, but he just drove by the exit that he needed to take to go to the restaurant.

“We have a detour.”

“Oh, let me guess—a bib emporium just opened up?”

“Don’t joke. I’d actually go to one if they existed.” Justin looked over to Parker. “No, I found a house for us to look at.”

Parker wasn’t really in the mood to look at houses today, but since they had missed the exit to the restaurant anyway, he wasn’t going to object. Justin threw on his blinker to take the next exit off the highway and within ten minutes they pulled up to a white Cape Cod house with dark green shutters and a dark green door.

And Parker’s heart dropped in his chest.

“We’ve seen this one, Justin.”

“This one? Are you sure?”

They were parked in front of the same Cape Cod style house that they had seen last week, where the owner made it clear that she was only looking for short-term summer renters. Parker could not believe that Justin could forget something that had only happened a week ago.

“I’m sure, Justin. It’s the house we both really wanted, well I guess the house I really wanted, because now you don’t even remember.” Parker’s voice

was sounding defeated, but Justin wanted a closer look at the house so he put the car in park and got out and Parker followed.

“It does look sort of familiar.” Justin ran a hand over his scratchy five o’clock shadow and walked on the flat front lawn, looking around and trying to remember. “I think I kinda remember.” He rubbed at his beard again. “But something seems different, like something’s missing.”

“It’s the same Justin, let’s just go.” Parker was beginning to make his way back to the car, but Justin spoke up.

“No. I remember now. There was something here.” Justin walked a few paces on the front yard to where the lawn met the sidewalk and not knowing what Justin was talking about, Parker followed to look where Justin was pointing, and saw that Justin was just pointing at the ground.

“There was nothing, Justin.”

“No, I think I remember a sign or something. Don’t you? You said we were here before.” It was all starting to become clearer to Justin and he had remembered something.

Parker was silent as he thought back and vaguely remembered a handmade “For Rent” sign that was on the front lawn, but he had been too preoccupied thinking about the house at the time to take a good look at some yard sign.

“Yeah, wait, come to think of it.” Now it was Justin who was making his way back to the car and taking his car keys out of his pocket, he opened up the trunk and bent down inside it.

When Justin stood from leaning inside the trunk, he was holding what Parker had remembered to be the yard sign, but instead of just having black writing saying “To Rent” and a phone number on a plain white background, the word “RENTED” was written in large red letters diagonally across it.

Justin walked back across the lawn and placed the sign in the same holes, that were still there from the previous week, and jammed the sign into the ground.

“See. I knew something was missing.” Justin propped his elbow on the top of the sign.

Parker was beginning to comprehend what Justin was doing and if Justin was joking right now...

“It looks kinda tacky though.” Justin looked down at the sign. “Well, when we live here we can take it down.”

What? Parker quickly walked up to Justin. “No way Justin, this is a summer rental, she told us last week.” *Don’t joke with me, Justin, not about this.*

“Well, I have learned some things on the job, you know.”

“What?”

“Selling cars... I’ve learned to sell and I sold the owner on the idea that we should be able to have the lease for the whole year. She didn’t even raise the price for the summer since we’re signing on long-term.”

Since Justin and Parker had been saving their money for so long, they knew that they could handle paying the rent on a house, but it would be a big help if they didn’t have to pay additional premiums for the summer.

“What? How’d you do that?” *Justin seriously better not be joking about this.*

“Easy.” He kissed Parker right on the front lawn, not giving a damn if anyone saw. “Some people do see my charm, you know.”

“Justin, I’m just gonna say it. If you are joking about this, it’s not even remotely funny.”

“Not about this, Parker.” He kissed him again. “Pack up your stuff. We’re moving.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

“Do you remember the first time you came to my room?” It was a Saturday morning at the end of May and Parker was standing in his bedroom, the same one that he had from the time he was in elementary school, and was looking out the window next to his twin-size bed, overlooking the driveway.

The first time that Justin had gone into Parker’s bedroom was the first time that he’d visited his house, during spring break of their sophomore year of college. Justin was visiting Parker, and upon entering his house, Justin saw Parker’s high school football shrine that his mom kept up in the living room. Justin and Parker had their first ever argument. Well, it wasn’t an argument really. Justin had been admiring Parker’s high school football awards, and it was just too painful for Parker to deal with Justin’s compliments because Parker’s career as a star high school quarterback was something that he had tried to forget.

That was because when Parker was a junior in high school, he had needed someone to talk to and had confided in his football coach that he was gay, and thereafter all hell broke loose. His coach didn’t tell him to quit the team specifically, but the bigoted asshole overworked Parker to the point of exhaustion and humiliation, and Parker, although the star of the team, was tired of the bullshit and decided that enough was enough and quit.

It had taken him years and the support of Justin to finally get over how wronged he’d been by his coach and now he was actually able to look back at his high school football career with fondness and a sense of pride.

“Why didn’t you say anything then? When I told you?” Parker was still looking out the window, but was directing his question toward Justin, and although the question had sounded vague, Justin knew exactly what he was talking about.

Because the day that Justin had first come to Parker’s house was the same day that Parker had decided to trust Justin, had decided to let his best friend know that he was gay. Justin, confused as he was in his romantic feelings for Parker, did his best to comfort him, but never made mention of his own feelings.

“We’ve talked about this, Parker. You know why.”

“Remind me.” Parker walked away from the window and sat next to Justin on the edge of his bed.

“Because I was chickenshit, and scared, and confused. You were always the stronger one of us. The braver one. The one who made the first move...”

“Yeah, thank God for that.” It was Parker who had first kissed Justin and right then he gave him another. “Should we get gushy and start talking about the first time we knew we loved each other? Should I find my college diary?” Parker reached over to his nightstand and grabbed a small notebook and opened it up to a random blank page and pretended to read, “Dear Diary, today I met the cutest boy at school,” Parker said in his best imitation of a girl’s voice.

“Shut up.”

“His name’s Justin and I really want him to like me.” He went on. “I just hope that he doesn’t have cooties.”

“Funny.”

“Ok, how’s this? MTV True Life: I want to bone my best friend.” Parker smiled at Justin and threw the notebook back on his nightstand. “Hey, have they aired our episode yet?”

“Yeah. Your royalties just came to me. It was in our contract.”

“Oh, is that right?” Parker pushed Justin down on his back on the bed and climbed over him, straddling his lap.

“Yup.”

“Well, it sounds like you owe me a lot of money then.” Parker was leaning down to Justin’s face, just inches above him, speaking low, his voice husky, breathing in Justin’s scent.

Justin made to pat at his jeans pockets, and came up empty. “Looks like I left all my money at home.” He was now lifting his hips off the bed to closer connect Parker’s pelvis with his own.

“Well, guess we’ll have to work out another arrangement then,” Parker said, still straddling Justin’s lap and leaning down to him.

Justin lifted his head up, meeting Parker's mouth with a deep kiss before flipping Parker onto his back on the mattress. He proceeded to kiss Parker hungrily, fully sprawled out on top of him, running his fingers through Parker's hair and then sliding them down—down his face, down his neck—before stopping and resting his hand right over Parker's heart.

“I remember, you know.” Justin lifted his head and stared down into Parker's eyes.

“Huh?” Parker wasn't sure what Justin meant or why he broke their kiss.

“The first time I knew I loved you. I remember when.” Justin's hand was resting right over Parker's heart, feeling its strong, fast beats right through Parker's T-shirt. His own heart was beating so fast, he swore he could feel it in his fingertips, beating right along with Parker's rhythm. “It was here, in your room. Sitting right here on this bed. The first time I was up here with you.”

Parker stared back into Justin's eyes.

“Justin...”

“You asked me why I didn't say anything then. But I'm telling you now, I love you, Parker.”

Although Justin was more than revved up and ready to go, he needed this moment with Parker to tell him this, to tell him fully, why on that day four years ago when Parker came out to him, why he had been so silent in his own feelings, and it was indeed because he was scared and it was indeed because he was confused, because deep down he knew, he had fallen in love with his best friend.

“I love you more.” Parker's mouth clung back onto Justin's, and as soon as Parker said it, Justin knew that there was no possible way.

“I'll miss this you know.”

Parker and Justin were now lying in Parker's bed, trying to huddle together under the sheet that was balled up into a lump and was nowhere close to covering up their naked bodies.

“What, sharing your twin-size bed?” Justin asked him.

They were both lying on their sides, the only way that they could properly fit on the bed, with Justin being the big spoon, draping his hand over Parker's stomach and slowly rubbing it back and forth.

"This room, this house." Parker flipped over to look at Justin. "I worry about my mom, you know. It's not the same with your parents, they have your sister, they have each other. With my mom, it's different. It was always just her and me." Parker's voice had a worried tone to it.

"You have me." Justin reached up and brushed Parker's hair out of his eyes, it was grown out and shaggy, down past his jaw with small pieces falling over his forehead.

"That's what I mean." Parker let out a small sigh. "I have you and she has no one, she's just gonna be here, by herself, in this house..."

"Hey, don't talk like that. She's not gonna be alone. She still has you. She has us. We'll visit."

Parker didn't look entirely convinced.

"Parker, do you remember what else you told me the first time I was in your room?"

"What's that?" Parker was surprised that Justin could even remember so much from that day, he had thought that it had gone all so horribly, but now that he knew the truth, now that he knew that it was the first time that Justin knew he was in love with him, he understood why Justin could remember it all so well.

"You told me that I would never want to be you, because people expect you to be the perfect son, and you will never live up to that. But you already have, Parker, you already are." Justin pressed his lips to Parker's forehead. "I'm telling you, your mom has you, and that's not going to change just because you're no longer sleeping under the same roof."

Parker was thinking about this and knew that Justin was right.

"But if you need time, if we need to wait..." Justin would give Parker time if he needed it, he needed Parker to be ready to start this chapter of their lives together, and although it pained a small part of him to even suggest it, for Parker he would do anything, and that included waiting.

But Parker cut him off, “We’re done waiting,” and then pressed his body up against Justin’s, bringing their mouths together with a kiss. “Our last time up here in my room is gonna be a lot different than our first.” Parker’s hand was around Justin’s waist, gripping onto his lower back, pressing them together, stroking Justin’s skin, moving his hands up toward his shoulder blades and then slowly down his back.

Yes, a repeat performance of the lovemaking that they just shared together was going to be a lot different.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

After Justin and Parker were done reminiscing and done making even more memories in Parker's bedroom, they each took a quick shower. They then packed up Parker's room, jamming a lifetime of Parker's things into Justin's small Ford Taurus.

Parker, the week before this move, had done his piles of "keep", "donate", and "throw away", so at least what he was bringing with him to the new house had been sorted through.

Plus, he and Justin were each given a house key last week upon signing the lease and using his mom's car while Justin was at work, Parker was able to take some boxes of smaller items with him in order to help make the move-in day less burdensome.

The Cape Cod style house they were moving into was on the small side but it was perfect for them. It had five rooms: a kitchen and living room on the first floor and three bedrooms upstairs. The kitchen and living room were mostly furnished, and although everything in the house seemed to belong in the 1980s, including its oversized cream-colored floral sofa, the guys were happy to have some furniture in their first place. The only things that were missing were beds and furniture for the bedrooms, and although the thought of sleeping on the floor for at least the first couple of weeks before they could get a bed delivered didn't seem ideal, at least the rest of the house was furnished, and they weren't sure what they wanted to do with the other bedrooms anyway. They supposed a guest bedroom and maybe an exercise room/office would work, but they would figure that out when they'd lived in the place a bit longer and could think of what they wanted those rooms to be.

Due to Justin's busy week at work, Parker knew that he wouldn't be making it over to the house, so this was the first time that they had been to their new house together since signing the lease.

They were using today, Saturday, to move in all of Parker's things and they figured they could use tomorrow to focus on Justin and getting his things. Even though Justin could live without the basic necessities, like clothes and

toiletries, he was not going to go more than one day without the fifty-five-inch flat screen TV from their college apartment. The archaic device that was in the living room now was in no way going to cut it, but since the cable guy couldn't come until Tuesday, there was no reason to rush it over since the TV wouldn't work anyway.

Upon pulling into the straight, short driveway that led to a two-car garage attached to the white Cape house, Justin put the car in park. He and Parker unbuckled their seatbelts and made their way across the winding brick pathway that led them to a large brick front stoop. They both stood on it in front of the dark green front door.

The guys had decided to just leave Parker's things in the car for now, excited to see the house and spend their first night here together, they wanted to get inside and look around.

“Wait.” Parker had always been the leaner one of the two, but what he didn't have in mass, he surely had in muscle and in strength, because what he was attempting now surely would require some.

“Parker, what the—”

Justin had just finished opening the front door to the house when Parker reached his right arm down to the back of Justin's knees and in one fell swoop he had grabbed Justin up off the stoop, and was holding him in his arms, awkwardly at best. What had started as an attempt to carry Justin over the threshold, the way that he would carry a bride, became him just clutching onto Justin's body, carrying him the best he could and just hoping that he wouldn't drop him. They were now off the stoop and in the front hallway and Parker figured that he could walk a little bit more before his arms collapsed completely.

“Parker, what the hell was that?” Parker finally let Justin down to the wood floor where Justin luckily landed on his feet. Justin was looking at Parker with a mixture of comedic laughter and utter surprise. “And what was it that you were humming?”

“Uhh, ‘Here Comes the Bride...’” Parker was a little out of breath, and looking back, he realized that it was an odd choice. From the expression he

saw on Justin's face, he could tell that Justin felt the same way. "I dunno, something about brides and thresholds and carrying someone, it just popped into my head," Parker offered as an explanation.

"Fine," Justin smiled and rubbed the outsides of his thighs where Parker was just clutching him so strongly. "But I'm not wearing a dress."

"You don't have the legs for it anyway." The same dark hair that covered Justin's head also covered his legs. "There's not enough wax in the world, my friend."

"Well, you would know." Justin always joked with Parker that he must wax because Parker's skin was so smooth and bare, especially when compared to Justin's. "And I hope you didn't strain yourself carrying me like that. No excuses tonight when we break in the floor of our new bedroom."

Clearly having only one thing on his mind, after Parker placed him down, the first thing Justin did was climb the stairs to the master bedroom, already having it in his head how he and Parker were going to spend their first night here together, and Parker was close behind him.

When they reached the master bedroom upstairs and Parker went to turn the doorknob, Justin stopped him. "Nope. It's your turn, Parker Klein." Instead of trying to carry Parker the way that Parker had carried him, Justin hoisted Parker up over his shoulder in a fireman's carry, giving his ass a hard slap, and kicked open the door carrying Parker over the bedroom threshold.

"What! What's this?" Justin walked into the room, calling this out loud.

Parker was still being carried by Justin, his head dangling low somewhere near Justin's lower back, so he couldn't see what Justin was looking at. "What? What's in here?"

Justin was looking at the unfurnished bedroom that he and Parker would share, except, it was anything but unfurnished.

Against the pale yellow walls of the room, there was a long dark wood bureau with a matching mirror resting on it and a tall dresser with six drawers on the opposite side of the room. As if that wasn't enough, right in the center of the room, right under the ceiling fan and next to two new nightstands, was a queen size bed with a headboard that matched the rest of the furniture.

But there was something different about the headboard too, because on second glance, draped over the bed's wooden headboard, was a folded up blanket, one that was red and green plaid, and it was the same blanket that Justin and Parker had shared years before at the Eagles football games, the same blanket that they laid on the night they first said I love you to each other, the same blanket that Parker had kept ever since, and Justin was hit with an enormous wave of love that he knew all too well was entirely possible.

Parker must have set this whole thing up, never once mentioning anything about it. Justin took him off his shoulder and placed him carefully on the floor, in order to properly look at the man he loved.

“Oh yeah.” Parker acted like he had completely forgotten all about this new bedroom set. “I got us some furniture.”

“Yeah, I can see that.” Justin kicked off his shoes, pulled his shirt over his head, and let his jeans drop to the floor so that he was now only wearing his boxers. Then he jumped up and came crashing down on the mattress. He scooted up the bed and lay down on his back resting his head against the pillows.

Parker just stood in the doorway looking at him.

“What?” Justin propped himself up on his elbows. He was right in the middle of the mattress, the only thing on the bed being him, the pillows, and a new light blue bottom sheet.

“That's just really hot that I show you a bed and you take your clothes off.” Parker said making his way over to the bed.

“Yeah, well what can I say, I'm easy.” Justin took the baseball cap that he had been wearing and flung it at Parker the way he would throw a Frisbee.

Parker caught it and then let it drop out of his hands. “Yeah, it only took me an entire day of carrying furniture up the stairs to get you into bed. You're definitely easy.”

At this, Justin scooted his way down the bed, his green boxers bunching up around his thighs, and he sat at the end of the bed looking up at Parker.

“Well if you come here, I'll make it up to you.” He said quietly, in a hoarse whisper, looking straight into Parker's eyes, and Parker thought it was sexy as hell.

Justin didn't wait for Parker to say anything next, instead he reached out for Parker's hands, pulling him down, and yanking Parker on top of him.

They both scooted back up on the bed to rest their heads on the pillows, lying on their sides facing each other, and Justin immediately went in to give Parker a kiss. At first, it was soft and sweet, but within a moment, it was full of passion. Parker wrapped his left leg over Justin's hip in order to be closer to him, and Justin held tightly to his back, kissing him hard and pulling Parker over so he was completely on top of him. Parker was kissing Justin back intensely, the kiss was all tongues and lips, and even though he knew Justin would be happy about the bed, Justin's reaction of immediately wanting to break it in, was making him incredibly hard. He was pressing his lower half fully on Justin, grinding up against him, when Justin pressed his chest up off of him, breaking their kiss.

"Lose the clothes, Klein," Justin called Parker by his last name and Parker knew he meant business.

Parker shifted just slightly off Justin, so that only the right side of his body was on top of him, while his left side was now on the mattress supported by his elbow, and he immediately brought his hands down to unbuckle his belt. When he finally got that done, Justin reached his hands straight up under Parker's T-shirt, dragging his hands slowly up Parker's stomach, all the way to his chest and resting the fingers of each hand on Parker's nipples, and he began to circle his fingertips slowly around them.

Parker loved when Justin touched him anywhere, but right now, what Justin was doing to his chest was driving him crazy and Parker's brain was going a little berserk at this as one part of it was telling him to just shut his eyes and enjoy this, while the other part of his brain, in the background, was forcefully telling him, *take off your pants!*

His brain found a sort of compromise and rather than reaching down to take off his own pants, his right hand found its spot on Justin's bare stomach, on that little patch of skin below his belly button but not quite touching the waistband of his boxers and he began to soothingly rub his palm back and forth, back and forth. He kept this up for a moment, while kissing Justin in a mesh of lips and tongue and as his palm began to move southward, his

fingertips lifted up the waistband of Justin's boxers and he rested his hand on the patch of hair that was just inside.

His mind was heightened at the sensation of going from the thin hair and smooth skin on Justin's stomach to the coarse hair that his hand now rested on, and again he began to rub smoothly, but this time he was making gentle circles in the hair that rested only slightly above Justin's rapidly growing hard cock that was sticking up and was now brushing the back of Parker's hand.

Justin was now shifting underneath him, writhing up so that his cock would brush up against Parker's hand, and Parker got the message.

He moved his hand just over slightly so that he could get his grip, and then wrapped his hand around Justin's cock, just lightly, just so that he knew that he was there, and Justin, panting for air and gasping in between kisses, definitely felt it.

"I'm glad you like it," Parker told him, moving his head over so that he could kiss the side of Justin's face, his jaw, his neck. He loved the way Justin's light beard felt against his skin and he began to move his hand up and down Justin's cock, wanting his hand to feel as much of him as it possibly could.

"Fuck yeah, you feel amazing, Parker." Justin was still panting and gasping and rubbing Parker's chest harder now and with more purpose.

"I meant the bed, but that works too." And Parker went back in to kiss Justin fiercely, working him over with his hand, and loving absolutely every moment of this. He was lying so close to Justin and was grinding his body and his hard-on into Justin's left hip, but he desperately wanted at the very least to unzip his own fly to lessen the pressure of his hardening cock that was now tightly compressed in his pants.

But before he could think of whether he would take his hand off of Justin in order to do this, Justin's hands had crept down his chest, onto his stomach and were now at the button to his jeans, undoing it, and unzipping his pants. Parker let out a little moan at this slight brush of Justin's hand when he was unzipping him and began rocking into Justin's hand which was still there and was now making its way into the hole in front of Parker's boxers, but just when Justin's hand made its way inside and began to brush Parker's cock a

little harder, Justin pulled his hand back out and Parker popped open his eyes in disbelief. He loved it when Justin was just rubbing his chest, but now that he had touched his cock and then took his hand away... Parker let out a whimper.

“I said, lose the clothes.” And Justin gently pushed the rest of Parker off of him so that Parker lie flat on his back on the left side of the bed, his head resting on the pillows, and Justin came over him, kissing him once on the mouth, before sitting down upon him, straddling his waist.

Justin let his full weight rest upon Parker and brought his hands to the hem of Parker’s shirt, hooking his thumbs up under it, and dragging it up Parker’s torso, where his hands quickly brushed Parker’s nipples but kept moving their way up so that he could take Parker’s shirt off entirely.

When he removed Parker’s shirt and flung it to the floor, he brought his hands back to Parker’s chest, rubbing his hands smoothly over Parker’s skin, and his fingers found their spot back on Parker’s nipples and began to rub and tease Parker all over again.

Parker closed his eyes and let out a few soft moans all the while lifting his hips to grind up into Justin who was straddling his waist and sitting on top of him.

Justin leaned forward onto Parker, again meeting Parker’s lips with his own and began kissing down Parker’s face, down on to his chin, stopping there and then going down to Parker’s chest, making small pecks all in a row, one after another along his collarbones. Kissing inward from the side, when Justin reached the small hollow of Parker’s throat, he began kissing and licking his way up his neck, at first small little licks around the base and in the hollow, but soon Parker felt the long swooping licks of Justin’s warm tongue up the entire length of his neck, and Parker was helpless against him, panting and gasping and clutching on to Justin’s lower back, keeping him pressed to him, desperately not wanting to break the connection.

Justin’s tongue stayed glued to Parker’s neck as he ground down into him and he kept licking along the side of Parker’s neck while he moved his head slowly upwards, taking his time to taste Parker’s amazing skin.

After hearing more of Parker's soft moans and groans and gasps, Justin sat up on Parker, removing his lips from his neck, and reached behind himself in order to grab ahold of Parker's hands that had been gripping his lower back so tightly, and taking Parker's hands in his, he brought them up to his mouth.

Justin softly kissed the back of both of Parker's hands and each palm and then brought them back towards the mattress and up and over Parker's head so that now Parker's knuckles grazed the headboard.

Justin then leaned over Parker again, kissing him softly on the mouth like he had done to his hands and began making small open mouthed kisses down his neck and onto his chest, this time not taking his time as he slid down Parker's body, stopping for a short while to kiss Parker's nipples, but not stopping long at this detour. Parker's pants, although they were unzipped, were still on, and as he kissed Parker lower and lower, he was on a mission to take them off.

When Justin finally found his mouth on the only hair that Parker had on his entire torso, the thin straight line of light brown hair that ran down from Parker's belly button and disappeared into his jeans, he brought his hands to Parker's jeans waistband, sliding the tips of his fingers into them and began to drag them down.

The jeans got bunched up at Parker's knees, so Justin scooted up off Parker completely and maneuvered down the bed some more until he was standing on the floor at the bottom of the bed.

He quickly untied and pulled off Parker's sneakers, peeled off his socks, and grabbed the bottom cuff on his jeans, which he then forcefully pulled down and off.

When he finally got Parker's jeans off, he walked on the floor to the left side of the bed where Parker was still lying, and sat next to him on the edge. He leaned down to kiss Parker's mouth, planting hot and firm open mouthed kisses onto his lips and then sat up and scooted down the bed some so that he could reach down to Parker's boxers and take them off.

Parker lifted his hips up off the mattress as to make Justin's job easier and Justin easily slid off his boxers and threw them behind him on the floor. Still

sitting on the edge of the bed, Justin began rubbing his hands over the tops and insides of Parker's thighs, teasing him mercilessly, all the while careful not to touch anywhere else.

Justin couldn't believe that he was here with Parker in *their* new house in *their* new bedroom, in *their* new bed. He knew that this was only the first time of many that they would be together in bed like this, and that thought alone was driving him crazy in the moment, and his whole body and mind were consumed with not only the time they were having now, but with all of the times that were still to come, and he couldn't stand to tease Parker anymore, because by doing so, he was only torturing himself.

So he scooted down the edge of the bed even more, and still sitting on the bed's edge, he took his right hand and began gently stroking Parker's erect cock up and down, up and down, loving the feel of his boyfriend in his hand, wanting to give him the most incredible pleasure imaginable and thinking to himself how it was Parker who had brought them together. Parker who was brave and made the first move the night they first kissed, Parker who was always there for him, no matter what, there to laugh, there to talk, there to listen. Parker who was his best friend, his boyfriend and his entire world, and if he didn't have Parker in his life he knew with all of his heart that he would have nothing.

It was with these thoughts in mind that Justin shifted himself off the side of the bed and stood up on the floor right next to the bed and looked down at Parker, allowing his eyes to gaze over his entire body, taking in the entire breathtaking sight of him before meeting Parker's eyes with his own. Looking back at Justin, Parker propped himself up on his elbows and then sat up so he was now sitting on the left side edge of the bed, his feet planted on the floor, still looking up at Justin who was standing in front of him.

"Now you." Parker told him. Justin was still wearing his own boxers and Parker reached his hands up into the top of them, wanting to drag them down, but Justin's hands met his and stopped them.

"The bed. I do love it, you know." Justin leaned down into Parker, smoothing his left hand along Parker's jaw, and said this softly, still looking him in the eyes before giving him another kiss. Parker met his lips back and

was kissing him fully and deeply and they kept like this for almost ever, loving the taste of each other and both knowing that they could never get enough. “But you know, I would have slept on the floor forever if it meant that I got to do it with you.” Justin had pulled gently away from Parker’s mouth and was now kneeling in front of him on the floor and with Parker right on the edge of the bed, Justin positioned himself in between Parker’s spread legs and with Justin kneeling directly in front of him, right up next to the bed, they were now chest to chest.

Justin brought his hands up around Parker’s back and was stroking him softly, holding him close, all the while kissing him in a mixture of soft and hard, tongue and no tongue, but all with 100% love.

As good as Parker’s mouth felt against his, Justin wanted even more of him, wanted to taste and feel and to be more with him. He was always more when he was with Parker. He always felt more and could do more and could *be* more. His life had never been the same since he had met Parker, and although now, after almost four years of being together he couldn’t really for the life of him remember what it had been like before they met, all he knew was that a life without Parker must have been no life at all.

“I love you, Parker.” Justin planted one last kiss on Parker’s mouth, a sweet, soft expression of all of the emotion that was within him, and of all the emotion that Parker brought out of him.

Justin was still kneeling on the floor in front of Parker and had brought his hands out from around Parker’s back and onto the tops of Parker’s thighs and was stroking them, back and forth, back and forth, the friction of his palms burning heat against Parker’s skin. His hands were inches away from Parker’s throbbing cock and Justin loved that he had Parker in this position, sitting right on the edge of the bed where he could have full access to him.

“I love you too, Justin, God, I love you.” Parker was gasping and huffing out breaths as Justin once again kissed his way down his chest and onto the straight trail of light brown hair that ran below his belly button, not stopping once as he did so until he reached Parker’s cock and took it in his mouth.

At this point, Justin was done with taking things slowly and now that he could feel Parker inside of him and felt the pulsing and throbbing of Parker’s

cock with every licking and sucking and swallowing action he took, Justin wanted nothing more than to bring Parker up and over the edge.

Parker ran his hands over Justin's short, cropped hair, massaging and caressing and feeling and wanting. Sitting on the edge of the bed, he was hunching over, with his stomach slightly concave as he leaned in down towards Justin, wanting to be as close as physically possible to him while Justin was kneeling in front of him on the floor.

Parker rested his hands on top of Justin's head the best he could in between Justin's slick, deliriously pleasurable bobbing motions and every time Justin looked up to meet his eyes, Parker would stare straight back into them, and he could barely hold back from coming.

Finally, Parker had to close his eyes as he could feel the final tingle building up low in his belly. His hips were gently rocking back and forth into Justin's mouth and his thighs were on fire from the friction of Justin's hands consistently working them over. He wanted to let Justin know what was coming next. He knew Justin wouldn't pull off, that he never did, but still he had to at least say something, anything to let him know.

"Justin—" Parker's voice was eager and hoarse and he kept his mouth open after he said this and his eyes were screwed shut so he didn't see Justin looking back up at him when he said his name. Instead, he could just feel the pressure of Justin's mouth becoming tighter around him as Justin brought his hands quickly away from Parker's thighs and put them right in between his legs, softly touching and stroking his balls, and that extra touch right there is what did it.

"Justin—" Parker let out a few more stifled breaths and the next thing he knew he was gasping and panting even harder as he dug his fingertips into Justin's hair, bucked his hips up one more time, and came in Justin's mouth.

He kept his eyes closed, riding out the incredible sensations that Justin had just created in him. He could feel Justin's mouth still on him, but the licking and sucking sensations had stopped and instead he could now feel the soft tender kisses of Justin's mouth on his softening penis and then felt more tender kisses from Justin trail up his abdomen, up his chest, until Justin was now looking straight into his eyes.

“You’re amazing,” Parker said, leaning forward and bringing his hands to the sides of Justin’s face, kissing him with even more passion than he had before, if that was even possible.

“I told you I’d make it up to you,” Justin smirked and said this squarely against Parker’s lips, making a teasing vibration as he did so.

“Yeah, well, now it’s your turn.” Parker gripped Justin from underneath the arms and still sitting on the edge of the bed, yanked him upwards to which Justin then stood directly in front of him.

Perfect.

Parker quickly took the waistband of Justin’s boxers and began to slide them down, and this time, Justin didn’t stop him.

Justin hadn’t even stepped out of the boxers that Parker had pushed to the floor before Parker was leaning into him, kissing and nipping at his stomach, licking around his belly button and moving his way lower and lower and—

“Unngh, Parker.” Parker took Justin’s cock into his mouth, using his left hand to grip the base and wrapping his right hand around Justin’s lower back. His hand moved lower onto Justin’s ass and after a few minutes of gentle suckles and licks, he pulled his mouth off of Justin and Justin let out a surprised gaspy whine.

Parker wanted Justin on the bed, he didn’t want him to have to stand up for this, so with the hand that was gripping Justin’s ass, he pulled him even closer to him and lied on his back across the bed until Justin was on top of him. He proceeded to then kiss Justin fiercely, loving the feeling of all of Justin’s weight on top of him, feeling so incredibly close to him on this bed that they would share and wanting to give Justin back every bit of pleasure that he had just received.

On top of him, Justin was grinding down into him, pressing his erection into the soft fold of flesh in between Parker’s thigh and his groin, and even though he had just come, the sensitivity of it all was driving Parker crazy and he quickly thought that if Justin could just wait it out a bit longer, that if he could just wait so that he could get hard again too... But the feeling of Justin’s tongue darting in and out of his mouth, pressing deeper inside, trying to reach

his throat and eat him alive, gave Parker other ideas and really, no, he wasn't going to make Justin wait any longer.

Parker reached his hands up off of Justin's ass and pressed his chest upwards a bit and even though he hated that his lips lost contact with Justin's, he knew that his mouth would soon find another home on his boyfriend.

Justin seemed to get the idea and rolled off of Parker, and being that they were lying horizontally across the bed, Justin was now lying on his back next to the pillows and quickly shoved a few underneath his own head and shoulders. He wanted his head propped up so that he could see what Parker was going to do to him, for as good as it always felt, he loved it even more when he could watch.

Parker gave him a few more maddening hot kisses on his mouth and then began to move down his body quickly, dragging his tongue out along his chest and torso and soon finding the base of Justin's cock and the patch of hair that was right above it.

Parker wrapped his hand around the base of Justin's cock and pressed his face to the hair there, giving Justin mercilessly slow, agonizing kisses, dragging out a few more whimpers and moans from him before lowering his head a tiny bit more and bringing Justin inside of his mouth.

Justin knew that there was no way that he could last long—not after what he had just done to Parker and definitely not after what Parker was doing to him. He was extraordinarily hard, and the sight of Parker licking at his cock and sliding him in and out of his mouth sent every sense he had into overdrive and it was all too much in the best possible way.

Justin had his hands buried into the sheet on either side of him but as the sensations heightened and his back and pelvis rose off the bed, he brought his hands down to the back of Parker's head, saying his name, *moaning* his name, and gripping the beautiful hair on it.

As the sensations continued to heighten, Justin couldn't hold back any longer, he wouldn't, and his brain stopped working as his hips began circling and thrusting and he began groaning and moaning and he never shut his eyes once as Parker was taking him in and out of his mouth, and when Parker

looked up at him, it was with so much love and so much heat that Justin was just done. Everything inside of him was just done. He was finished in so many ways more than one. This was Parker, making love to him right now on their bed, giving him the best feelings imaginable, and as good as it all felt, as incredibly amazing as it was to see and feel Parker now on the bed with him and being a part of him like that, his heart was hammering not just with what Parker was doing to him, *with* him, *for* him, but with every feeling he had ever had in his life for Parker, with every memory and kiss and laugh and touch all balled up inside of him, rolled into this feeling that he couldn't even place exactly where it was in his chest, because it was moving like a wave through him, and now it was in his stomach and now it was in his heart and he tried to keep it down in his chest, but when he opened his mouth to breathe, the wave was getting bigger and taking him over entirely and now that his mouth was open it wanted to rush out, but he wouldn't let it and "Unnnnnnggghh!"

And he was just so in love, and he was just done. Gone for. Whatever the saying is, he was it. And he held this feeling tightly in his chest, this wave that radiated through him, knowing that whatever happened that this feeling wouldn't go away. It was always there and always would be.

"By the way, my appointment's made." The next day, Justin was bringing up breakfast-in-bed to Parker, well, lunch really, well, snacks if Justin really thought about it. They had quite the time keeping each other up the night before but now that it was Sunday, even though they would have spent the whole day in bed if they could, they still had to go to Justin's house to pack up his stuff and bring it to their new house.

"Hmmm?" Parker was still in a state of sleep under their red and green plaid blanket, curled up on his side.

Since they had just begun the move-in process, there was next to no food in the house yet and all Justin could bring up to Parker was a half-eaten can of potato chips, an unopened bag of tortilla chips and a jar of salsa. He figured this was all right for now, and that he would take Parker out for a proper lunch before they grabbed his stuff. Justin placed the junk food bounty on the night table next to Parker's side of the bed and climbed back on the bed to lie down on his side, curling up into Parker.

Although the bottom half of Parker's body was under their plaid blanket, his upper back was exposed, and lying next to Parker now, Justin traced his hand over Parker's "02" tattoo and put his mouth up against it, kissing it.

"I said I made my appointment. You said you went to Ronnie at Armed & Inked, he put me in for next week." Justin was kissing Parker's tattooed right shoulder blade and making his way up the side of Parker's neck, caressing and brushing Parker's nearly shoulder length hair over to the side as he did so.

Justin wanted his "01" tattoo on his left shoulder blade, whereas Parker got his "02" tattoo on his right. Upon thinking about where to place it, it just felt right to have it put on his left, on the same side as his heart and to compliment the placement of Parker's, like they were two parts of a whole, because they were.

"Gonna get inked for me, hmm?" Parker hummed out. Feeling Justin's soft kisses and gentle caresses, Parker was still in that blissful state between being asleep and being awake and just then when Justin wrapped his arm around his chest and pressed him even closer to him, Parker felt like he could stay this way forever.

"Yeah, well I figure you don't get to be the only one to have all the fun." Now that Justin was curled in right behind Parker, he felt like he would never be able to get up and out of bed again. Parker's warm skin pressing up against his body was making him feel so calm, so safe, so peaceful, and even though they were home now, in their home, Justin couldn't help but feel that the entire time that he had known Parker, that he had been home all along.

Parker turned over to face Justin and looked in his eyes. "Fun? You know it involves needles right?"

"Yeah, well I told Ronnie it would be my first time and he said he'd go easy on me." Justin's mouth had found its place back on the side of Parker's neck.

"Easy, huh?" Parker arched his neck into Justin "You're always saying how you're so *easy*." Parker was dragging his hands up underneath the T-shirt that Justin had stupidly put on thinking that they would actually get some work done today.

“What can I say? You bring it out in me.” Justin’s mouth was open and he was nipping at Parker’s skin, the skin right where Parker’s neck connected with his shoulder, and Parker was already breathing heavily at the feel of it. Leave it to Justin to get him completely turned on before he was even fully awake.

“Yeah, well, I’m gonna go brush my teeth, and when I come back, you can show me just how *easy* you really are.” Parker pulled away from Justin and before he could even get up and out of bed, Justin was taking off his own shirt and wrestling down his track pants and boxers.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Keeping true to their word, now that they were moved into their new place, Justin and Parker visited Parker's mom and regularly invited her over. Just because they were in their mid-twenties didn't make it so that they knew exactly what they needed to run the day-to-day operations of their house, and other than Parker generously providing them with the bedroom furniture, they still needed a lot of the basics. So Parker's mom, Shannon, went shopping with them one day so that they could pick up household necessities like pots and pans, and extra sheets, well, two extra sets of sheets and a comforter that they both liked for their queen size bed. And now that summer was in full swing, they even bought a window unit air conditioner for their living room and took the air conditioner from Parker's old bedroom and put it in their bedroom window.

As much as Justin and Parker loved that they now had their own yard and could hang out to throw around the Frisbee or baseball or football and have Brandt and Todd over for weekend scrimmages, they found that most of the time they only used their yard at night after work when it was cooler outside because this summer had turned into a scorcher.

They had been living in their house for two months, it was the beginning of August, and it seemed like every day was over ninety-five degrees with ninety percent humidity. Parker had to walk almost two miles in the heat every day to the bus stop to get to work and because he had per diem shifts at the hospital and didn't have a set schedule, most days Justin couldn't drive him. Not that it made much difference because on the days that Justin could drive him, since his air conditioner in his car had been busted since God knows when, they both still ended up sweaty and sticking to the seats, even with the windows down. Justin really wanted to improve this situation.

“I see you decided to take a shower with your clothes on today, Meyer.”

Justin had just walked into work looking drenched and Brandt, of course, greeted him. Due to the heat and humidity, Justin drove to work wearing casual clothes and brought his work suit along with him, arriving to work early

enough everyday so that he could change his clothes before meeting with customers.

“Yeah, well at least I remember to bathe.” Justin told Brandt sarcastically. Good one. Sort of. Justin didn’t really care though, he just wanted to get to the employee’s bathroom so he could change.

When he’d changed and come out of the bathroom, he saw that Brandt was still the only one in the showroom and that they still had a good half hour before any customers would be walking in and he decided that now was as good a time as any to talk to Brandt.

“I want to switch up our bonus deal.”

“What?” Brandt was bending over a new silver Audi A5 Coupe, buffing out something on its hood with his suit sleeve.

“Our bonus deal. Right now, I get a bonus for every twenty cars I sell. And I get it as a check, but I want to work out something different.”

When it came to money and business deals, Brandt was just like his dad. All ears. “I’m listening.”

“Well, I get a bonus check every month on top of my commission, but I want to change that.”

“Fine, no more bonuses for you, good call.” Brandt smirked and then made his way across the shiny black granite showroom floor, over to the small showroom office that housed coffee, teas, and snacks for the customers who came in, and then popped in a pod of bold roast coffee into the automatic coffee maker.

Justin followed behind him and leaned against the counter by the sink. “Actually. You’re kinda right.”

“What?” Brandt turned around to face him.

“I get bonuses in the form of money. What I want is to get bonuses in the form of product.”

Brandt was intrigued. “Go on.”

“I want to buy a car here, and I figure that maybe you’d go for giving me a higher bonus percentage on the sales I make if you know that the money is going right back into the company.”

“I knew it!” Brandt boomed out. “Finally ready to get rid of your Taurus! Man, I don’t know how the hell you still drive around in that thing. How many miles does it have on it now? Two hundred thousand? Three?”

“Yeah, well it’s lasted this long...”

“Can’t stand coming to work every day looking at all the foreign models, huh? The princess wants something shiny and new!” Brandt made a horrible attempt at making a girly princess voice. Well at least that’s what Justin thought he was trying to make his voice sound like. Mostly it sounded like a cross between a squeaky mouse and a helium-huffing hyena.

“What the hell are you talking about, Brandt? You drive a domestic. Or didn’t you know that about Escalades?”

Brandt’s coffee was done and he was pulling open all the cabinet drawers searching for sugar packets. His coffee was always mostly sugar. “Yeah well, that’s because my dad was dealing in domestics at the time. I’m trading up, though.” He was squatting, opening up all the lower cabinets, still searching. “Gonna get a Porsche or a Maserati or an Aston Martin or—Jesus Christ, where’s all the sugar?!”

Justin sighed and walked over to the coffee maker, where right beside, it in plain sight, was a small basket containing more sugar packets than even Brandt could use and handed it down to him.

“So do we have a deal?”

“What?” Brandt was now standing, ripping the sugar packets open with his teeth. Justin just gave him a look. “All right. Deal. If you put your bonuses back into the company, I’ll double your percentage rate. We’ll write up something tomorrow.”

Yes. All Justin’s time trying to sell customers luxury automobiles had made him quite the salesman. He could even sell Brandt.

“Now show me where you got that sugar, I can never find it in here.”

“You’re such a—” Wait, now isn’t the right time to call Brandt a doofus. “Good boss. You’re a good boss. Thanks Brandt.” And Justin pointed over to the place on the counter where the sugar belonged.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

“Nice wheels, Meyer.” Parker was walking out of their house and down the driveway toward Justin. Having walked the two miles home from taking the bus, he was still looking drenched from the humidity and hot summer sun even though Justin guessed that he had been home for about an hour. With the bus stop being in the center of town and so far away from where they lived, he hated that Parker still had to take the bus, but with Parker still on a per diem schedule at the hospital with his shift times always fluctuating, today Justin couldn’t swing driving him.

“Yeah? Glad you think so.”

Since it was August, it was still light outside even though it was evening and Parker could clearly see Justin standing next to a black, certified pre-owned BMW X5 SUV. The car was nearly ten years old and pushing one hundred thousand miles, but it only had one previous owner and Brandt, knowing that Justin was buying this car, had his crew thoroughly inspect it and detail it. Twice.

And as if that wasn’t good enough, when Justin bought the car, Brandt honored their newly formed bonus arrangement and even advanced Justin his bonus money up front. He then also honored Justin’s employee discount and on top of that, he took ten thousand dollars off the Blue Book value without even mentioning it. Justin basically felt like he was stealing.

“So what? Old man Donnelly decided to let you have a test drive?” Parker asked him.

It was true that Justin worked for North Shore Motors and that yes, it was owned by Brandt’s dad, Ed Donnelly, but Justin had only seen Mr. Donnelly around the car lot a dozen or so times since he started working there over a year ago. Now that Brandt was managing most things around the office, Mr. Donnelly had even more of an excuse to take jet-setting vacations with Mrs. Donnelly, leaving Brandt to run the show, which was completely fine with Justin.

The first time Justin had met Mr. Donnelly was in his freshman year of college on move-in day and Mr. Donnelly honestly scared the shit out of him.

Justin was the second kid to arrive on move-in day and all he could hear while standing outside his new dorm room holding an overstuffed duffle bag full of clothes, was the barely muffled yelling of a man inside taking note of the state of the carpet and the lack of closet space and how it only had one window and wasn't there someone he could yell at about this because he didn't want his hard earned money going to some shit-hole dorm where three shit-kicker kids were forced into a triple.

In fact, when Brandt had offered Justin the job at the dealership, even though Justin was desperate to get some more work experience and start making a decent paycheck, he took time to think about it because he really didn't think that he could handle working for Mr. Donnelly. It was only when Brandt reassured Justin that he would be his supervisor and that he would keep his dad off his back that Justin agreed, and Brandt kept to his word. He was never once hassled by Mr. Donnelly, not that he could really be hassled by someone who wasn't there.

“A test drive? Yeah something like that.” Justin had never told Parker his intentions of buying a car. “So let's go for a spin. I figured you could drive.” Justin reached into his pocket, pulled out the car keys, and tossed them over the hood to Parker.

“Dude, I just worked a twelve-hour shift. Why don't you drive?”

“I already drove it here. It's your turn.”

Parker walked around the front of the car, noticing the blue dealer plates encased in a North Shore Motors license plate holder. “And old man Donnelly isn't going to shit a brick if something happens to this car?” Parker, although having never met Mr. Donnelly, had heard horror stories about him from Brandt and Justin. “Why is it here anyways? You never bring cars home.”

“It's like you said, a test drive.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

After carefully backing out of the driveway, Parker was coasting east, wanting to spend this time with Justin and see the ocean after a long day of work. The light of the day was only just beginning to fade, and it was that peaceful time of evening when day almost fully blended into night and the sky was just slightly glowing from the fading illuminating sun. Parker loved this time of day.

As they continued to drive, Justin put on the air conditioning, and Parker smiled at how the cold air felt against his damp skin. Parker then turned on the radio low, loving that it actually got reception because Justin's car, although it had a radio, didn't have an antenna and could only get a few stations in here and there.

While Parker drove, heading east toward the ocean, he listened to Justin note of all the car features and talk about its leather seats and sunroof and CD player. He took Justin's hand in his and kept his other hand on the steering wheel, feeling relaxed, enjoying the smoothness of the road and Justin being beside him.

They were driving around aimlessly until Parker decided that he was hungry and drove over to the seashell shaped restaurant that had the best fried clams and seafood on the North Shore. In general, Parker had been trying to eat a little healthier, but having come straight home from work and wanting to wait for Justin before he ate, he was now starving.

The guys took their order to go and they headed over to the seawall to sit down on its edge, side by side, to look at the ocean and eat their meals: two large clam plates with extra tartar sauce, extra coleslaw, a large order of onion rings and enough ketchup packets to bring them into the next century. Oh yeah, and two large Cokes. *So much for healthy eating.*

It was a perfect time of night to be sitting by the ocean. The tide was coming in, and although they lived on the east coast, and therefore were looking to the east while the sun was setting behind them, they could still see the sky painted in tones of gold and rose swirling amongst the darkening hue

of encroaching purple twilight, and the first stars were now showing themselves in the late evening sky.

“So what do you think?” Justin looked over to Parker feeling completely stuffed. It somehow had only taken him about five minutes to eat his entire meal, and Parker was done soon thereafter.

Not bothering to eat with utensils, and wanting to wipe his hands on something, Parker was digging in a half-deflated, brown paper bag. They had an extra bag just for napkins, that’s how much food they had, and now that Parker was done eating, he really needed to clean up his hands.

“Disgusting. I couldn’t eat any of it.” He had found the napkins and was wiping his hands before passing some over to Justin. That meal was the best thing he had eaten all month. All year. Maybe his whole life.

“Yeah, same here.” Justin joked back. “But I still finished faster than you did.”

“I don’t know if you wanna brag about that.” Parker nudged Justin’s shoulder with his. “That’s not always a good thing.” Parker smiled over to him.

“Well. It’s not always a bad thing.” Justin smiled and nudged him back. “And besides, I was talking about the car. What do you think?”

Parker was finishing the last of his Coke through its straw, making exaggerated slurping sounds when the straw reached the bottom of the empty cup.

“It’s a Beemer. It’s nice.” He sounded distracted as he popped off the lid of his soda cup eyeing its contents, hoping for one last sip.

“Nice?”

“Yeah. I mean, it’s really nice. Better than the bus,” Parker answered, wondering again, why Justin had him drive around a work car in the first place.

“Better than the bus. All right, I’ll take it.” Justin brought his legs that were dangling over the seawall to his side and hoisted himself up to stand. “You have the keys right?”

“Huh?” Parker was still distracted. *Nope. No more sips.* The soda cup was just one more thing to add to the trash bag.

“The keys. To the car. Pass ’em over, I just wanna grab something.”

Parker patted his pockets and handed the keys to Justin.

“Be right back.”

Parker took this time while Justin was at the car to grab up all the trash and find a trash can to throw it away and then he sat back down on the seawall to look at the waves softly crash against the shore while waiting for Justin.

Justin was back shortly after Parker and took a seat beside him on the seawall and handed him back the car keys. Parker went to stuff the keys back in his shorts pocket when Justin spoke up.

“Corny? Too much? I knew it’d be too much.”

Parker was still clutching the keys in his hand, now looking confused. “Is what too much?”

“The key chain.”

Parker didn’t even see what Justin had been talking about, but when he looked down into his hands he could see something silver catch the light.

He had to bring the car keys closer to his eyes in order to make out what Justin was talking about, and now he was looking at a small round silver disc attached to the key ring, but it had been there when Justin handed him the keys in the first place back in their driveway at home, and Parker didn’t think anything of it.

“This little circle? It’s definitely too much,” Parker joked and handed the keys back to Justin. “I thought you said you had to go back to the car to get something. The keychain was already on here.”

“Yeah, but you haven’t seen it yet.” Justin handed the keys back to Parker.

“Uhh, I do see it.” Parker had no idea what Justin was getting at with all this keychain talk. “What, do all Beemers come with these?” Parker was now squinting, turning the keychain over in his hand, when his thumb felt a small bump on the side of the silver disc, and upon closer inspection, he saw that it was a clasp.

Parker opened up the silver circle and inside was a small picture of him and Justin from their sophomore year of college, with Justin's arm draped around Parker's shoulder while wearing their "GO" and "EAGLES!" football shirts. Parker recognized the photo, a larger one was framed in their house, and while contemplating why Justin would have put this on the key ring of a work car, Justin spoke up.

"And *this* is what I got from the car."

Justin unfolded a piece of paper and held it out in front of Parker so he could read it and Parker just stared at it.

"Justin..."

Parker was now reading a car title to a BMW X5 SUV. And on the very top line, the line where it states the new owner's name, there was a name filled in.

And it said Parker Klein.

"You bought the bed. I bought the car. Fair deal." Justin had been saving money toward a new car the entire time that he had been working at the car dealership and the entire time he knew who it would be for. It would be for Parker. He wanted Parker to be able to get to and from work safely, any time of day or night that he was scheduled, and not have to rely on walking on busy streets out in the snow or the sleet or the rain or the hot sun to take a bus.

Parker was speechless. He half expected all of this to be one of Justin's pranks, but looking over at Justin, looking in his eyes, he knew that this was somehow real, that Justin was somehow serious and his mouth opened and popped out the first thing in his mind.

"No way." He was still in shock, gripping the car keys. "No way am I driving this thing around while you're still in your crappy Taurus."

"Crappy! Hey! My grandparents gave me that car! And we've made some good memories in it if I remember correctly." Justin was grinning widely at Parker and he wasn't alone in remembering the good times they'd spent in it.

"Yeah we have had good memories." Parker looked over to Justin. "You know the first time we ever spent any time together was in your car when you

drove me home from school.” Parker smiled at the memory. Who knew that by Justin driving him home from college nearly five years ago that he would be starting the best friendship he would ever know and that it would all be with the love of his life.

But not all of the memories he had of Justin’s car were so G-rated. “And who could forget the stiff necks and chaffed asses from being in your tiny backseat.”

“I’d rather remember what it was that we were doing that gave us all those stiff necks and chaffed asses.” Justin bumped his shoulder into Parker’s. “And plus, with us being squished back there, that’s how I knew that you always wanted an SUV.”

Parker was still thinking back to the past times he’d had with Justin, but feeling the car keys in his hand, he was brought back to the present.

“Justin, there’s no way.”

“It’s done. The title’s in your name. Plates have already been ordered. Car insurance’s been bought. So, sorry, Parker. You’re stuck with it.”

Parker was still feeling a mixture of shock and bewilderment but all of this was overshadowed by an inordinate amount of gratitude and love toward Justin and the fact that he would do something like this. Justin was always telling Parker how he hated that he had to take the bus to work and how he worried about him walking on the busy main streets that didn’t even have sidewalks, especially at night when Justin had to work late and Parker was called in at the last minute for a shift.

But there was no way. Even now hearing all of this from Justin, Parker couldn’t believe that he had bought him a car. A Beemer for Christ sake. There was no way he could pay Justin back for this. No way. But the look of warmth and love on Justin’s face said it all. Justin didn’t give him a car in order to be paid back in some way. He gave it to him because he loved him and wanted him to have it, *needed* him to have it, because as long as Parker was safe, he was too.

And one final thought popped into Parker’s mind.

“Time for some new memories?” Parker leaned his head toward Justin and rested his lips against his.

“Time for some new memories.”

Valentine’s Day – 6 Months later

“Admit it!” Brandt yelled over to Justin. Even though Justin was about thirty yards away from him in the sports complex in Boston where they always played their wintertime football games, Brandt could see Justin easily in his bright red T-shirt that had a big white “IN” written across the front. It was the same T-shirt that Justin had worn one year ago today during their first ever Valentine’s Day football game.

“What?” Justin yelled back right before spiraling the football over to Brandt and then jogged over to him.

“You tried this before! You want to switch around the teams!”

Justin casually clapped his hands out in front of himself and looked up at Brandt with a coy smile. Justin was trying to act dumb. Brandt wasn’t buying it. When Justin’s smile wasn’t going to convince Brandt of anything, he decided that he’d give it his best shot and say something.

“I’m just trying to make things fair! You know you and Todd always lose!”

Just as Justin said this, Todd was walking over to the two of them, having just changed into his football clothes. Justin couldn’t help but wince a little bit. He loved to smack talk with Brandt. But it was just that—smack. He didn’t want Todd to feel bad about his and Parker’s past victories.

The guys still played their game of football almost every week, just as they had been doing for five years since they were sophomores in college and the teams were always the same—Justin and Parker on one side and Brandt and Todd on the other. But when it came to the Valentine’s Day game today, Justin wanted to make sure that he and Parker were on opposite teams.

“Yeah, yeah. Trying to switch up the teams again, huh, Justin?” Todd had indeed overheard the small conversation that just went on between Brandt and Justin and had to add in his two cents too. “Should we be expecting this every week?” Todd said, as if he was annoyed, but his smile said otherwise. “And besides, Brandt. He’s right. The last time we won a game was back in

November. And I can't keep losing all my money to these two." Todd gestured over to Justin and the man behind him, jogging up to their little group.

The guys had started making small bets with each other over who would win each week's football games, and the bets would get pretty steep, consisting of payments of pizza and beer.

"Come on, Todd. You don't lose that much money to us. And besides, we always buy you beer afterward to help you nurse your wounds." Parker had made his way up to his gang of friends after having taken a few extra minutes in the locker room. He and Justin had decided to drive over to the sports complex separately today, and now that Parker had his own car, this was possible.

Even though Justin and Parker had been living together for the past eight months, they didn't want to see each other too much on the morning of Valentine's Day. During the first couple of years of their romantic relationship, they never wanted to make a big deal out of the holiday, but last year things changed for them.

It was a year ago today that Justin and Parker announced their romantic relationship to Brandt and Todd while wearing the "IN LOVE" T-shirts that Justin had designed for them, with "MINE 01" and "MINE 02" written on the backs.

"Ahh," Justin now looked over to Parker, a great big smile on his face. "Look who decided to show up!" He of course was kidding. He knew without a shadow of a doubt that Parker would definitely be coming to the game today.

"Yeah, well, I had to find my shirt. I never know where I keep this thing." Lie. Parker smiled back at Justin, but he knew Justin knew that he was lying. They kept their "IN" and "LOVE" shirts, along with their "GO" and "EAGLES!" shirts from their college days, folded up together in Justin's undershirt drawer, the only red shirts in a sea of white.

Justin inched his way toward Parker and stood about an inch away from him. *God, he looks good.* "Well, good thing you found it, because you look damn se—"

Brandt cut him off. “Guys!” Although Brandt had welcomed Justin and Parker’s relationship and never treated them differently, he still had a hang-up about them showing PDA on the football field.

But fuck it, Justin was still standing directly in front of Parker, and if he wanted to kiss his boyfriend on the football field on Valentine’s Day he would. But Parker beat him to it, grabbing him around the waist, kissing him first, right on the lips.

“Ugh. No crying in baseball, no kissing in football!” Brandt, who at one time never understood why Justin and Parker liked movies so much, had finally taken an interest in films and actually recited some movie quotes from time to time. Albeit they weren’t always accurate.

Then Brandt crossed his arms in front of his chest and let out a big huff of air. “And we know you guys are gonna be all over each other on the field. That’s why Justin wants to switch up the teams today. So you guys can tackle each other and whatever the hell else.” He tried to look annoyed, he really did. But he secretly wanted this change of teams, because if they changed teams, he had a way better chance of winning, and he had a girlfriend this year, someone he actually cared about and it would be nice to try to show off just a bit. Not that he cared about proving that he was a former college football hero or anything. “And can we get on with it, already? You know I’m with Gretchen this year. And she doesn’t want to spend all damn day in this arena watching the four of us play football.” Lie. Gretchen was sitting happily over in the bleachers that lined the field, smiling along and having a great time.

Parker and Justin shot up their eyebrows at Brandt’s statement and were about to call him out on it when Brandt opened his mouth.

“Fine. But you know if she didn’t like you guys so damn much, she wouldn’t be here.”

“I know why she’s here,” Justin retorted. “It’s because Brandt’s in love. Brandt and Gretchen sitting in a tree, S-I-T-T-I-N-G.”

“Good one, Einstein, that’s not even how it goes.”

“It is in your version. You wouldn’t know how to do anything else.”

And with that Justin grabbed the ball.

“Two-Fourteen! Two-Fourteen! Hut, Hut, Hike!”

THE END

Author Bio

Thank you very much for reading. I sincerely hope you enjoyed this story. I really enjoy Justin and Parker and I hope that you do too!

In case you are interested, the prequel to this story, North of Sure (North Shore Series #1), is available through Amazon.com. The prequel takes place when Justin and Parker meet in college.

Please be on the look-out for more stories from me in the future as I plan to release more stories on Amazon.com.

Contact & Media Info

I always enjoy hearing from readers so please connect with me at Goodreads or at my Amazon.com page.

Thank you for your support and as always, happy reading.

Best Wishes,

Lashley Mills

[Goodreads](#) | [Amazon](#)

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DOCTOR'S PUPPY LOVE

By Shayla Mist

Photo Description

A beautiful monochrome photo featuring a handsome man, his head lying on his lover's naked back, savoring the moment with his eyes closed. Maybe he's dreaming of how perfect their life is.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

Our jobs are stressful and heartbreaking, but coming home to him makes everything better. He makes me smile even when I'm angry at the whole world and being with him makes me stronger.

Of course, the first time we worked together he called me an arrogant heartless bastard. Mind you, I had just referred to him as "the spineless wonder from the Land of Too Naive to Survive". It wasn't like I realized he was listening.

It took a long time of working together before we starting to respect each other, and longer still before I realized he was the center of my world. It took a lot of sarcasm (him) and name-calling (me) before we got to that point.

Perhaps you could tell the story of how we got from there to here.

Sincerely,

J.

No BDSM or power games, please, but snarky banter a plus.

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: medical personnel, men with pets, blow job/fellatio, enemies to lovers, anxiety disorder

Word count: 20,597

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DOCTOR'S PUPPY LOVE

By Shayla Mist

CHAPTER ONE

Colt

The sky looked particularly cloudy today, but I was still itching for a smoke. So much so that I didn't care if I'd get soaked. I was willing to risk the chance. There were ten more cigarettes left in my pack. *If I have two before and after work, then maybe one during a break if it's a slow day, God please make it a slow day, one when I get home, one before breakfast tomorrow...* My pack looked like it would last for at least one more day. I'd sworn I'd quit after I was done with it. *Maybe there's a chance I could make it last one more day.* That wouldn't be very tough with my job. I didn't have much time to leisurely smoke cig after cig like normal people did. In the ER one couldn't even take a proper piss if the urge came. *What the hell was I thinking when I applied for the job?* Oh, right, saving lives and all that baloney. And my stupid pride in being an ER doctor. *Man, was I naïve...*

I stepped out of the locker room, the pack of smokes locked in my fist. I made my way through the long corridors that led to the main entrance, mentally cursing the architect who thought it would be a smart idea not to plan a back entrance for personnel. I mean, seriously, everyone has that! I could always take the ambulance entrance, but that would mean I would choke on the smoke right when I needed to relax the most. The farther away I was from those cursed machines, the better.

With a sigh, I checked my watch. It had taken five whole minutes to get to the hospital's front entrance, slaloming through ill people and exhausted nurses. I had five minutes to finish a smoke in record time, then approximately five more to get back to the locker room and change into my fugly puke-green scrubs, then straight to Hell for the next twelve hours. *Don't you just love it?* Almost half an hour lost for a freaking cigarette. *That's why you need to quit, moron.* Umm, *not* a very appealing thought. Maybe I could just quit smoking

before and after work. *That's cheating. I already know that. Stupid conscience. Won't leave me alone, will you?*

It was freezing outside. I tended to forget in between the warmth of my home and the comfort of my car. It seemed like God wanted to remind me again how completely unhealthy and senseless smoking was. *All right, Big Guy, I get it. The day after tomorrow. I'll quit smoking. It's a promise.*

I shuddered and stuck out the collar of my jacket in a useless attempt to protect my ears from the prickling wind. Small drops of rain started drizzling softly as I headed for the farthest corner of the building, away from the frantic crowd near the door. Somehow, I had that niggling sensation that I was missing something. With a frown, I checked in my jeans' pocket. *Meh, as long as I got my smokes, who cares?* I took the pack out and extracted one. Lighting it was a bit of a challenge, but eventually I managed. I was gonna be *so* late for my shift. *Guess Jess can last a couple more minutes. I covered for her two nights ago.* That's what coworkers did for each other. Damn, I was gonna miss Cassidy. That girl had a dirty mouth on her. And I was a sucker for dirty mouths.

Now I remembered. Today the new guy was coming. The one who'd take Cassidy's place. I was sure I was gonna hate him, yeah, just because he was taking Cass's place. People could call me childish, but she was my best friend and the best nurse any doctor could ask for. I was going to hate every single minute the new guy would remind me she wasn't gonna be there anymore.

I Skyped with her the day before yesterday, though. She was like "Mwahaha! Fresh meat's coming, Colt! What's not to love?" her eyes sparkling like those of an eagle targeting its prey. She was like that, good old Cass: always searching for a target to bully. I'd learned from the best.

My cigarette was almost done. Ah, what was it about cigarettes? There was something about them...

"Umm... excuse me."

I turned my head in the direction of the voice and found myself face to face with a scrawny emo kid, all dressed in black, black eyeliner and a—yes, you guessed it—*black* scarf around his neck, covering his mouth. The only color

that I could see on him was the gray of his eyes from underneath long black mascara-covered eyelashes. *Hmmm... pretty cute.* If he didn't look so... punk-rockish. *Snob.* That was my consciousness again. Not that I cared.

“What's up, kid?” I asked, taking one last intake of nicotine-filled smoke, before stubbing my cig to the ground.

The kid looked at my foot stepping on the cigarette butt, then back up at my face.

“This is a hospital,” he muttered, cold gray eyes appraising me with surprising arrogance.

“And?” I retorted with a raised eyebrow.

“And you're smoking.”

“And?”

The kid rolled his eyes. “Never mind.” He squeezed in between me and the wall, probably to avoid getting soaked by the rain, though, to be honest, I thought emo kids loved it.

I shrugged and followed him. Not because I cared, but because I needed to get inside as well. The kid looked at the walls, confused, not an abnormal thing in this godforsaken hospital.

“There's a map behind you to your left,” I told him, pointing to my own left at the map hanging on the wall, next to the entrance door.

Despite the noise, he heard me, turned around, gave me a hostile once-over and walked back to look at the map.

I grinned and started walking down my usual corridors. In just five minutes time, the emo boy would be a forgotten memory.

I found my way to the locker room and put on my scrubs, then went to the nurses' station, where I was promptly scolded by Jessica, whose shift I was taking over, for being late again.

“You and your damned cigarettes. One of these days I'll shove them down your throat,” she threatened with a pointed finger my way before disappearing through the doors.

I rolled my eyes and walked over to Evita, the petite Hispanic nurse in charge of the triage. “All right then, any urgent cases?”

“Doctor Newman already took care of them. You go wait in your sanctuary and I’ll call you as soon as someone comes.”

“Thanks, Ev. Oh, we have fresh meat today.” *Indeed, Cass, what’s there not to love?*

I sprinted to the Trauma section before Evita had the chance to answer—she would have scolded me anyway—and almost bumped into Joe, better known as Doctor Palmer. Joe and I were pretty good friends. That’s mostly because we both had charming personalities. I meant that.

“Late again.”

“Sorry, doc, what can I do to help?”

“You could quit smoking.”

I let out a suffering groan. “You too, Brutus?”

“Take these samples to the lab, if you’re so bored,” he said with a smirk, handing me two syringes with blood. “And send someone to settle our patient into a bed.” He pointed at the consultation bed behind him where a homeless man sat with eyes bloodshot and a lost look.

“That one’s a regular. It’s his fifth visit this month. That I know of.”

Joe shrugged. “Guess some don’t realize when they have to *quit*,” he grinned with a pointed look my way. *Did I mention charming personality? I take it back.*

“All right, doc. Less chat, more work.”

It didn’t take long to take the blood samples for testing and settle our addict into a comfortable bed. He had a moment of awareness when he tried to strangle me and then landed a mean punch straight at my eye leaving me with a nice shiner. However, I managed to calm him down and he fell into a trance again.

On my way to the staff room, though, I was welcomed by a familiar figure coming my way. Emo kid. What the hell was he doing there?

“You again?” Huh. He didn’t seem very pleased to see me. I wondered why. I hadn’t had the chance to be properly rude to him before. “Nice shiner.”

“What are you looking for, kid? Did you get lost?” I asked rolling my eyes, refusing to let my fingers trace the painful purple spot underneath my eye, despite that they were itching to move.

“You’re a physician?” he exclaimed, giving me another once-over. For the first time I actually saw an expression on his face. Pure shock.

“Trust me, it’s been five years, and I still can’t believe it either. I must have been high when I made my career choice.”

His lips now uncovered by that unappealing black scarf twitched at the corners. Pretty sexy lips if I did say so myself. *What the hell are you thinking? Robbing the cradle?*

“Well? What can I do to help?”

“Actually, I’m looking for the locker room.”

“Locker room.”

The kid nodded and raised an eyebrow at me, as if I were an idiot who didn’t understand English. Well, at the moment, I didn’t.

“Locker room,” I repeated.

“To change,” he retorted, his tone patronizing. He lifted a bag I hadn’t noticed before and rolled the plastic down, exposing the insides: a pair of scrubs.

“No way. Fresh Meat?”

“I can’t believe it’s really you,” I said while I opened the door to our locker room. “Are you even legal yet? Wait, you’d have to be, right?”

“Right.”

“Not very chatty, huh?”

Fresh Meat/Emo Kid—I really needed a nickname for this one—took off his jacket. Underneath: a black pullover. Huh. I hadn’t expected that.

“Do you mind?” he asked with a pointed look. Aww, he was shy too.

“No, really, how old are you again?”

“None of your business.”

“Fine, then, kid. I’ll leave you to get changed.”

I exited and walked back to the nurses’ station. My eye was in bad need of an icepack. Hmm, so Emo Kid wasn’t really a kid, after all. He was definitely legal. *And definitely cute.* Oh, come on, I didn’t just think that.

Oh, I loved this! For the first time in my life, I actually understood why my sadistic best friend Cass felt so much satisfaction in bullying people.

I was evil. I knew it, but I couldn’t help myself. It felt so good to have someone to give orders to and revel in their misery. I could afford slacking off a lot more now because Cass, even though she was a nurse, never had any qualms in ordering me around. These days, I could enjoy watching the new kid cleaning up vomit, helping old geezers sit on toilets and wiping their asses. Helping doctors perform rectal exams and either get accused by said patients of raping them or get a piece of paper with their phone number on it and a dirty proposition. Ah, I needed this. It was better than a marathon of comedy shows. *I can’t believe I’m saying this, but, Cass, thank you so much for leaving.*

Ugh, this thought brought me down to earth. I couldn’t believe I had thought I was grateful for Cass leaving! No. That was blasphemy. Although, I should have been, since she had left to be with the man she loved, which I still insisted was crazy, I couldn’t help feeling lonely and bitter. No one would replace Cass. So, of course, it was pure blasphemy being happy she was gone.

Still, it did feel good to have this new kid around, I couldn’t deny that.

Speaking of the devil. “Kid,” I yelled and grabbed his arm right as he was passing by me, trying his best to go unnoticed. Newbie was written all over his forehead. It was that period we’d all been through at some point in our lives when we felt uncomfortable as hell in our own skin. Everything was new. Everything was overwhelming. And the fact that he didn’t have his usual black attire to help him feel secure probably didn’t help either. He looked like a rabbit about to bolt. And it roused the most sadistic instincts inside me. I wanted to make him squirm. To scare him. To possess all his thoughts.

“For the last time. I have a name.” And I loved how he got defensive and put on a brave mask even though his eyes and his shaky hands spoke volumes about how he really felt.

“Yes, pup. And I happen not to care.”

He huffed. That incredible porcelain white skin of his turned a furious shade of red, but he said nothing, choosing instead to stare me down with a fiery gaze.

“Do me a favor and help the nice eighty-year-old grandpa in the examination room put on his gown and collect a sample of urine. And then I need an EKG on the patient in the observation unit.”

“Anything else, sir?” he retorted crossing his arms. Funny, it was only a week since he had started working here and I already couldn’t understand how I’d been living without him. Going to work had actually started to feel fun.

“Nothing else, for now. I’ll think about it, though.”

“Whatever,” he mumbled under his breath as he moved away at a snail pace.

“Well, hurry then. We can’t have the poor guy have a heart attack because you didn’t administer the test in time,” I called after him. I couldn’t help myself from grinning.

Face red, hands fisted, Emo Kid, whose name was actually Nico—yes, in fact, I knew his name—stomped his foot, threw me a murderous look and turned his back on me, marching away without saying a word. Adorable.

“You are such an evil shit.”

“Oh, come on, you have no sense of humor,” I protested, as Joe appeared out of nowhere behind me.

“What do you have against the poor kid? He’s new, he’s from out of town, he doesn’t know anyone here. Cut him some slack.”

I rolled my eyes at Joe and let out an exasperated sigh. “That kid is the spineless wonder from the Land of Too Naïve to Survive. I’m just teaching him how the real world works.”

“I’d rather be a spineless naïve *kid* than an arrogant heartless bastard like you.”

I turned back around to find the kid looking at me with a venomous glare. I didn't have time to open my mouth in time before he spun around and ran away.

“Ouch,” Joe supplied helpfully, patting me on the back.

I shrugged him off and walked toward the staff room. It was okay, that kid needed someone to give him a tougher guidance. Yet, why did I suddenly *feel* like a heartless bastard?

CHAPTER TWO

Nico

Saint Marie's Hospital wasn't as grand as its name promised. On the contrary, it was a small town hospital with very few funds and even fewer doctors. Still, I had wanted to come here. It might have been a means to escape from my agoraphobia; it might have been my cowardice at fault for not having bigger dreams and aspirations. Or it might have simply been my compulsive need for a fresh start. Whatever the reason, it had brought me here, to the town of Highwyn with the estimated population of twenty-five thousand souls to which I'd added mine.

I had hoped to live unnoticed by all and still bring joy to people by working in the ER. Pretty small town, few difficult emergency cases and less chances for me to get on anyone's nerves.

Didn't expect anyone to get on my nerves though. Yet, Colt Anderson had managed. I hated him. I hated him so much it had almost crossed my mind to make a voodoo doll with his face and burn it into ashes. How could someone like him work as a doctor? Doctors were supposed to be kind, to care for people, to sacrifice their very own souls for the sake of others. That was the whole point in choosing this kind of job.

Still, someone like Colt effin' Anderson was a *physician*.

Hands trembling, I took refuge in the break room and took a couple of deep breaths. My anxiety attacks were starting again all because of that bastard.

I tried to calm down and took out my cell. It had been a whole week since I started this job and I barely had time to call home twice. My parents didn't give a shit whether I lived or died, but Nonna must have been worried sick. A whole freaking week and it already felt like a century.

I speed-dialed her number and waited for her soothing voice to calm down the furious drumming of my heart.

"Nico, I was starting to get worried." Her voice. Gentle. The voice that told me stories when I was little, the voice that told me everything was going to be

okay even when I felt the earth slipping from underneath my feet. I knew it would instantly make me feel better. And it did. My breathing almost instantly returned to normal.

“*Ciao, Nonna,*” I answered in a calm voice.

“*Ciao, amore.* How are you? Are you on your break now?”

“Mhm, sorta. I finished helping some people out and managed to take a breather,” I replied after a long exhale. God, it felt good hearing her voice. “How’s everything going?”

“Oh, you know how it is. The usual. I think Tommy is sick. He didn’t want to eat at all this morning. I made an appointment with the vet for this evening.”

That was so like her. She always cared for that stinky old cat more than she cared about herself.

“What about you? Are you taking your pills, Nonna?”

“Yes, *caro mio.* Stop worrying so much.” She chuckled. “Tell me about you. Do you like the work? Are you helping people like you wanted to? How are you getting along with your workmates?”

I suppressed a groan at the reminder. “Everything is going great, Nonna. Seriously, they’re all very nice.” *With one exception.*

“Oh, I’m so happy you’re finally doing what you wanted.”

The door behind me creaked open followed by a loud screech and my tormentor’s head peeked in.

“Pup.”

Oh gaawwd! “Nonna, *devo andare.* I need to get going, I’ll call you tomorrow morning.”

“That’s my boy. Go save some lives. Don’t worry about me, dear.”

“All right, Nonna. Take care.”

“You too.”

“Stop slacking off. There’s another rectal exam waiting for you and all the other nurses are busy,” Colt Anderson said, with an outrageously bright smile on his face as if he was giving me a compliment. *Nonna, you never taught me how to deal with guys like him.*

He turned around and left, closing the break room's door behind.
If only his ass didn't look so good in those horrific green scrubs.
Why were the villains always handsome guys?

The whole week passed in a blur. It was hard getting used to the ER, but the feeling of accomplishment this job gave was like no other I'd experienced. Having people come to you in critical states and then seeing them walk out on their own, or at least getting them through the critical state and stabilizing their condition. Knowing I'd saved a life or two or three, even whole families. This feeling was amazing. It made me feel like my life was worth living even if I was nothing special on my own.

It wasn't until the second week that I experienced the ugly side of the ER. We got a call from the EMT that a kid was injured in a traffic accident. As the attending doctor, it was up to Anderson to take charge. Me and four other nurses got everything ready before the ambulance's arrival. My stomach was in knots. I was fresh out of school and had never seen any kid hurt badly before. I was just praying for it not to be as bad as it sounded, though judging by the whole chaos spreading throughout the ER at the news, it seemed like something they rarely dealt with themselves.

We walked out and waited impatiently for the ambulance to arrive, but it took almost twenty minutes for them to get there. Anderson was the first to run toward the ambulance as the EMT opened the doors wide. The injured boy was far bloodier than I'd expected. There was blood *everywhere*.

I heard a nurse vomit behind the ambulance door and I barely resisted the urge to follow her example. The only thing keeping me sane was the thought that we had to help this boy as soon as possible. If there were any chances for him to survive this.

I approached on trembling legs to offer my assistance, followed swiftly by the other nurses. I felt a moment of anger when Anderson pushed me away to look at the injured boy, but then I remembered the guy *was* a physician, after all. I could do nothing but bear with it. Soon, we started wheeling him out of the ambulance and on the way into the hospital, and my mind was focusing on the patient alone. Barely hanging on to life.

“He’s been hit by a car while trying to catch a ride on a side street. Swept five feet in the air,” the EMT called as he helped us carry him.

Fractured pelvis, a broken neck, and who knew what other internal injuries he must have suffered. I couldn’t bear to look. As the EMT recited the whole list of their findings and their suppositions regarding what internal damage must have been inflicted on the poor boy that was lying unconscious on our gurney, I couldn’t help wondering whether he would survive this. It sounded like an impossible feat. But we couldn’t let that happen.

I gave Anderson a long, hopeful gaze, to which he responded with an unreadable expression. Anderson would save him, wouldn’t he? We would all save him. That was the reason we were there.

Yeah. I nodded, a renewed confidence suddenly arising inside me. We would save him.

We brought the patient into the trauma section with the help of the paramedics.

“Hey, buddy, can you hear me?” Anderson called.

“He’s been unconscious the whole ride,” the EMT whispered. “It’s no use calling him.” We managed to bring the gurney inside a room. Anderson shone the flashlight in the boy’s eyes and called him again. Meanwhile, Emma and I connected him to the heart monitor.

“He has no pulse.” Anderson said, his voice showing no inflection, and started CPR. After about thirty compressions, he breathed in his mouth and reassumed the compressions.

“Still no pulse. Defibrillator,” he ordered.

I quickly handed him the equipment and stepped away.

“Doctor, is he going to be okay?!”

I turned around to find a woman trying desperately to get inside despite the paramedics’ efforts to stop her. Obviously the kid’s mother. I shuddered.

“Ma’am, please step away. The doctor can’t treat him like this. He needs room to work.”

“Please! Tell me he won’t die!”

“Take her out of here,” Anderson called, not sparing us a glance while he helped Emma cut the boy’s T-shirt off.

Eventually they got her out, but we could clearly hear her screams behind the closed doors.

“Three hundred joules!” The machine beeped in a high pitch. Anderson placed the paddles on the boy’s chest.

“Step aside.” I took a few steps behind at Anderson’s call and focused to keep my breathing under control because of the damn panic attack that was threatening to overtake me any second. “Clear,” he called. The body convulsed under the massive shock.

I watched the heart monitor in numbed silence, silently begging for a miracle. I wondered how old he was. Twelve? Fourteen? My own breathing was becoming erratic. I hoped to God I wouldn’t faint.

“Resume CPR.”

Emma did it this time. I couldn’t find the willpower to move. She pushed the chest repeatedly. I kept thinking it was too late. I felt it in my heart.

“Nico! Wake up!”

I flinched at the call of my name and raised my gaze from the boy’s pale chest to find Anderson looking at me with a stern expression. Funny, I didn’t think he even knew my name. How amazing the human brain was. When in critical situations, the funniest things could cross your mind.

“I said to give him an amp of epi. Move!”

I trotted to the IV on autopilot and injected the fluid.

“Charge to three hundred and sixty joules,” Anderson called to Emma. Even his voice betrayed the same hopelessness and exhaustion I felt.

He placed the paddles again. “Clear!”

No signs of life.

“Resume CPR. Come on, kid. Come on!” Anderson cried as he pushed the lifeless chest. I couldn’t watch anymore. My vision was blurring, but I didn’t faint. My body stood frozen in place. It felt like some invisible masochistic force inside me kept me there and made me watch.

“We’ve lost him,” Anderson whispered.

“You can’t just let him die!” I found my voice to speak. “We’re the ER.”

“We’re humans, kid. Nothing more,” he said, his look oozing authority. An authority I couldn’t accept.

“But we can’t. We need to save him. He’s just a boy,” I screamed.

I knew my voice was shaking. My face was wet with tears. Em patted me on the shoulder and sighed.

“He arrived here too late. It took the ambulance thirty minutes to get to the hospital. His heart was already too weak.”

“Time of death: 10:45 AM,” Anderson said, as he looked down at his watch.

“I’ll bag him. Em,” I cried, running to the bed where the body lay. “Bicarb and atropine.”

The nurse looked, dumfounded, at Anderson and me. “For God’s sake, just do what I said!”

Anderson shook his head. “That’s enough, Nico. There’s nothing we can do for him.”

“Em!” She turned her eyes away. I looked at all the other nurses who either turned their heads away to avoid my eyes, or looked at me with a sort of resigned pity.

Eventually, I looked at Anderson. “Please.”

Anderson’s face was unsympathetic. He reached for the boy and took out the air mask.

“I’ll go talk to his mom,” he said and walked out.

We were left looking at the body, until Emma moved over to cover it with a sheet.

“Let’s go change,” she whispered, talking me by the elbow and nudging me away.

I let her walk me out, my head still turned to the bed where a life had just ended minutes ago.

My panic attacks felt stupid then.

I made my way toward the locker room, walking like a zombie. The whole waiting room was packed with patients, but I couldn't hear any of the usual noises.

As I opened the door, I saw Anderson being slapped and hit by the boy's mom who was crying loudly. Standing beside her was a man with a stony face and a lost look. The boy's father, most likely. The woman kept hitting Anderson's chest and he stood there and took all the hits without a word. He looked just as lost as we all felt.

I slowly walked inside the locker room, took off my clothes and changed into a clean pair of scrubs. The others had the boy's blood all over them. It occurred to me I didn't even know his name. A few seconds later Anderson appeared in the doorway, closed the door behind him and started taking off his own clothes, making no effort to acknowledge my presence.

"What was his name?" I whispered, looking back at the bloodied scrubs.

"Adam. He was thirteen. He was planning to run away." Anderson huffed, shaking his head.

We fell silent as he put on his clothes and I laced my own sneakers slowly.

"Let's get out of here." His voice, coming out of nowhere, made me jump, startled.

"What?"

"I said. Let's. Get. Out of here." he repeated, punctuating the words, as if talking with a little child.

"But... We're on duty. We can't leave."

"We both need some air. We'll take a short break. They can page us if something's up."

I shrugged and let him lead me out of the room. He put his arm around my shoulders and we walked down the corridors. I would have been puzzled by his sudden change of demeanor had it not been for what happened earlier. We walked until we reached the corner of the building where I met him first.

I couldn't find words to express how horrible I felt.

"It's so unfair," I eventually whispered.

"Yup. It is."

I looked at Anderson as he fished out a cigarette from a brand new pack and lit it with a cheap plastic lighter.

"How can you be so calm all the time?"

Anderson gave me a sad smile. "There's nothing you can do. No one can do anything."

"How can you think like that? You're a doctor for fuck's sake. It's your job to do *something!*"

He took a drag of smoke and let it out with an audible sigh. "You're being naïve, kid."

"Well I'd rather be a kid than a heartless bastard like you!"

He smiled sadly, not even flinching at my words. "You mentioned that before, pup." It only served to infuriate me more. I clenched my fist, ready to jump at him and give him another shiner over the old one. Never mind he was twice my size.

"I was like that too when I came here. Thinking I'd save lives and become some kind of hero." His words stopped me in my track. "But we're nothing, kid. Nothing compared to the universe. We can't change anything."

"Yes, we can! This is where you're wrong. We save people's lives every day!"

He threw the cigarette butt down and stomped on it. He gave me a sad smile. "Fate saves them, not us. But go ahead and believe what you want, if that makes you feel better." And with that, he walked away.

"Bastard!" I called, even though he was far away enough not to hear.

Maybe I was naïve. So what? Better than someone like him.

It was my first time entering a gay bar since I'd moved here and started working as an ER nurse. As far as I knew, it was the only gay bar in town. It looked much posher than I had expected. Had I been in a better mood I'd have

taken more time to appreciate the view of the hot hunks dancing in the ring, but all I cared about at the moment was getting thoroughly and properly wasted.

The rest of the day had been uneventful, all the more reason for my mind to keep displaying the image of the dead kid in an endless loop.

I had an unexplainable urge to scrub my skin raw, the sense of dirtiness overpowering all of my other senses. But I especially wanted to forget. I approached the bar with determined steps and ordered a shot of Jack Daniels, not gracing the barman with even a glance.

“There you go, cutie,” he whispered when he placed my glass down on the counter, his face dangerously close to mine. I looked at the shelf behind him. “Tough day at work?”

“You have no idea.”

“Oh, poor baby. Want me to make it better?”

I finally looked at him with a hard stare. He was hot. I didn’t care.

“Well, maybe some other time?” he pouted, getting the message.

I didn’t think so, but I said nothing, opting instead to swallow my drink in one go.

“Give me another. And make it a double.”

“Honey, are you sure you can take it? You look pretty frail. Are you even legal?” He said the last bit in whisper, his eyes widening doubtfully.

This again. You would think I was used to it by now. Bouncers and barmen always double-checked my ID and people, in general, were doubtful of my abilities because I was stuck looking like an underdeveloped teenager. No wonder guys like Colt bullied me. If I had a body like his, I would have looked down at people like myself too.

“Just give me the fucking drink,” I said, staring the barman down.

“Ouch, what a dirty mouth you have. What’s your name, cutie?”

“Look, I just saw a teenager die today, so I don’t feel like talking shit. Just give me my fucking whiskey and leave me alone.”

Oh, man. The way he looked at me. I shouldn't have said anything. What was wrong with me, sharing things all of a sudden? If there was anyone I shared things with that was my grandma, and I couldn't possibly tell her such a sad story. Yet, here I was spilling my guts out to the barman.

"I'm so sorry, baby. Wanna talk about it?"

"You can't take no for an answer, can you?" The words were taken right out of my mouth, by none other than Colt Anderson. I would have recognized that voice anywhere.

"What are you doing here?"

"Hi, kid," he said with a grin. How he could grin after a day like that was beyond me, even for someone like Anderson. And especially after the way our conversation had ended earlier in the day. Yet, he seemed not to care, as if this was an ordinary day and I was just an ordinary coworker he happened to meet in a bar. I didn't have the energy to even be angry at him anymore.

"What are you doing here?" I repeated slowly.

"Followed your taxi. I knew you'd probably do something stupid after a day like this."

"What may I get you, gorgeous?" The barman appeared out of nowhere and brought me my glass of Jack, his eyes thankfully fixed on Anderson's face and completely ignoring me.

"Just plain water, I'm driving," he said turning his attention to the slutty barman. Did I see wrong or did Anderson just wink at him?

"So now you're stalking me too?" I asked, once the other guy was out of earshot.

Anderson smiled, but the amusement didn't seem to reach his eyes. "After I saw my first death, the first thing I did was enter whichever bar was closest. I drank for three days in a row."

"Bullshit," I said, though, as if proving him right, I downed the second glass, wincing as the cool liquid burned my throat.

"In my defense, I had a patient die on my first day," he retorted, shrugging.

"No way. That sucks."

“Yea. It does.”

We fell silent. When he put it like that, I should have felt lucky.

“How do you get over this? This... this feeling?” I asked pointing at my chest as if all the answers were there.

Anderson huffed with a sideways smile. “You don’t, pup. It’s always there. Once you see someone die, you’re never the same again.”

I looked down at my glass, throat suddenly feeling dry, but to my disappointment, I found it completely empty. When had that happened? Luckily, the barman came soon with Anderson’s water and I asked for a refill.

“Hey, slow it down, you’re gonna get sick,” Anderson pointed out, putting his heavy hand on my forearm.

“So you know this cutie, Colt?” The barman gave me a leering glance, licking his lower lip. I rolled my eyes at his attempt of being sexy. Oh, so they knew each other. I wondered in what circumstances they had met.

“You look like a whore doing that,” I said.

The barman’s eyes widened, and Anderson’s lips twitched.

“You do,” Anderson agreed. “And leave the kid alone, Alex. At least for today. I promise I’ll hook you two up some other time. You do know this is a gay bar, right, pup?” he asked, turning back to me. I nodded.

“Promise?” The barman, Alex, recovered quickly and snickered.

“Hey, stop talking about me as if I’m not here.”

“Shut up and drink,” Anderson said.

“I would, if someone cared to refill it,” I retorted with a pointed look Alex’s way.

“Oh, sorry sweetie, you’re so pretty I forget about everything when you’re around.”

“Ugh. Disgusting.” Anderson’s words made me grin. Somehow, the barman’s flirting wasn’t as annoying as long as there was someone next to me making fun of the guy and lighting up the atmosphere. Hmmm... I guess Anderson was just like that by nature. Maybe he didn’t mean to bully me. It was just his personality.

Alex came back with my drink. Our fingers touched when he put the glass down. When I looked up I met his fiery gaze. He licked his lip again. This guy was hilarious.

“That’s enough, Alex.”

“Heh,” Alex said, stressing the vowel. He turned back to Anderson and gave him an unreadable look. “I’ve never seen you so protective of anyone before.”

“Alex.”

“Fine, I’m leaving you two lovebirds alone. Holler when you need something.”

I couldn’t contain my curiosity any longer. “I didn’t know you were gay.”

“What makes you think I am?”

I made a hand gesture pointing around the club, taking in the view of male bodies humping against each other, and then raised my eyebrow at Alex, who was serving some new guy a beer. “It looks pretty obvious to me.”

“Can’t a straight guy have gay friends?” Anderson retorted with a shrug.

“Oh.”

I felt like an idiot now. I lowered my gaze and noticed with satisfaction that there was still plenty of whiskey in my glass. I took a mouthful again. Oops, my head was getting dizzy. That was what I deserved for not drinking a drop of alcohol for the past six years. Jesus, had it really been that long since I last gone out for a drink?

“Maybe you should have some water,” Anderson offered, but I slapped his hand away when he tried to hand me his bottle.

“I’m okay,” I said a little bit too loud. I hated when people treated me like a child. I was a man, dammit, even if I didn’t quite look like one. But I still had my pride.

“You won’t be able to get home on two legs, if you’re drunk after only three glasses.”

I shrugged. “I’ll get a taxi.”

“Suit yourself,” he said, uncapping his water and taking a drink. I couldn’t help but notice the way his Adam’s apple moved. I’ve always found that sensual. He had a sexy throat.

“I’m hitting the john. Stay where you are,” he said, patting me on the back.

With effort, I unglued my gaze from his throat and managed to meet his eyes. “Since when do I have to listen to you?” I slurred. Shit, when had I gotten this drunk?

“Ever since you met me, pup. Now stay put.”

“Geez, what a jackass.”

I finished my drink and signaled Alex for a beer. He gave me one with a worried glance. I flipped him the bird and brought the bottle to my lips. I didn’t care anymore. I had even lost track of the reason why I had started drinking to begin with. Oh, right, because I’d seen a kid die today. How could anyone forget that? It came rushing through my head like a torrent—every single image of that kid’s torn-apart body. Pale dead skin. His mother’s tears. His father’s lost gaze. Watching helplessly as he gave his last breath and the heart monitor flat-lined before our eyes. I couldn’t do anything to stop it. Anderson had been right all along. Yet, he’d been the one who fought the hardest to save that kid. All the while, I had just stood there and watched.

My head was beginning to feel light. I put my beer down, still a quarter full. Then I suddenly felt someone’s hand on my thigh. I turned in that direction, expecting to find a cheeky Colt Anderson, waiting for the best moment to bully me again. Instead, I found the face of a stranger staring at me with lecherous eyes. He opened his mouth and spoke, but because of the loud music I couldn’t hear any of it.

“What?”

The guy grinned and moved closer, his hand encircling my waist and a fat finger caressing the skin above my jean’s hem. Ew. He was coming on to me. *That* was all I needed at the moment.

“You look bored. Maybe I could entertain you,” he whispered in my ear, the hairs of his beard scratching my cheek.

“I don’t think so,” I mumbled.

“Hey, leave the boy alone. Can’t you see he’s not interested?”

Alex. Slutty Alex had come to my rescue? Wow. I mouthed a thanks his way and tried to wiggle away from the pervert’s touch. But my strength was leaving me. Vision started getting blurry and when I closed my eyes, I could see billions of colored dots. Man, had this guy slipped something in my beer bottle? I reopened my eyes and tried to get off the bar stool, while Alex and Mr. Pervert were having a heated verbal duel. The pounding in my head and eardrums was getting insufferable. I needed fresh air ASAP. But as soon as I got off the high stool, my back bumped into a solid chest.

“I told you to take it slow, pup.” Great, just what I needed, him patronizing me yet again. Let’s say I could take it at work, because he was my superior and he clearly had far more experience than me. However, to listen to his shit, in my free time, no way.

“Leave me alone, bastard,” I said, silently cursing myself for not having the strength to actually yell. It had sounded more like a half-hearted attempt at pushing him away, which only made Anderson chuckle. God, even his chuckle was sexy. I envied him so damn much.

All of a sudden, the ground was swept from underneath me. I yelped, unable to stop myself.

“Ready to go home?”

“Hell no.” And this time I yelled.

“Alex, I’m, taking him. Put his drinks on my tab.”

My face was mashed against his chest and because of the position; I couldn’t turn my head around.

“Sure thing, hon. Make sure to bring him again”

“I will.” He chuckled. Again.

“Would you stop talking about me as if I’m not around?”

“Nope.” He grinned, looking down at me. “Just how much did you drink while I was away?”

“Only half a beer. I’m just not used to drinking, okay?” My face felt hot at the admission. No wonder he called me *kid* and *pup* all the time. I was as far from a man as Anderson was from a kid.

“You can put me down now,” I said when we reached the exit. The fresh cold air felt great against my flushed cheeks. Anderson let me down surprisingly gently. I shook my head, inhaled a lungful of air and slapped my face a few times.

In the meantime, Anderson had left me alone and I was assuming, a bit irritated that he hadn't said goodbye, that he had already left, until a Miata parked right in front of me. Anderson's face appeared as soon as the window lowered. He opened the passenger door. I raised an eyebrow questioningly.

“Well, hop in already.”

I shrugged my shoulders and reluctantly got in. I didn't own a car anyway. A free ride was always welcomed. “Thanks,” I mumbled, to which Anderson chuckled again.

“Why do you keep laughing at me?” I snapped.

“Cause you're funny?” he replied, grinning.

“Was that a question?”

“I don't know, kitten, do you consider yourself funny?”

“No! And stop with the name-calling? First, you call me a kid, then pup. Now kitten?”

“Does it bother you?”

“Yes!”

“Good.”

“Good.”

“The more it bothers you, the funnier you get,” he said wiggling his eyebrows.

“What the hell? You're sick.”

Anderson shrugged, not looking at all offended. “Maybe. Or maybe you're just really funny.”

“Dude, you're sick.”

Anderson gave a hearty laugh. “Fine, I'm sick. I'm a sick bastard,” he said.

“Really, really sick bastard,” I approved.

“And you’re in a car with a sick bastard. You might even be sicker than me.”

“Oh my God,” I lowered the mirror and looked at myself. “I’m sick.”

“Yes you are. We’re both sick.”

“It’s entirely your fault. You’re contagious.”

By this time, we were both laughing loudly. What the hell was happening with my sanity? This whole conversation felt absurd, yet it had put me in a good mood, a mood I hadn’t felt in years.

“God, look at us.”

“Yeah, I know.” His tone had suddenly gotten serious. I looked at him to find a stony expression on his handsome face.

“What are you thinking of?”

“I don’t know... Life, I suppose.”

“A boy died today, under our very own eyes,” I remembered. As if I could forget.

“We couldn’t help him.”

“I was...” Scared. Hopeless.

“I know.” He sighed and reached over the gearshift and patted my knee awkwardly.

“Your eyes are getting droopy. Try to sleep. I’ll wake you up.”

I nodded and closed my eyes. Silence fell. Nothing besides the sound of the engine, that quickly lulled me to sleep.

“Come on, kid. We’re here.”

I felt Anderson’s hands shaking me awake.

“Here where?” I managed to mumble after finally opening my eyes. There was barely a visible light anywhere, making it hard to discern my surroundings, but one thing was certain: judging by the poor light and the smell of pine trees in the air, we weren’t anywhere near my neighborhood.

“My place. Now get up.”

I groaned and made my limbs obey. They felt like wood after having sat for so long. I shook both my legs and gave a few jumps.

“You really do look like a puppy.” Anderson chuckled beside me as he locked the car.

“Fuck you,” was the only smart retort that came to mind. But I wasn’t expecting his reply.

“Not tonight, kid.”

“Huh? I thought you said you were straight.”

“Did I?”

“Yes”

“Well, you heard wrong then.” Anderson gave me a pat on the ass and nudged me forward. “Let’s go then, unless you plan on spending the rest of the night in the yard.”

“Maybe *you* should try that.”

He laughed and jingled his keys. As my vision got used to the dark I could clearly see the contour of a gate and a small house in the background, mostly hidden behind a grove of pine trees.

“Wait. Is that the ocean?” I asked, dumbfounded, as the sound of waves hitting the shore became increasingly apparent.

“Yup,” Anderson replied, nodding, and unlocked the iron gate, swinging it open.

“Seriously? You live by the ocean?” I didn’t sound excited just then. Not at all. *Great, now he will say I’m like a puppy again.*

“Seriously, pup.” *Hah, I knew it. Darn it.*

Blushing, more, I tried to contain my excitement, looking anywhere but at his face.

An odd sound caught my attention. Heavy breathing. Then a small whine.

“You’re kidding me.”

“What?” Anderson, crouched down as he was, peered up at me then back down at his four-legged friend that was lying belly up, licking his master’s hand.

“You got a dog.”

“Correction. I *got* a puppy.”

Uh, he was making fun of me.

“Hey, I’m still a little drunk. I’m allowed to make mistakes,” I protested.

“A little...” Anderson shook his head, but his eyes were twinkling with mischief. God, I hated when people made fun of me.

I looked down as I felt a weight settle on my foot, and found the puppy looking at me with its tongue out. It looked as if it was laughing. So according to him, I was like that?

“Yes.”

“Yes what?” Had I asked that out loud?

“I know what you’re thinking and the answer is yes. You’re totally like this little girl. You’re basically her spitting image, except for the part where she’s a girl and she’s white, whereas you’re mostly black. By the way, do you have anything in your wardrobe that *isn’t* black?”

“Wooaah. Slow down. Firstly, I’m nothing like this... furry, dirty, poo-smelling thing. And secondly, what’s wrong with black? I happen to think it’s very nice and practical.” And it complements my eyes.

“Sure, it is, but you look like a depressed teenager who’s about to commit suicide.”

“No I don’t.”

“Whatever you say.” Anderson dismissed me with that and unlocked his front door, letting the frustratingly excited puppy inside.

“I don’t,” I cried, unable to let the subject go. People didn’t take me seriously as it was. The last thing I wanted was for them to start pitying me as well.

“Uh-hum,” he sing-songed.

“But I don’t. Tell me I don’t.”

“Jesus.” He fed the dog a fistful of dry food that he’d taken out from a bag near the door and looked square at my face afterwards. “You’re not letting this go, are you?”

I shook my head.

“Yes, you do look like a depressed suicidal kid when you’re wearing black.”

Damn.

“Hey, there’s no use in sulking. Want me to go shopping with you tomorrow? You’re free right?”

Tomorrow would be a Saturday. I had my Saturdays free. The question was, did I want to spend my free time with him?

“I hate shopping.”

“Great. That makes two of us. We’re gonna have so much fun!”

“Your notion of fun is pretty twisted.”

“Did you just notice?”

I rolled my eyes and took off my sneakers and jacket. “Where do I sleep?”

CHAPTER THREE

Colt

“Umm, get off, Cindy.”

The wet tongue licking my cheek only got more persistent. Cindy’s smelly breath was fanning over my face and her drool was spewing out on my lips. I cringed and grabbed her by the nape of her neck, tearing her away from my face. “All right, all right. Daddy’s taking you out. Jeez, you’re impossible. You’re sleeping outside from now on.”

The puppy yelped excitedly when I got off the bed. I put on my boxers and my robe and walked through the hallway, unlocked the door and let the puppy out. I let her do her business while I hurried inside and thoroughly cleaned my face with soap and cold water.

“Ah! Cindy, Cindy.”

I heard her cute little paws on the parquet and quickly closed the front door, with her promptly tailing me. When I walked back, I saw the door to the guest room half-opened and couldn’t help myself from taking a peek.

“Shush,” I said to the puppy who was huffing beside me, wiggling her tail.

The view from the door was aimed right at the bed, where the sleeping form of my cute nurse lay. He was still dressed in the street clothes he’d been wearing last night. The bed was still made beneath him. So thin, he looked almost fragile.

My legs moved on their own accord and gradually led me to the foot of the bed. He was sound asleep, his breathing slow. I walked closer to him and found myself moving away a strand of hair from his forehead to reveal his beautiful face. Yes, he was truly beautiful. A cute, innocent kind of beauty that made me feel old, despite the fact that only three and a half years separated us, according to what I read in his CV.

A generous amount of black kohl outlined his eyes. I grinned at this small proof of rebellion. It only made him look younger, but it truly suited him. His cheeks were a cute shade of pink and his lips puffy from sleep, a shiny ghost

of drool slipping away from the corner of his mouth. Chuckling, I wiped it with my thumb. Nico stirred in his sleep, mumbling something unintelligible.

“Arf!”

The loud barking from Cindy made me flinch and Nico open his eyes.

“Cindy?!” The puppy looked at me, pointy teeth showing in what looked like a perfect imitation of a laugh. “Seriously?”

“Umm. What are you doing here?” I heard a mumble from the direction of the bed.

Nico rose half of his body up and looked around bemused. “Where am I?” he asked, the question followed by a noisy yawn. I resisted the urge to ruffle his hair. It already looked like a bird’s nest.

“Morning, sunshine. It’s only five AM, so you can still sleep. I just walked in to see how you’re feeling.”

“Tired.”

“Poor pup.”

This time, I did give in to the urge and ruffled his hair. He smacked my hand away with the cute kind of groan Cindy made when she was angry, then fell back on the mattress, gazing long at the ceiling.

“I stink,” he finally said.

A laugh escaped from between my pursed lips, no matter how hard I tried to stifle it. “Go take a shower, Stinky. I’ll bring you some of my clothes and put them on the bed, okay?”

The kid’s nod was followed by a muffled yawn.

“Good. I’m making breakfast in the meantime. The kitchen is down the hall right next to the front entrance,” I said, pointing to my right, and left closing the door behind me.

After rummaging through my closet for some shorts and a T-shirt for my guest, I went back to his room and entered without bothering to knock. The sight that welcomed me made me gasp for air. The kid was butt-naked with his back to me and, damn, what a view! He suddenly didn’t look so much like a

kid anymore. His body was frail, but way more defined than I had ever expected. He actually had an ass. A nice, round—

“Have you not heard of knocking, Neanderthal?” he asked, turning around and gracing me with a pointed look.

I coughed and tried my mightiest not to stare anywhere near his southern parts. “Sorry. Brought you some clothes.”

“Thanks.” He took the clothes I handed him and looked at me expectantly.

“All right, pup. I’m getting breakfast done, then,” I said after clearing my throat, pointing to the door with my thumb. Damn, I was really losing my charm.

“Well what are you waiting for? It’s not gonna magically make itself,” my pup said, crossing his arms. *Do not look down! Don’t. Look.*

I looked.

Freakin’ hell. My mouth watered.

“How long do you plan on staring, pervert?” he finally snapped. As if it was my fault he stood shamelessly naked in front of me like that.

“Hey, is that a way to treat your benefactor?” I protested, hands raised defensively in front of my body.

Nico only rolled his eyes and tilted his head sideways, frowning at me in an all too superior way. He looked good enough to eat, but it was still too early. We had been through a rough patch ever since we’d started working together. I had pretty much bullied him for fun and then yesterday he’d experienced his first death in the ER. It wouldn’t do to complicate things. And giving in to temptation would do just that. I couldn’t risk having an affair with a coworker unless it was something I truly wanted. And if I wanted it, I had to at least take it slow.

With a sigh, I took a few steps back until my feet touched the doorway. “Fine, fine, this pervert is going now. Have a nice shower.”

“I will,” I heard him say as I closed the door. As I walked down the hall, I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror. My erection was painfully obvious through the thin robe. Damn, I really was losing my charm.

And here I had thought he was too effeminate for me.

Yet I was sporting a huge hard-on at a mere glimpse of his naked body.

Fuck, I was doomed.

“Ah! Shit. Shit. Shit.”

“Hmm... smells wonderful.”

I huffed and turned around from the fuming pan in the sink to find Nico looking at me with a sarcastic smile.

“Ah... Sorry, kid. I can't cook to save my life.”

Cindy seemed to agree with me, since she barked right away.

“You, outside,” I said pointing to the door. Cindy whined cutely and immediately sat on the floor looking at me with big innocent eyes.

“What breed is she?”

“Golden retriever. You seriously can't tell?”

“My grandma is allergic to dogs, so I never paid much attention to them,” he said, shrugging, and stepped next to me giving the burnt pan a dubious look.

“You lived with your grandma?”

“You could say so. My parents never cared much about me so I was always at Nonna's house.”

“Oh. I'm sorry to hear that.”

Nico suddenly clapped his hands and looked me squarely in the eyes. “Let me show you what a real pancake looks like, old man.”

“Old man?”

He shrugged and began rummaging through my cabinets, extracting a clean pan and setting it on the stove. “Since you insist on calling me a kid, it's only fair.”

“Weren't you hung over?”

I shot Anderson a sarcastic look. “I took a pill. Now give me some eggs and flour.”

“I have pancake batter.”

He rolled his eyes. “Give me a break. Now do what I say. Old. Man.”

“I’m still pretty much your boss, you know?”

“Excuse me. Old boss.”

“You’re impossible.”

“Take this scoundrel out. I can’t concentrate with her climbing on my legs.”

“Now, listen here, kid. No one kicks my puppy out.”

“Fine. Then hold her.”

Nico took out a bowl and put the flour inside, then took a separate bowl and put the eggs and some milk and started mixing them with swift movements.

“Do you have spring water?”

“Yeah.”

He extended his arms expectantly. With a huff I walked with Cindy tightly pressed to my chest, opened the fridge door, took the bottle out and handed it to him. “Anything else I can get you, master?”

“You could make yourself useful and start the coffee machine.”

I shook my head and grinned. This kid was shameless outside of work. I kinda liked his spirit.

And his ass. At which I’d looked only a dozen times since he’d entered the room.

“Okay, so you can make incredible mouth-melting, drool-inducing pancakes. What other dangerous talents are you hiding?”

Nico licked his lips after sipping from his mug of coffee and grinned, his cheeks turning a soft shade of pink. What was even more fascinating were the round dimples that appeared in the center of each cheek. Two perfectly symmetric little holes. My fingers itched to reach out and stretch those cute little cheeks. *Calm yourself down, idiot.*

Something was seriously wrong with me. He was cute, damn cute. And I didn't usually like cute. What was disturbing was the fact that he looked so freaking young. I felt like a pedophile. However, I was not a pedophile. Nico was perfectly legal. And gay. Yet I couldn't help feeling guilty.

“Something wrong?”

“Nah.” I shook my head and sipped the last drops of coffee from my cup. My fingers were shaking from the nicotine craving, but I had sworn this time I'd really quit. It had been three days. And I felt like crawling on the floor. “We should go shopping.”

“It's okay. You don't have to go with me. I'm sure you'd rather do something else.”

I smiled questioningly at him and he lowered his eyes to his cup.

“I have no plans today, kid.”

He nodded slowly, his eyes darting up to meet mine.

“What's wrong? You don't wanna be seen around with an old man?”

He gave me a lopsided smile and shrugged. “Fine. Let's go shopping.”

CHAPTER FOUR

Nico

I was nervous. Palms sweating, knees jerking uncontrollably. I couldn't keep myself still. The thought alone of having to go through a crowded mall was enough to leave me out of breath.

Even though the mall was in the opposite part of town from Anderson's house, the road to our destination couldn't have been shorter.

I reluctantly climbed out of his car. My stomach churned in reproach.

"You okay, kid?"

"Never been better," I replied haughtily. Damn, I was *so* not okay. I almost wanted to scream and beg him to take me home, but was too chicken to do it. Or rather too proud. I patted my pocket in search of my eyeliner. In moments like these, a good dose of black was always comforting. Then I realized, to my dismay, that I had put my clothes in Anderson's washing machine and borrowed his. Where the hell had I left my eyeliner? I looked down at myself and moaned. A pair of blue shorts that ended past my knees and a huge khaki T-shirt that almost reached the same length. I looked even more like a kid than usual.

I heard Anderson chuckle and caught him taking in the same sight. "Hey, at least they aren't white," he said and burst into laughter.

I shot him what was supposed to be a deadly glare, but with my eyelinerless eyes I bet my gaze wasn't that impressive.

I hated this. I shouldn't have even let him bring me here. I would end up wearing black anyway. I couldn't feel like myself wearing something else.

"Maybe we should go back," I finally found the courage to say.

"Nonsense. We're not leaving here until you have a new wardrobe."

"I don't have any money," I lied.

He seemed lost in thought for a moment, chewing on his lower lip.

“I’ll buy them for you then. You can give me the money back on Monday.”

I opened my mouth to protest, but he grabbed my hand and swiftly dragged me in the direction of the mall. “Don’t worry. We’ll start with darker colors so you can accommodate better to the change.”

I stopped, forcing him to halt and look back at me. “Why are you doing this?”

Anderson grinned. “I thought we’d already established this. It’s because we both have nothing to do today. I’d rather be bored with you than alone.”

He didn’t let go of my hand, but pulled it again, prompting me to move, groaning and moaning all the way.

“Oh right,” he said, stopping and turning to look at me again. “And because your look is that of a suicidal kid.”

This time I whined. I felt pathetic.

“There, there,” Anderson cooed, as if reading my mind, and ruffled my head. “We’ll fix it soon, baby.”

I flinched at the endearment, but Anderson didn’t even seem to register having said it. He grabbed my hand again and started walking, his attention focused on the mall entrance.

I was dizzy with apprehension. Why had he called me that? Was it his usual style or was he mocking me? Or did he... Nah. Anderson would never look at someone whose *look was that of a suicidal kid*. I bet he had much higher standards. Even that was questionable. I still didn’t know whether he was indeed gay or straight. The guy was a complete mystery.

The mall didn’t seem very busy. I sighed with relief. I tried to tug my hand away from Anderson’s hold, but he held it tighter instead. I decided to relax myself and let him guide me.

“So, what do you wanna try first? Jeans or shirts?”

I shrugged. “Whatever you want”

“Shirts it is then. You’ll get tired faster if we start with jeans.”

“Yeah.”

“Let’s go there,” he pointed at the upper level and dragged me to the escalator. I climbed on apprehensively and looked down. My dizziness was reemerging.

Calm down.

When we reached the upstairs, I let out a long exhale of relief, my legs shaking horribly. Anderson didn’t notice. He practically shoved me inside a store and started browsing through shelves, picking up items and dismissing them one by one, according to who knows what principle. I just crossed my arms and watched him patiently, trying to regain my composure.

“This!” he eventually exclaimed. To my surprise, he took out a plain *brown* button-down shirt with fine gold stripes, only visible in strong light.

I raised a questioning eyebrow. “I reckon I won’t look like a suicidal kid in *brown*.”

Anderson tilted his head backwards and let out a throaty laugh. “Brown suits gray eyes best. Kid, are you really gay? How can you not know this?”

I rolled my eyes. “Prejudicial snob.” It was mumbled but he still heard it, which prompted another laugh. What was so funny about it was beyond me.

“Come on. Go try it on while I look for more.”

“Whatever.”

I dragged my still-shaky feet to the dressing room and took Anderson’s T-shirt off, replacing it with the shirt he had chosen.

“Wow.” My eyes really did pop, to my utmost astonishment. This guy was good.

“Amazing. All you need is a fresh haircut and you’re officially the cutest boy in town.”

“Haven’t you heard of privacy?” I retorted with a pointed look Anderson’s way.

“We see each other half-dressed all the time at work.” He pointed out the obvious, sticking his tongue out at me from behind the half-opened curtain, then stepped completely inside and handed me an armful of clothes. “Try these on next.”

“I thought you said you hated shopping.”

“I do. When I’m not in charge,” he said with a wink and started unbuttoning the brown shirt. I tried to pretend I didn’t register the closeness.

His breath touching my face, his hands feeling my chest. It was *completely* non-sexual and it still should have made me claustrophobic, but instead it made me want him closer in a *completely* sexual way.

I cleared my throat to release the tension that took over my body and melted in Anderson’s arms, letting him take over the dressing and undressing part. He seemed unusually quiet. Had he perhaps noticed my state of mind?

“This one looks good too,” he eventually whispered with a hoarse voice. I looked down at myself, having forgotten whatever he made me wear. My eyes eventually focused on a mint green T-shirt.

“It looks like our scrubs,” I mumbled, scrunching my nose in distaste.

Anderson released a healthy laugh. “Right. Better not.”

“What about this one?”

He pointed at a burgundy T-shirt with black vector flowers on it. It looked a bit girly, but the hint of black made me immediately feel better. I shrugged. “Yeah, that looks more... normal.”

“Good. Let’s put it on then.” He undressed me again and helped me put it on. “This looks more like you, huh?” he said from behind me, meeting my gaze in the mirror.

I nodded. His breath caressing my ear both relaxed me and put me on pins and needles at the same time. It had been a while since I’d last felt attracted to someone. This was such a bad idea. “I think these are enough.”

“All right, kiddo. You may be right. We chose quite a few.”

“Could you stop?!”

Anderson flinched at my demand and so did I, taken by surprise by my own unusually loud voice. “Calling me a kid, I mean,” I said in a milder tone.

“Right, sorry,” Anderson replied ruffling my hair. His smile was kind, his touch gentle. Whatever happened with the tyrant from the ER? That one felt like a forgotten memory.

“Split personality much?”

Anderson didn't hear me. He was already at the counter, paying for the half-dozen shirts he'd chosen for me.

“Ah, hungry yet?”

We had bought two pairs of jeans after I'd tried on about six.

Sweat was pouring down my back and I was feeling more exhausted than if I'd spent a whole night in the ER. But the moment Anderson mentioned food, my stomach rumbled with surprising vigor.

“I have a new-found respect for shopping addicts,” I said with a moan as I sat down in a chair. Anderson laughed and asked what I wanted to eat, then vanished, leaving me alone at our table.

I looked around and found myself mouth agape. I hadn't even noticed how crowded the mall had gotten. Children, old people, teenagers, entire families. There was too-loud music and too much chatter. Yet my anxiety didn't reappear.

My gaze found Anderson's form, so easy to differentiate from all of the rest, and my body involuntarily relaxed. *He* was doing this to me. He was making me feel normal. Maybe Nonna was right when she'd told me a friend can cure any disease. Course, she meant real friends, while Anderson and I were just coworkers.

I sighed.

“There you go kid. Oh, sorry! I mean. Ah, I don't even know what to call you.”

“Nico would be good.”

“Nico. Sounds good. But don't hate me if I happen to call you 'pup' from time to time. I can't help myself.”

I rolled my eyes at his antics, but my mouth twitched and I couldn't help it. He was the one sounding like a kid at the moment. “I suppose I should find an equally embarrassing name for you.”

Anderson pouted, looking innocently at me. “Now that’s not fair. If I call you by your name, you should do that as well.”

“I already do that, *Anderson*.”

“Not that. My first name. It’s really easy. C-O-L-T. You can do it. Repeat after me.”

“You’re ridiculous,” I interrupted, almost choking on the soda because I couldn’t contain my laugh.

He handed me a napkin and I wiped my mouth. Our eyes met above the soda cup and I could swear he moved just an inch closer. I was just about to do the same when his cellphone abruptly pulled us apart.

Anderson—Colt—cleared his throat and picked up, mouthing a *sorry* my way.

“Hey, there, how’s my mistress doing today?”

Mistress. *Ew*. I hoped he hadn’t meant it that way.

Anderson—dammit, Colt—let out a sexy chuckle. I swore it was sexy. He was totally flirting. I felt my face heat.

“Yeah? You really miss me?” he continued. God what was that? This guy had no common sense. And why had he flirted with me, then? *No, it was just your stupid overactive imagination, Nico. Like usual. Why would Colt Anderson have any interest in someone like you?*

“Well, I’m a bit busy right now, actually. Yeah. No. I’m shopping. With someone. No, *seriously*. No, it’s *not* Joe.” He had this stupid grin all over his face. “What are you talking about? I do get along with other people except Joe, you know. In fact—”

I gestured to him that I was going to buy another soda and got up. Hell. I felt like such an idiot. I had no idea when it had happened, but somehow, sometime, unknowingly, I’d started to expect something to develop between us. And here he was flirting with a woman on the phone. *You are such an idiot, Nico. Idiot, idiot, idiot!*

“Excuse me,” someone called, but it seemed so far away I didn’t bother to turn around.

“Hey, watch where you’re going!”

My breathing was getting heavy again. Brown dots danced before my eyes.

I spotted the exit door and ran toward it, not minding the curses that were, now obviously, directed my way.

As fresh air hit my face I finally managed to breathe at a more normal pace.

“Fuck. I hate this.” I screamed. And immediately regretted it after people stopped and looked my way as if I were some kind of psycho.

“Nico. Hey, you all right, pup?”

Not the person I wanted to see now.

I nodded and whispered, “Yeah. I’m fine.”

“No, you’re not. What’s going on?”

“Nothing. Just... I suffer from anxiety sometimes and... it gets to me when I’m in crowded places.” I avoided his gaze, concentrating on a bright spot in the distance, where the sun shone over a guy’s car, creating an undulating beam.

“Oh, I see. Shit. You should have told me.”

I finally looked at him at the sound of plastic squishing. He had the bags full of clothes raised at his chest level. “Well, we’re done here. So, how about we go home?”

I nodded. Colt smiled at me and walked to his car, and I followed closely behind, trying to still my beating heart.

“So, you have a mistress,” I said, once we were settled in the car. I inwardly cursed my big mouth and the sarcastic tone I couldn’t help from weaving through my words, but the cat was already out of the bag. I couldn’t take what I had said back. I waited, heart drumming in my chest.

Colt chuckled and looked at me from the corner of his eye with a lopsided smile. I pretended to study an invisible spot on the glass.

“I let her think she’s that. But truth is, I’m the one who owns her.”

“Oh.” A sudden image of Colt with his chest naked, jeans unzipped and a whip in his hand flashed before my eyes.

“You’re blushing. What are you imagining, pervert? It was a joke.”

“Nothing,” I hurriedly protested. Too quickly, I’m afraid. Colt guessed it too and burst into laughing.

“Sorry to disappoint, pup. I love that woman to pieces, but in a completely platonic way.” He shuddered exaggeratedly. “Girl cooties.”

“Okay. Stop. I don’t get it. What are you playing at? Are you straight or are you gay?”

The car jolted to a stop. Colt shut the engine down and looked at me. “Why? Do you care?”

“Uh. I...”

He had a leering smile on his face as he got closer to me. I couldn’t help letting my gaze settle on his lips. A mesmerizing sight.

“I-I mean...” Ah, why was I mumbling so much? “I mean—you first—first imply you’re straight, then—then that you’re gay and then you flirt with a woman on the phone and—and—”

“Flirt?!”

The distance between us grew as Colt moved back from my face. I sighed with relief. His cheeks bloated and small shudders overtook his body while he was trying to refrain himself from laughing. But, in the end, he failed miserably after only a couple of seconds.

“Oh, pup. You’re the funniest little thing I’ve seen.”

“You know, I’m a man too!” I sulked. His derogatory terms were getting too much to handle. As was his constantly laughing at me.

With a frustrated sigh, I opened the car door and tried to get out, but Colt’s hand abruptly caught mine in a tight hold. And his face got closer again, his voice suddenly lower than normal. “Oh, I know, Nico. Believe me. I know.”

I tilted my head away, the atmosphere unexpectedly odd. Why was he playing these games with me? I wanted to cry, and, at the same time, I wanted to give in to him completely.

All of a sudden, his fingers cupped my chin, forcing my head his way. I flinched, but turned to look at him and the intensity of his gaze took me by surprise.

“C-Colt.”

Colt shut me up with a finger on my lips. Then his lips descended on mine, effectively bringing an end to any protest on my part. With a moan, my treacherous body melted into his touch. My mouth opened, lips giving in to his hot, wet, demanding kiss.

“Damn, pup.” Colt stopped, supporting his forehead against mine. His heavy breathing entwined with my own. “You know I’m pretty much your boss at work.”

I nodded, words barely registering.

“And we shouldn’t do this.”

I nodded again.

“Damn, but I want you so much.”

And he kissed me again. And again. His teeth bruising my lower lip. His tongue brushing against my own with a nerve-twisting, butterflies-inducing intensity.

Colt pulled away. “I should take you home.”

I nodded again.

I suddenly felt cold, as if my body physically missed his heat. But I kept on nodding dumbly as Colt started the car and drove away.

All the while wondering what the hell just happened.

CHAPTER FIVE

Colt

Fuck, when had this happened?

When Cass told me that love creeps up on you when you least expected I'd called her crazy. I never understood what she meant and even when she moved to a different city to be with the man she loved, I just kept thinking it wouldn't last. Love was just a chemical reaction. An injection of pheromones. Once its effectiveness was lost, the body would go back to normal and so would the brain.

Now it was happening to me, that same chemical reaction. Of course, it wasn't truly love, if we were to admit love actually existed. But it was something. An attraction, far more powerful than I had ever expected. And much harder to control than I had thought.

I found myself going to work with a little hitch in my steps that hadn't been there before. I found myself humming a song—something I hadn't done in ages. I found myself stroking his eyeliner inside my pocket, as if it was precious treasure. All the while dreaming of the moment we'd meet again and I'd see his deep gray eyes and those pouty lips, so open to my kisses.

“What’s wrong with you today? Are you poisoned?”

“Huh?” I turned toward the voice and found Joe looking at me with a dubious stare.

“What? Can’t a man enjoy the... weather?”

Joe raised a curious eyebrow. “Spill.”

I shrugged. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Oh, come on, buddy.”

I kept on humming with Joe running behind me trying to pry the secrets out of me. Ah, life was beautiful.

We got out of the parking lot and reached the main hospital entrance, and I immediately saw Nico’s familiar figure. He was wearing a black jacket and his usual black scarf. He had his back to me, walking slowly to the door.

“Hey, pup.”

He stopped in his tracks and turned around, looking at me wide-eyed.

“What happened to the clothes I bought for you?”

“Clothes?” Joe butted in.

“Yes, Joe, clothes. Private conversation.” This guy caught onto things too quickly. I had to be careful around him.

“Hey.” I said turning toward Nico.

“What clothes?” Joe asked again.

“I said *private conversation*, Joe.” I stared Joe down and eventually he gave in, rolling his eyes.

Muttering “fine, fine” under his breath, he turned and left, leaving us alone.

“Hi,” Nico whispered with a slight smile when I looked back at him. Damn, I could swear my heart gave a little skip.

My attention was diverted from his gorgeous gray-blue eyes when his hand reached for the zipper of his jacket. Oh, hell, was he planning on getting undressed right there for me? In plain sight of everyone?

I swallowed hard and moved closer to him, my breathing accelerating.

“I put this on today,” he said, revealing the red T-shirt we bought together. Right, stupid thought. Who in their right mind would undress in broad daylight and in public?

I exhaled loudly and nodded. “Next week, we’re getting your hair cut.” I smiled, ruffling his hair.

Nico smiled shyly in return and nodded.

“You two, lovebirds, do you plan on delaying work long?”

Both Nico and I flinched and turned at Emma’s voice. She had her arms crossed, looking at us from behind a pair of round glasses.

“We better get changed then,” I said, nudging Nico with my elbow. He nodded, waved weakly at Emma, and walked toward the locker room with me close on his heels. I couldn’t help catching Emma’s deep gaze following us. I

definitely needed to be more careful. Medical personnel were good at spotting what people wanted to hide.

I didn't see Nico for the rest of the day. He was too busy with administering injections and checking wounds, getting people dressed in gowns and cleaning up bed sheets to have any time for me, and I was too busy consulting with all sorts of patients, from sane and nice ones to really insane and not nice ones. But as soon as I got a break, I went to the staff room, hoping to catch a glimpse of him. Deep inside I was ashamed of this teenager-like behavior, but I couldn't help myself. It all made a lot more sense now. Why I had felt the need to bully him so much harder than other people. I had wanted him to think only of me. But at this point, I needed to show him I could have a nice side, too, if I wanted to have a chance with him.

We were coworkers. We weren't supposed to date, not even for a no-strings-attached, friends with benefits, kind of relationship. However, Nico was more interesting than any other guy. Some days he seemed sarcastic and confident, other times, he looked vulnerable and innocent. He was water mixed with fire. An equation I wanted to solve. Scratch that, I *had* to solve.

I knew the feeling was mutual. I could see it in his eyes and in the heated kiss we'd shared two days before. But would it be enough to convince him to go out with me?

"You've bullied the new kid for the past two weeks. But suddenly I see you getting along this morning; very well, in fact. You both had *that* kind of smile. Like you shared a dirty secret." Joe stepped up behind me and put a coin in the coffee machine, selecting his beverage.

"Are you done for the day?"

"Are you avoiding the topic?"

My innocent face didn't trick him. Joe grinned at me as he grabbed his coffee out of the beeping machine. He then dragged a chair over and sat on it, stretching his legs over the table in front of him. "Well, you didn't want to spill it this morning. But you better do it now. Do you. In fact. Share. A dirty secret?"

“You’re seeing way too much into this, Joe. The kid saw his first patient death last Friday. We just bonded I guess.”

“Just bonded? Didn’t look like that to me. Unless by ‘bonded’ you meant physically sexed each other up.”

I had to laugh at this one. He had no idea how I wanted what he said to be true. But, sadly, it wasn’t and I had no problem hiding it. In fact, it was better to clear things up. The last thing I wanted was for Joe to know the nature of my affection for Nico. I could be in a lot of trouble, given his reputation of blackmailer. “Trust me, Joe, that kid and I didn’t have sex.”

“Oh, but you want to.”

I tilted my head back and laughed hard. It didn’t sound fake, surprisingly so. Cass had taught me a few tricks about being evil and that included a kick-ass evil laugh.

“Seriously, Joe, the last thing I want is to get laid with that guy. I mean, he looks like a freakin’ teenager. Totally not my type. Plus, as I said, he’s really too naïve and spineless for this job. I prefer my men a bit more daring and a little more... manly, if you know what I mean,” I finished on a sarcastic tone.

I wasn’t prepared for the intake of breath I heard behind me. Unease gripped me as I turned around and found myself face to face with a teary, wide-eyed Nico.

“Oops. I think you got your point across,” Joe said, chuckling as Nico spun around and jogged away.

“You knew he was listening.” I pointed an accusing finger at Joe’s chest.

“Why are you so angry, Colt? Didn’t you say you don’t feel absolutely anything for that spineless, naïve boy?”

I sighed and stared him down. Joe met my eyes straight ahead with an evil sarcastic smile. I shook my head and turned in the direction of the exit. Damn, I really needed to choose my so-called friends more wisely in the future.

“Nico.”

“Go away.”

Man, I really needed a cigarette now. I settled with breaking a leaf from the tree above which was starting to lose its blooms and twirling it through my fingers.

I kicked the dirt a few times and eventually sat down beside him on the grass. “The weather’s looking good. Spring seems to be finally here.”

“Would you go away, please?” he said with a huff, throwing me a venomous look.

With a sigh, I lay down, putting my hands beneath my head. Good thing we had no patients now. This was my only chance to talk to him and I wasn’t going to give it up. I cleared my throat and tried to look in his eyes. But his face was completely averted from me.

“You know I didn’t mean any of those things.”

“What things? That I don’t look like a real man? That I’m naïve and spineless?” he spat out, giving me an angry stare.

“Yeah. Those things. Well, you do look like a teenager, but that’s what makes you so cute.”

Nico huffed, moving his hands helplessly by his side, as if he couldn’t find a place to put them. Okay, bad strategy from my part.

“What game are you playing again, Anderson? Aren’t you sick of bullying me? You wanted me to think you liked me just to go around and hurt me. Does that make you feel... more manly, *if you know what I mean?*”

Ouch. You deserved that, my consciousness reminded me.

“No. Nico, it’s not like that.” I tried to touch his face, but he pulled away from me. “I just don’t want people to think we’re together, that’s all.”

“Right. By bad-mouthing me, ’cause being with me would be such a disgrace.”

“No, silly. ’Cause being with you might leave us both jobless.”

We fell silent. I kept watching Nico, but he kept on looking forward, not acknowledging my presence.

“I like you, Nico. I like the way you look. And I love that you’re not like average men.”

“Average men...” he huffed.

“Okay, maybe I didn’t put that right.”

“Nah, it’s okay. I don’t look like an average man. I don’t look like a man at all, in fact. I. Look like a suicidal Emo kid.” He smiled sadly and got up.

“Shit, pup, I really—”

“Don’t bother explaining. I get it. That kiss didn’t mean anything to you. And, you know what? It didn’t mean anything to me either.”

His voice was trembling, proof that he was lying through his teeth, but when I reached out to grab him, he pushed me away and turned his back to me.

“We’d better get inside. Oh, right—” He took out something from his pocket and threw it at my chest. It fell on the ground, and when I looked down I realized it was a wad of dollar bills. “That’s what I owed you.”

To hell with it. This time I really needed a smoke.

Okay, so my talk with Nico hadn’t gone so well. Who was I kidding? It was a disaster.

But I didn’t plan on leaving things like they were. However, I had no idea how to fix them. I was so used to having no friends and hiding in my own shell that I didn’t know how to act nice anymore and how to express myself properly. I needed advice. Badly.

With a pained moan, I dialed Cass’s number. She was the only person who came to mind.

“Mwahahah. My slave has called to report?”

Despite my bad mood, I couldn’t help grin at her uncommon way to say hi. Well, uncommon for anyone but her.

“Please receive my humble respects, my beautiful mistress.”

“You know my man is gonna spank your ass red if he hears you.”

“We better keep it to ourselves then,” I replied jokingly, though I was forcing myself to smile.

“Hey, what’s with that tone?”

“What tone?”

“Your voice didn’t sound right. Did something happen?” It seemed I didn’t have to worry about cutting it short. It only took Cass seconds to guess my foul mood.

“Well... Actually it did.”

“Oh. Did someone die again?”

“No. It’s not that.”

“What? It’s personal then? Is this about the cute guy?”

“How do you know?” I asked, shocked.

Cassidy laughed whole-heartedly. “It’s not hard to guess, Colt. It’s not like you have a very eventful life. And the last time we talked you sounded positively smitten.”

“I did not!” I protested weakly.

“You so did. It took very little effort to convince you to spill the beans about your date at the mall, and you talked for almost an hour about the things you bought, and how cute his sarcasm is, and how adorable his blush is, and how good of a kisser—”

“Okay, fine. Maybe I sounded a bit smitten.”

“Oh my god, you’re so incredibly cute.”

“Mistress, stop your evil mouth from sputtering nonsense or your slave might rebel.”

“No you won’t. I’ll lash you with my magic whip if you only dare to think it. Now, back to your tragic love story. What happened? Did you find out he’s secretly a vampire hunter?”

“Ummm... No. Are you watching that teen show again?”

“No. Yes. Ah, that girl pisses me off. It would have been so much better if the boys got together.”

“They’re brothers.”

“Yes! Which would make it even hotter. Hah. I won. You admitted you watch it.”

“I don’t. *Everyone* knows they’re brothers. All I need to do is eavesdrop on Emma and Evita cooing about the latest episodes.”

“Hmm... I still think you watch it.”

“Okay. Can we please focus! I need to get back to my patients soon.”

“Fine. What do you want me to tell you?”

“Tell me how to make him like me.”

Silence fell from the other line. “Cass, are you still there?”

Eventually I heard a loud sigh. “Let me recover from the shock. One—this is the first time you’ve ever asked for love advice from me. You must really have it bad.” I rolled my eyes. “Two—this is such a deep question, Colt. Sorry but you have to figure it out yourself.”

“What?” I quickly recovered and cleared my throat after the question came out as a pathetic shriek.

“Seriously. It’s way too hard to explain it over the phone. Just remember that crap about being yourself, it’s not really crap. The hard part, in your case, is being yourself and still making someone like you.”

“Hey, you’re my best friend.”

“Um-hum. Which is why I’m being honest. Don’t get me wrong. You’re a nice guy, but before you open up, everyone thinks you’re a jerk.”

I sighed, feeling completely dejected. If even Cass thought that of me, this was a lost battle indeed. The woman had known me for five years. That’s more than I could say for my own parents, who died when I was three.

“Come on. Don’t lose hope. You said you went shopping and had fun together. So maybe he saw the nice side of you that isn’t usually evident at work. Just loosen up. And try not to badmouth your patients and do some rectal exams from time to time.”

I scrunched my nose. “Do I really have to?”

“If you really want this Nico to see the kind, selfless side of you, then yes, definitely.”

“Damn.”

“Hang in there, my faithful slave. Remember who your mistress is. Don’t embarrass me.”

With a lifeless chuckle, I pressed the end button on my cell and looked hopelessly toward the hospital entrance.

Who would have guessed it was so hard to make someone like you?

We were still not talking, more exactly, *he* was the one not talking, for a whole week after that disastrous apology of mine. I was at the end of my patience; Cass’s so-called advice had left me more deflated than ever and more confused than enlightened.

In spite of all of this, the irony was that I knew Nico wanted me. At least I hoped he did, judging by the hundreds of times I caught him looking at me when he thought the coast was clear. Moreover, he seemed to have all his breaks at the same time I did. Now I remembered from my high school years that was exactly how all the girls acted when they saw the baseball team captain walking down the hall, or when they wanted to chat with a boy they liked. Those were signs of a crush. Or that was how my brain insisted on interpreting them.

The torturous moments were when we had to work together and our eyes would meet at the most inappropriate times—yes, even during rectal exams, which I now performed every time a case came up that required them. He would blush and lower his head quickly or pretend to be coughing or suddenly tell someone something, just to avoid looking at me.

I didn’t know how to interpret these moments anymore.

I wanted to talk to him. I needed it, for my sanity. I couldn’t care less if that would cause me problems at work.

I had made my decision the morning I arrived at work, seven days after Nico had stopped talking to me. No matter what, I had to apologize to him again and convince him that kiss had meant something to both of us.

I found him in the perfect place, the changing room. As soon as he set eyes on me, Nico made as if to walk out, his gazed determinedly fixed on a spot on the floor.

“Nico, we need to talk.” I grabbed his forearm when he tried to move past me.

“I ha-have work to-to do,” he whispered, stammering.

“It’ll only take a second.”

Nico huffed. “I doubt it.”

“Just, please, listen to me.”

“Fine,” He said with a bored tone, finally looking straight at me. “You’ve got two minutes.”

“Great.” I exhaled and sat down on a bench. Okay, my brain hadn’t developed a scenario to go with this. My imagination had stopped at the part where I begged him to talk to me.

“Well?” Nico tapped his foot on the floor, looking thoroughly impatient. “You were the one who wanted to talk, so hurry up.”

“I...” Hell, why were my palms sweating?

I looked up at him, praying he would understand my silent apology. My mouth opened and closed successively in a failed attempt to find the right words. There was something so wrong with this picture. Where had confident, defiant me gone? The moment my eyes met Nico’s and I saw the hurt and betrayal in them, I understood I had lost my chance before even getting it.

“Dr. Anderson, there’s a pregnant woman in the waiting room that needs immediate assistance.” Emma’s words brought me back to reality.

I lowered my head and sighed in relief that she’d saved me from further embarrassing myself. I didn’t even bother to ask how she found me, but instead I practically ran toward the waiting room. Luckily, the patient was easy to spot thanks to her immensely round belly.

“What about the attending OB/GYN?” I asked Emma as I was running toward the patient, with the nurse behind me.

“She’s performing an emergency C-section.”

I nodded and finally slowed down. “Hello, ma’am, I’m Dr. Colt Anderson,” I said, approaching the woman.

“Doctor!” she cried, looking at me with wide desperate eyes.

Emma, who was right behind me, handed me the woman’s file. “It’s what we managed to gather from her. Her gynecologist is out of town.”

“Mrs. Corrigan, right?” I said after taking a glimpse at her info.

The poor woman was sweating profusely and looking at us with unfocused eyes, but managed to utter a weak yes.

“You’re in your seventh month?”

She nodded.

“Are you having contractions?”

“I did. They’re gone now. Doctor, I think my baby’s dead.”

“Get her on a gurney and give her a gown,” I instructed Emma. “I’ll examine you to make sure you’re okay.” I told the patient squeezing her shoulder. Whatever had made that woman think her baby was dead, was definitely bad news. Problem was, I had never delivered a baby and something was telling me I was going to get my cherry popped today. *Bad choice of words.*

I went to another room to see a patient, just to have an excuse to compose my thoughts. I still couldn’t understand what exactly happened in there with Nico. It felt like I had completely lost all thought and capability of speech. I wondered what Nico thought of me now.

However, there was no time to idle on romantic thoughts. My pregnant patient was lying in bed, waiting for me. And something might have been horribly wrong with her baby.

“Mrs. Corrigan, how about you tell me what’s wrong, while I do a pelvic exam on you, yes?” I asked her, trying to look composed, though inside, I was praying my hardest for her to be insane and imagining all this, so I could send her on her way home and forget I’d ever seen her.

“I can’t feel my baby...” she whispered after a loud intake of breath.

O-kay.

I heard movement behind me and turned to find Nico staring at me from the doorway. “Need any help?”

I nodded, feeling slightly uncomfortable at his presence after the awkward “conversation” we’d had. “I could use a speculum.”

“You mean...” he made a circle with his thumb and index and inserted the index finger from the other hand inside, simulating the ancient penetration motion.

“Yup.”

“Great,” he mumbled under his breath, and I did my best not to chuckle. “Bring me a heart monitor too,” I called after him.

Turning back to my patient, I touched her belly gently, but with enough force so that a healthy person would feel a slight push. “Does it hurt?”

She shook her head confused. “I don’t know. Listen, are there no women doctors?”

I wished there were myself. “I’m afraid not right now. If you think you can wait until tomorrow, Dr. Palmer will be attending patients and you could come see her. However, if it’s not an emergency case, you should consider going to the OB section. Tell me, what did you mean by what you said?”

She was silent for a moment, then shook her head. “I don’t know. Something is definitely wrong. I don’t think I can wait. It’s just... It’s a bit embarrassing.”

“Believe me,” I reassured her with a chuckle, patting her knee, “I’ve seen dozens of embarrassing cases, ma’am. It’s a hospital.”

The patient smiled and I felt her relax. Just then, Nico reappeared with a fetal heart monitor and a speculum.

“You do the honors, pup,” I said with a wink, feeling confident again. Oh, hell, if women could go through such hardships with a smile on their faces, how could I pity myself? I would try talking with Nico after work again.

“Huh?” He darted a desperate look my way, a mix between *I can’t believe you’re doing this to me*, and a *you’re dead, bastard*, which made it impossible to stifle my laughter. I let out an odd sound between laughing and choking and quickly turned my back to the patient, pretending to be coughing. This was not the time to give my patient any more reasons to worry.

Yes. Nico and I were going to be okay. Maybe we wouldn't kiss again, maybe we wouldn't try dating. That was fine too. But as long as we could look in each other's eyes and even chaff with each other from time to time, we were going to be just fine.

"Go on," I said, after I'd calmed down from my supposed coughing fit.

"Could you open your legs, ma'am?" Nico asked, switching fully into professional mode.

The woman put her legs in the stirrups and exhaled heavily. She was just as red-faced as Nico—for he couldn't help that from showing on his face. Nico moved his hand toward her genitals, then looked back at me with a spiteful glare. I gave him a pointed look in reply. Nico sighed and inserted the speculum with care.

"She's not fully dilated," he whispered after a few minutes.

I nodded, thoughtful.

Suddenly, Nico's eyes shot open, a panicked look on his face. Man, had I scarred the boy irremediably?

"Umm... Colt, I think you should feel this."

"Um-hum." I crossed my arms and shot him a sarcastic look. No way was he tricking me.

"I'm not kidding. You should feel this," he repeated, on a determined tone.

"What?" I approached with a frown.

"That's what I was trying to say," the woman said, looking at us with scared eyes. "Is he dead, doctor? Is my baby dead?"

She burst into tears.

"Calm down, we don't know yet. We need to get that heart monitor."

"But, I can feel him coming out of me, yet I'm in no pain."

"Ma'am." I gently patted her knee and gestured for Nico to comfort her. He obliged, moving to pat her awkwardly on the back. "Let's see."

I put on a pair of gloves and coated my right hand with a generous amount of sterile lube. As I moved my hand, seemingly being under perfect control of

my emotions, on the inside I was dreading every second my hand got closer to her body. It wasn't, surprisingly, because of my complete disgust of female genitalia, but because I feared having to tell that woman that inside her there was a little dead human being.

My fingers gently probed her entrance, but what I found was not a tiny hand or foot. It was something just as dreadful.

“Umbilical cord prolapse. We need to get the baby out *now*. Heart monitor.”

Nico moved faster than ever and handed me the object. I placed it on her belly and we all held a collective breath. The monitor beeped showing, to our utmost relief, signs of life, albeit very close to fading away. “Call the nurses’ station. We need to deliver this baby as soon as possible.” *I knew it, dammit.*

Nico took the intercom out and called for the nurses’ station asking for assistance. Meanwhile I reassured the patient. She cried in relief when I told her the baby was alive.

“What do you think? Since you’re not dilated enough, it’s risky to push the baby out. We’ll have to wait for the OB/GYN to come give you—”

“Doctor, bad news. OB isn’t sending anyone. At least not right now.”

“You’re kidding, right?” I had finally given in to my despair, and barely stopped myself from shrieking like a little girl. The patient needed me calm at the moment, but I had never been further away from calm than at that particular moment. The gravity of the situation finally hit me. The baby could be asphyxiating as we spoke.

Nico and I exchanged a long look. It felt like something finally clicked and we could understand each other as if we were sharing the same mind. He nodded at me and I nodded back.

Fuck hospital policies. “We have to deliver this baby ourselves,” I whispered.

“God help us,” Nico whispered, biting his lips.

Turning back to the patient, I took her hand again and squeezed it tightly. “Mrs. Corrigan—”

“Call me Sherry.”

I nodded, with a small smile. “Sherry, I’m gonna cut your belly.”

“Really?” Nico snorted.

“Hey, now, humor is essential in crisis situations. Let’s wheel her out to the operating room. Afterwards, bring me the anesthesiologist and one more nurse.”

“Don’t worry,” I said patting Sherry’s hand, “I won’t let him die.”

Her eyes, filled with tears looked at me with unadulterated faith. If I failed to save this baby... No, I couldn’t think like that. I had to save him no matter what.

Man, I was scared shitless.

“I take it back. You’re not that much of a bastard.”

I couldn’t wait to get under the shower after a day like that. It was the most terrifying experience I’d ever lived through. But also the most gratifying. Especially at the end of the whole ordeal, when I heard that baby cry for the first time in his life while Nico and I both shushed him up, looking down at him with tears in our eyes. I had an epiphany in that moment. It felt like seeing my whole life flash before me in a split second. I remembered the first patient I’d ever saved, Tyler Bronk, who would have died because of a blood clot if it hadn’t been for my early diagnosis. I remembered his smile, that he’d looked at me like I was some kind of hero, and how I realized that was exactly what I wanted to do for the rest of my life—help people.

Somewhere along the way, I had lost that pure, unadulterated love for human beings. But today, a small four-pound creature had managed to give it back to me.

“She’s giving him our names.”

Getting out of the shower cubicle with a towel around my hips and one resting on my shoulders, I almost tripped over my own feet when I saw Nico appear from behind a locker.

“Geez, pup, way to make an entrance. You almost gave me a heart-attack. What were you saying?”

My eyes rested on his lips, which he wetted slowly with his tongue. I hoped that was desire I saw in his eyes, because I was so ready to show him more if only he gave me a sign.

“I said...” He coughed and his eyes met mine. “I said she’s naming the baby after us.”

I broke out into a grin while staring at him shell-shocked. “You’re kidding, right?”

“Nope. Nicholas Colt Corrigan.”

“That is just... amazing.”

Nico grinned and fidgeted like an excited puppy. “I exchanged numbers with her. She wants to invite us to the baby shower. She’s a single mom, so I offered to help her out with the baby too.”

This kid amazed me. I grinned and ruffled his hair. “Sounds great.”

“I still have to pay you back for forcing me to have a personal close-up experience with a *vagina*, though.”

“Actually that was *me* paying *you* back for intimidating me when I tried to talk to you.” I scrunched my nose in disgust. “Still, meeting a vagina up close and personal is a necessary experience in every boy’s life.”

“Says who?”

I snorted and moved past him to my locker. The moment I opened it, a familiar small object fell to the floor with a click. “Oh, right. I meant to give this back to you.”

“My kohl,” Nico shouted, ecstatic. I couldn’t help a smile form on my lips.

“Listen, Nico. You need to hear me about last week.”

He sighed deeply and balanced back on his heels, looking at me from underneath his lashes. “It’s okay.”

“No. It’s not. I said some horrible things about you. Even if I didn’t mean them, I still don’t deserve forgiveness. I just wanted to tell you that...” I walked up to him and put my hand on his shoulder, squeezing until he looked up and his gaze met mine. “You’re doing a great job. You’re a great nurse and

a beautiful person, both inside and out. Don't let anyone tell you otherwise, especially bastards like me."

His eyes shone, his lips twitched as if he was about to say something but didn't dare or didn't know what.

"And..."

"And?" he whispered.

If I didn't tell him now I never would. "And you're the most beautiful man I've ever seen."

Nico snorted.

"I mean it."

Finally, the corners of his mouth lifted upward. "Prove it," he dared me, locking his gaze with mine.

"With pleasure," I said grinning. And prove it I did, bringing him flush against me and mashing our lips together in a heated kiss that seemed to last forever.

CHAPTER SIX

Nico

The sky outside was cloudy, as usual, but I was oddly overcome by a strange heat spreading from my solar plexus all the way to my face and down to my toes. It felt like the first date or taking a walk with my first crush, yet this was nothing like it. It was simply a ride home. A ride home with someone who was sorta my boss and at the same time, someone I had sorta secretly dated for over a month. Stealing glances at each other, exchanging hurried kisses in the changing room, sending texts before going to bed. But never really talking about it, never really going further. I didn't know what he really felt; I didn't know what he thought of me. I didn't even know if he saw someone else outside work hours or if he thought what we had, if we really had something, was exclusive. The way I thought. I dreaded asking him. At the same time, I burned with desire to know.

Colt put his hand over mine the moment we were inside his car. That strange heat again, spreading through my body, pouring down my spine. When I looked into his eyes. When I thought of his lips.

“What are you thinking about?”

I flinched, feeling guilty. His voice sounded hoarse. It always sounded hoarse because of all the smoking, which he'd meant to quit but the most he managed was two weeks. But right at that moment, my dick hardened at the sound of it, more quickly than usual. I wanted him so much. I was tired of stealing kisses during breaks. I wanted something real, something palpable. Did he know just how much my body ached for his touch?

“I'm thinking you should stop smoking.” Liar. I was such a liar. And I blushed again.

Colt huffed, amused. “I really should.”

I swallowed loudly as silence fell again. Hell, what did people say in this kind of circumstance? “Could you stop the heat?” That had sounded damn perverted.

Colt's eyebrows rose. "It's the middle of summer. I haven't turned on the heat." He chuckled and lowered both our windows. "Better?"

I nodded with my head down.

"Where's your place again?"

"Here," I said, pointing to my apartment complex. "You can park in front of that shop."

He parked in an empty spot near the clothes boutique I had pointed to, and stopped the engine. "Well, see you on Monday, then. Take care, pup."

"Would you..." *Don't say it, idiot. He'll laugh at you.* "Would you like to go inside?" Shit. My big mouth again.

Colt gave me a long, unreadable look. "I thought you'd never ask," he eventually said, a sly grin spreading on his face. Seriously? I let out a long breath I hadn't been aware of holding and closed the passenger door. He extracted himself from the car, locked it with the remote and looked at me expectantly.

"This way," I said, smiling. I tried to avoid his gaze because I was feeling embarrassed and more than a little dizzy.

"What floor?"

Unaware, I had walked the way to my building on autopilot, opened the front door and entered the elevator, followed closely by Colt.

I shook my head. "Eight. Sorry, I guess I'm feeling a bit tired," I lied.

"No worries. Today was stressful."

"Yeah."

We fell silent as the elevator climbed. The door finally dinged open and we walked out. My apartment door was right in front of us. I took out my key and unlocked it. My hand was slightly shaking.

"Well, this is it," I said with a wide hand gesture and a nervous laugh.

"Pretty."

"Pretty? You call a guy's house pretty?" I would have sounded angry if he hadn't been so near, his breath tickling my ear and the nape of my neck, his

body heat so close it was almost palpable. Instead, I sounded like I was on the brink of an orgasm. How embarrassing.

“But it is. You even have flowers,” he whispered in my ear, the bastard probably very aware of my reaction to him.

“What’s wrong with flowers?” I managed to mumble.

“Nothing,” he said, shrugging and suddenly pushed himself away from me and walked into the living room. He splayed himself on the sofa, and because of his large frame there was barely any empty space left. “They’re pretty.”

Ah, he pissed me off. He turned me on.

“Come here,” he said, patting the small place beside him. I walked slowly, his watchful gaze intimidating me.

“Relax, pup,” he whispered after I sat down next to him with a stiff posture.

His hand fell on my shoulder, massaging gently. Out of their own accord, my eyelids closed. I let out a soft moan and melted under his touch. Damn, but he knew how to touch.

Suddenly, hot air fanned over my face. Then I felt his lips, barely a soft, feathery touch on my jaw. Then another on my cheek, and another, getting closer and closer to my mouth. I opened my eyes and gazed into his. He was waiting. With a sigh, I parted my lips and allowed my eyes to close again. His lips descended on mine, his tongue invading my mouth. Hot. Wet. Willing. I let him drag me into his lap, let my hips gyrate against his and my hands explore his strong chest. Shy touches, then more persistent ones. Wanting to feel his skin. Craving it beneath my fingertips.

I heard him moan. Or was that me?

“Oh, kid. You’re driving me crazy.” Me? I couldn’t even protest against the irritating endearment, afraid his touches would cease.

He cupped my head in a tight grip and looked me in the eyes. There was so much desire in his gaze, so much passion that it took my breath away.

“I want you, Nico. All of you.”

“You... do?”

“This is your last chance to say no before I devour you whole.” His intense gaze made me trust he was serious.

I nodded, swallowing hard. “I want you too, Colt.”

“Good. Get naked.”

I complied as fast as I could, hands shaking, breath hitching. As soon as I got rid of my boxers, being left naked in all my “glory”, Colt grabbed me by the nape of my neck and brought me close again, joining our mouths in a wet kiss.

“Jesus, kid, looks like not all of you is small.” He looked down at my erect penis, which jolted from excitement, and licked his lips. “Wanna taste that so bad.”

“Really?”

He grinned at my awed expression, but who could have blamed me? Colt Anderson wanted to suck me. I had waited for this for what seemed like an eternity. Didn't even think we'd go farther than a few kisses, judging by how slow things seemed to move with us. This was definitely my lucky day and I didn't know what I did for everything to have worked out so perfectly. Maybe that meant we really were dating. Maybe it hadn't all just been in my head.

“Lay down.” He got up from the couch and I quickly took his place, afraid, he'd change his mind before letting me feel his hot mouth against my aching dick.

I shouldn't have worried, though. Colt put each of his legs on either side of me, barely fitting on the narrow couch, but he didn't let that bother him. He lowered his mouth to my skin, teasing me with small licks on my belly and thighs. I opened up my legs for him, moaning approvingly as his lips got increasingly closer to my member.

“You smell so good,” he purred, burying his nose in my pubic hair and inhaling deeply. I contracted my muscles and made my cock twitch to attract his attention. It hit Colt's cheek and he let out a long groan that mingled with my own. God, his teasing felt so good, yet so painful at the same time. Finally, sensing my impatience, he grabbed the base of my cock and gave it a long swipe with his tongue from base to head, finishing with a kiss on the crown, which prompted me to put a hand on his head, forcing him down on it.

“Patience, kitten. Wanna make this last.”

“Holy shit, you’re driving me insane,” I finally cried, frustrated.

“Patience.”

He gave my cock a few slow strokes and licked the head again. Slowly. Excruciatingly slowly.

“You make me want to strangle you.”

He chuckled with the crown of my dick in his mouth, sending painfully good vibrations all the way to my belly. I let out a pitiful whine.

“Actually choking you would be the best option in these circumstances.”

He let go of my cock with a loud pop and lowered his head to my balls, taking his time to lick them thoroughly.

“Let out those noises again and I might just let you choke me, baby. You’ve got me so turned on.”

“Colt.”

“That’s it, call my name.”

Suddenly he swallowed me whole in one move. I cried and trembled, arching my back as if possessed. I could feel his throat muscles around my dick, his spit sliding down my balls. I looked down to find him watching me with an intense gaze.

“Please,” I whispered. I wanted him to make me come. But I wanted this to last.

I wanted him to kiss me. But I couldn’t bear separating his mouth from my dick. The sensations were so good I felt on the brink of fainting.

“Colt, please!”

He took my cock out of his mouth and looked up at me, after giving it a couple of affectionate licks on the head.

“How far do you want this to go, Nico?” he asked with a sudden serious expression.

“What do you mean?”

He answered with a smile. "I mean... have you even gone all the way? Do you want to?"

"Anal sex?" I asked, the meaning of his question finally registering. For a panicky moment, I had thought he'd meant us.

Colt nodded. I nodded back. "It's okay. I did it one time, in high school. Not really a stunning experience, but if it's with you I think I can manage," I whispered, blushing.

He gazed at me for a long moment. "I want us to take it slow."

I nodded slowly.

"So it's okay if we don't do it today."

"Okay," I whispered and couldn't help feeling relieved.

Colt smiled and went back to sucking me, and I quickly forgot anything and everything we'd spoken about.

I soon exploded in his mouth, my vision blurring and millions of stars dancing behind my eyelids.

Colt climbed up until we were face to face. With a playful grin, he trailed kisses and bites all over my neck and chest. It took a couple of seconds before I could go back to breathing normally and I realized he hadn't come yet. I slapped away his hand from his gorgeous cock and took over jacking him while looking in his eyes. It took Colt only a few seconds to orgasm with a loud cry. He looked so beautiful in that moment that I felt like I wouldn't be able to live on without seeing this face again every single day of my life. The thought scared me. I didn't want to ponder on what it meant.

Colt got up and searched through his jeans pocket, retrieving a few tissues he then used to wipe my hand. We sat silently, looking at each other, and then we both burst out laughing.

Colt ruffled my hair and hugged me. I let my head fall on his broad chest with a yawn.

"We have twenty-four hours until the next shift. You think you can handle a repeat?" he whispered as he stroked my hair. I could feel the smile in his voice.

Yes, definitely dating.

“Only if we take this to the bed,” I replied with a smile of my own, meeting his gaze and sealing the deal with a long passionate kiss.

THE END

Author Bio

Shayla made her debut in the writing world during elementary school with a heart-breaking story about how her grandma's chicks died from an unknown disease. It was published in the school newspaper, spurring a significant amount of pitiful looks directed her way. Being a stubborn Aquarius, she kept on striving, publishing cheesy love poetry, an endeavor that thankfully proved to be far more successful. Her writing life changed dramatically when she read her first yaoi manga and discovered her real calling. Imagining guys together has become her favorite pastime. Aside from writing, daydreaming about men and devouring any M/M book she can get her hands on and, she also loves manga, kpop, jrock, classical music, crafts and art. An earnest romantic, she's always been convinced there's a soulmate out there, searching for her. It appears he's been lost. Maybe word hasn't gotten to him that cars are faster than white horses. In case you've seen a prince on a white horse (though a sports car would be preferable), Shayla would very much appreciate if you let her know.

Contact & Media Info

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[Email](#) | [Blog](#)

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CHILDREN OF FIRE AND CLAY

By Azza Mitchell

Photo Description

A picture of the torso of a naked young man with a collar around his neck attached to a leash and his hands tied behind his back.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

Small town boy. Big city college. It's my first year and I never thought he would be my roommate. We started out friends, studying late nights and hanging out. He never made a move. Not until after Christmas.

I loved that first kiss. Sweet, gentle. But days after, something strange happened. I ended up like this. Writhing in these chains, I succumb to his every command.

I only hope he doesn't realize who (or what) I really am. What happens if I can't hold back the truth?

Must be supernatural that is not vampire or shifter. I'd love to have some suspense or thriller. Hot sex, yes. BDSM yes, but nothing super extreme. Bonus points if they switch in the scene(s) (no absolute top/bottom relationship). HFN is okay. Bittersweet is too, but there has to be some sense of happy at the end (no character death).

Anything else is author's choice. Have fun! :D

Sincerely,

Azalea Moone

Story Info

Genre: paranormal, urban fantasy

Tags: light BDSM, supernatural, college, slavery

Content warning: dub-con

Word count: 10,825

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CHILDREN OF FIRE AND CLAY

By **Azza Mitchell**

CHAPTER ONE

Basil knew better than to look around at the burst of laughter behind him. He'd know that voice anywhere. He woke up to it every morning, a heavy yawn or the groan of stretching muscles. Basil could look across the room and watch him move under the covers, strong pale legs kicking at the blankets or a shock of blond hair peeking from under the pillows. He was too far away and truly not far enough.

Basil wanted him more than he'd wanted anyone in his life. He could feel the fire in his veins gathering at even the thought of him. He pushed the magic down and the flames retreated to somewhere deep inside before anyone could notice.

His closest friends knew, but his closest friends were considered his pets by the other mythkin of the city. It wasn't as easy or as laid-back as the country mythkin he was used to. He was a minor celebrity in his tiny town but the city mythkin couldn't care less about his father or the strength of his powers. He was just a young free djinn with two human thralls and a servant. He was nothing to them, and he had to stay that way to stay safe.

Basil sniffed the air unwillingly, and his roommate's scent wafted past his nose. He tried to ignore his body's enthusiastic response and closed his eyes to keep the fire from showing in them.

"What's wrong with you?" Leila asked, poking him in the arm.

Basil lifted his head enough to be blinded by the bright pink of her hijab. He scowled, unsure if he was annoyed by the bright color or her usual perceptive grace. The last thing he needed was his friends noticing his fervent crush on his roommate.

"It's Rowan," Hassan said flatly, flipping through his history text. "Bass wants to marry him and have a litter of fire babies."

Basil felt his face heat. "I hate you," he snarled at his best friend. Leila was going to be unbearable and Hassan knew it.

Hassan simply grinned.

Leila craned her head to see over his shoulder. "Don't look!" he snapped.

She frowned, her brown eyes narrowing. "Isn't that your roommate?"

Basil groaned.

"Yep," Hassan answered for him.

She didn't look overly pleased. She tapped her nails viciously against the polished wood of the table. "He's okay, for a heathen. You should let me set you up with someone."

Basil grimaced. She'd already tried to set him up with her brother, her very straight brother. Kasra hadn't been thrilled with that blind date. "Never, ever again, Leila. Don't you dare."

Hassan grinned. He was always happiest when Leila was torturing anyone but him. "Don't try it. He's so in love, he's pining."

Basil slapped his hand down. "I'm not pining. I don't pine!"

Hassan smiled back with pity in his eyes. "Well, your manly impression of stoic unrequited love looks a lot like pining."

Leila looked away from the argument. "Your keeper is coming."

Basil looked around and spotted Niall walking toward their table. Niall was a faerie vassal of the djinn lord's court. He was sent to watch over Basil years ago. He wondered if babysitting an exiled prince was a punishment detail, but he never asked. He had a feeling that he didn't want to know the answer.

The faerie had taken a position teaching European history at the university to keep a close eye on him.

Niall nodded at the group. "Prince." He stared at Leila for a moment. He always had trouble addressing a human as an equal. "Miss Parsi."

Leila inclined her head, but only barely.

"Professor Grady," Hassan hissed.

“Pet,” Niall returned, contempt only half disguised. Basil was never sure how the faerie felt about his prince’s favored thrall. Basil mostly left them to duke it out. They knew better than to actually hurt one another.

Hassan leaned back in his chair, gearing up for a fight. “Hey, why didn’t you ever offer to tutor us? Making us fail finals because you wouldn’t help is unbelievably rude.”

Niall’s eyes filled with black, always less concerned with getting caught. “I don’t want to teach you. Pets don’t need to know any more than how to look pretty and warm a bed. In both of which, your knowledge is sorely lacking.”

Leila snorted.

Hassan scoffed, undeterred by Niall’s show of power. “My bed-warming skills are epic. Why don’t you try them out for yourself?”

“I don’t touch my lord’s favorite *toys*.”

“Enough,” Basil snapped. “Bicker somewhere else. I need to study. Hass, stop hitting on a teacher.”

Niall smirked.

Hassan huffed and looked away. Basil was happy to call an end to that argument, but Hassan was a sore loser. His friend grinned, white teeth flashing dangerously. He waved at someone behind them, beckoning them closer. “Hey, Rowan!”

Basil let his eyes flash orange in warning, but Hassan hadn’t been afraid of him in a long time.

Rowan stopped close behind him, dropping his hands to rest on Basil’s shoulders. Rowan was always doing that, touching him, smiling at him, as if the boy knew he could scramble Basil’s brains with just a look. It worked.

“Hey, guys, Professor Grady. Are you ready for finals?”

“Mostly,” Hassan said. “Professor Grady’s taking Leila and me to find one of his first edition books for my thesis.”

“What? When?” Leila asked.

“I really don’t think I am,” Niall said flatly.

Hassan shoved his books in a bag and grabbed Leila's for good measure. "Don't you two have statistics together? You should study. Basil is terrible at all that number voodoo."

"I'm not," Basil complained.

Hassan grabbed Leila's arm, pulling her out of the chair, before shoving his shoulder into Niall's chest. "Yeah, we'll just go and leave you two to your studying."

Basil glared at their retreating backs and Rowan slid to the other side of the table. "I'm really sorry. I don't know what he was doing. I'm pretty good at statistics."

Rowan smiled. It was kind and a little sad. He was older than the usual freshman, one of the guys that got a late start in life. Basil couldn't say it was a bad thing. There was something damaged about him, dark. Basil didn't mind the dark places. He was fire. He had all the light he'd ever need.

"I know, I've been cheating off you for three weeks," Rowan said, "but your friend did do me a solid, getting me away from my chemistry group. They're talking in so many acronyms I can't begin to decipher it."

Basil looked down and shuffled his deck of cards. He had noticed Rowan's wandering eyes. He hoped it wasn't just for a better grade. "You're welcome, then."

He didn't know how to look at Rowan outside of their shared room. It was easy in the closed space of their room: two beds, two desks, and a bathroom in between. Rowan spent most of his time half-dressed, if he even bothered to pull on pants before wandering sleepily to the en suite bathroom. Basil had never known the layout of another person's body so well, not one that he wasn't having sex with.

"Are you okay?" Rowan asked. "If you're just staying for me, you don't need to."

Basil sucked in a breath. He wanted to run far away from Rowan's tantalizing scent, but more than that, he wanted to stay. "I'm fine. I just got lost in my head. Do you need help with something?"

Rowan shook his head and looked down at the cards Basil was shuffling absently. “Are you a card shark or something?”

Basil slowed the cards’ movement so Rowan could see the skill that went into the manipulation. His talent with playing cards was one of the few things he was truly proud of. “Sort of. I do tricks.”

Rowan grinned, leaning over the table to get a closer look. “Magic tricks?”

“Sure. Do you want to see?” He shuffled the cards together, then spread them out in a fan with one hand.

Rowan motioned him to continue.

Basil shuffled the cards once more and cut the deck, setting half of them aside before spreading out the remaining cards. “Pick one.”

Rowan pulled out a card and looked at it. He slipped it back into the deck and Basil grabbed the rest of the deck to shuffle the cards. Basil could feel the heat from Rowan’s fingers on the card. He wanted to grab the card and hold it out to his roommate but he needed to finish the trick.

He laid out three cards face down. “All right, pick out your card.”

Rowan arched an eyebrow but flipped over the far left card. “That’s not my card.”

“No, but this one is.” Basil flipped over the card on the right, the plastic still tingling with Rowan’s touch.

Rowan gasped and grabbed the card, looking it over closely. “How did you do that?”

Basil blushed and looked down at the deck. “Magic.”

CHAPTER TWO

Basil spent most of the winter break curled up in the warmth of his bed. It was better than spending his break sitting across from his mother and trying to make small talk. They'd never really gotten along since he'd turned twelve and started liking boys. She was never cruel, but the disapproval was heavy. Her life was probably much easier with her gay bastard child far away.

He never celebrated Christmas and he hardly cared about a holiday stuck in the middle of the coldest time of year. It was still depressingly lonely. Even Hassan had joined his family on vacation to southern Georgia.

Basil flinched as the door opened unexpectedly. Rowan grinned sheepishly from under a bright red hat and threw his bag toward his bed. "Hey, I didn't think you'd be back this early."

He laughed humorlessly. The cold had managed to suck all the happiness out of him, and he couldn't even manage to find Rowan particularly attractive in the harsh midday light. "I didn't actually leave."

Rowan flopped down on Basil's bed, pushing him around until the older boy dug out a large piece of bed for himself. "You stayed here for Christmas."

Basil shrugged and tucked his blankets around his waist. "It's just another day."

"You don't celebrate Christmas?" Rowan's voice got higher with each word, nearly screeching with horror by the last.

Basil shifted uncomfortably. He'd spent most of his life trying to explain to other children why Santa didn't visit. He didn't think he would need to keep it going when he went to college. "Why would I? I'm not Christian."

Rowan blinked, looking out into the middle distance. Basil turned away. He didn't want to see the look of betrayal wash over his friend. So many friends quickly disassociated when they found out he was raised closer to Islam than Christianity.

"Okay..." Rowan said slowly, "but presents, Santa, awesome reindeer. No religious affiliation and free gifts."

Basil let out a breath he didn't even know he'd been holding. He felt a dozen tense muscles loosen just by the fact that Rowan didn't pull away from him. "We just never did it."

Rowan clapped his hands and jumped off the bed. "Right. Christmas. We're doing this."

Basil was sure he looked beyond horrified. He wasn't angling for anything. "Please, don't. You don't need to do anything for me."

"Be quiet, I'm looking for something."

No one cared that much about any of the holidays in his house. His father told him that gifts weren't meant for one day out of the year, and was fairly disturbed by the whole flying deer mess. Neither his mother nor Basil wanted to disappoint the Lord King Djinn so they left everything that wasn't a birthday or Thanksgiving by the wayside.

Basil didn't feel like he missed out on all that much, but he did know that gift-giving was supposed to be reciprocal. The djinn quickly dug through the drawers of his desk, but there wasn't anything except crumpled papers and broken pencils.

In the last drawer he found a flask, a pretty silver thing with a lion etched into the front. It was beautiful and delicate, and he could feel a thrumming power under the heavy silver. He had no idea where it had come from.

Basil looked up and Rowan was standing over him. Too close, much too close. "Hi," he squeaked.

Rowan held out a small thin box. "Didn't wrap it."

Basil awkwardly took the box. He didn't think wrapping really mattered. "That's oka—"

Rowan kissed him. It was sweet, gentle, lips just brushing his. Basil couldn't hold back the moan and Rowan pressed harder, his tongue tracing along Basil's lower lip. Basil opened his mouth and Rowan dove in, his tongue stroking along Basil's. He tasted like the earth, wet sod and swamp. He tasted like a human from the north.

He wondered if Rowan could feel the fire on his skin or the taste of smoke in his mouth. Basil wondered if he could taste the djinn in his blood.

Rowan fisted the short hair on the back of his head. Basil trembled, his whole body on overload. He had wanted it for too long. Basil tried to grab at him but only came up with a fistful of sheets. He couldn't do anything through the onslaught of tongue and teeth.

Rowan pulled back, and Basil dared to open his eyes. "Merry Christmas."

"Merry? Is that what I'm supposed to say now?" His brain was still on the short path to getting his hands down Rowan's pants.

Rowan touched his cheek, fingers soft and cool against his skin. Basil always forgot how a human's body temperature was so different from his own. Basil shivered again, pressing his face into Rowan's hand. Rowan's thumb touched his bottom lip, tracing the wet edge.

"I want you," Basil whispered. He shut his eyes at the admission. He shouldn't have said it. He shouldn't have said anything.

"Thank God," Rowan groaned and Basil opened his eyes. "I've wanted you since I saw you in my stats class."

Basil grinned stupidly. It was better than he'd even thought it would be. "Yeah?"

Rowan ran his fingers through Basil's short curls. "I didn't think you were interested."

Basil cocked his head. "I've always been interested. Always."

Rowan smiled, something mischievous and dangerous in his eyes. Rowan leaned down again and Basil was ready for him. Basil grabbed his shirt, twisting his fingers into the cotton. He plunged his tongue into Rowan's mouth. He was a fearsome son of the djinn. He couldn't let Rowan keep the upper hand.

Rowan grabbed him, fingers digging into his ribs, pressing him back onto the mattress. "Can we do something?"

"Sure," he said breathlessly.

Rowan grabbed the bottom of Basil's shirt, pushing it up to his neck. "Good, because I really want to fuck you."

Basil nodded frantically. He hadn't been with anyone in nearly two years.

There wasn't anything he could do about that. There was a dearth of gay young men in the middle of the Appalachian Mountains.

Rowan suddenly jumped up and ran for his side of the room, stripping as he went. Basil shoved the flask into the space between the mattress and the wall before wiggling out of his pajama pants. He stared a moment at his dark skin and the lighter swirls of tattoos over his skin. It usually didn't bother him. He didn't mind being different, his skin was too dark for the country kids, too human for the other djinn. He wanted to be perfect for Rowan.

The older boy finally came back with a box of condoms and a bottle of lube, both unopened. Rowan crashed into the bed and ripped at the plastic with a vengeance.

"How long have you had those?" Basil asked.

Rowan looked up, his cheeks pink under his pale skin. "I'm not sure I should answer that."

Basil laughed and grabbed Rowan, pulling the young man on top of him. He wanted someone on top of him, feeling the weight of another person over him. No more drunk teenage fumbling. No more silent hand jobs by the river. He wanted something real and hard and completely human.

Rowan pushed him back, pushing him down until he could lean over him, fingers tickling Basil's abdomen. It was too tender, too sweet. Basil wanted to shove him, but he held still, waiting. "Have you... um?"

Basil looked up, annoyed that Rowan continued his lazy petting. "What? Oh yes, of course."

The look that passed over the older boy's face wasn't pleasant. "Okay."

Basil tensed. He could feel it in his bones, that he said something wrong, something dangerous. "It's been a while though. Like two years."

Rowan's expression cleared, but only slightly. "Good." Rowan's whole body shook like a dog sloughing water. "I'm not going to hurt you."

Basil laughed against his mouth. It was truly funny, a mortal trying to harm a mythkin. Only a few attempted it, even fewer succeeded. "It's not like you can."

Rowan cocked his head in confusion but went back to touching him. He wiggled down the bed and pushed Basil's legs apart. Rowan touched his stomach. "You have a tattoo."

Basil leaned forward enough to look at the stylized flames running over his skin. It was a small manifestation of his fire that he couldn't hide even in his human guise. Rowan traced one line, his fingers barely touching his skin. "Oh."

"Oh?" Rowan's hand moved down, wrapping around Basil's cock. He pumped it a few times, precome working as a lubricant. Basil moaned and let his head fall back on the pillow.

"Please, Rowan."

Rowan grinned. "I like 'please'." The older boy let go of his cock and skimmed his fingers over his hole.

Basil shifted uncomfortably. It was a little strange for someone to be that tender with him. Tommy was quick with the prep and quick to get off. It wasn't like they had a lot of time for foreplay and making out.

Rowan finally slipped a finger inside and Basil groaned. That first burn was the best feeling in the world. "Do you like that?"

Basil closed his eyes and tucked his face against Rowan's neck. "Oh, yes, please."

"Okay." Rowan slipped another finger inside and Basil hissed. "I'm sorry, honey. It'll feel better in a minute."

Basil glared. He knew what it was supposed to feel like. He wasn't sure he liked being coddled, but all thoughts left his head when Rowan pressed against his prostate. His cock jerked against his stomach. "Please, Master, please." He cringed. He didn't know where that note of submission came from. He was a prince. He shouldn't be willing to submit to anyone, even in play.

Rowan growled at his admission, more animal than human. His fingernails dug into Basil's hip. "Please what? Tell your master what you want."

Basil strained against the tight hold Rowan had on his hips. He wanted a lot of things. He wanted to not say anything stupid. He wanted to be good at sex. He wanted Rowan. "Fuck me. Touch me. Please, please."

Rowan sucked in a breath, his pupils dilated. “Good boy.” Rowan pushed another finger inside him.

“Yes, please, that feels so good.” Basil trembled, digging his fingers into Rowan’s strong shoulders.

Rowan pulled away and Basil growled. He wasn’t allowed to leave. Rowan could never escape him again. The older boy ripped open the condom packet and rolled it over his cock.

Basil let his legs fall wide open. Rowan’s cock was long and hard, practically angry from being denied Basil’s body. He grinned at the thought.

Rowan lined himself up, rubbing the tip of his covered cock against Basil’s hole. Basil pushed up against him, trying to get Rowan’s hard cock where he wanted it. He needed Rowan inside him. He could almost settle for anyone’s cock at the moment, just as long as he was filled.

Rowan sank into him in one long stroke. Basil groaned and grabbed Rowan’s arm to keep himself from shaking apart. It was wonderful. It was like they were meant to be together, bodies moving as one, fire and earth battling for dominance.

“Please, please, please.” Basil tried to lift his hips, to meet each thrust with furious abandon. Rowan grabbed his wrists and held him down to the mattress. Rowan’s eyes were bright and intense. He was looking for something, but Basil couldn’t imagine what. Basil couldn’t give him more.

Basil groaned and let his head fall back. He closed his eyes, trying to keep the fire within. He couldn’t let Rowan see the devil inside.

“Look at me,” Rowan said.

Basil shook his head and bit down on his lip.

Rowan slowed the roll of his hips.

Basil growled and opened his eyes. “What?”

Rowan’s expression was broken, sad, and desperate. “I need you to look at me.”

Basil wiggled one hand free and touched Rowan’s face. “Are you all right?” He looked away for a second. He was giving his feelings away with

every touch, with every look. Basil was surprised by the rising level of need in his eyes.

“I don’t know where you are if you’re not looking at me.”

Basil pulled him down into a long kiss. “I’m right here. It’s okay.”

Rowan nodded once and started to move again, his blue eyes daring Basil to look away. He couldn’t even if he tried.

Rowan moved faster, hands on Basil’s wrists as if he could control the djinn. It was a fun illusion. Basil shook off his hands and grabbed his dick, holding it tight. Basil arched under him, chasing that one last hard push to completion.

Rowan dipped his head and bit at the juncture of Basil’s neck and shoulder. The quick burst of pain was enough. Basil shouted as he came, spilling over his hand. Rowan groaned, pumping into him faster until he tensed, his whole body held motionless for a long moment, before he slumped on top of him.

Basil breathed slowly for a few minutes before pushing a limp Rowan off of him. The older boy grumbled at the movement but eventually settled, spooned against him.

Basil was happily sore in all the right places and none of the wrong ones that came from quick sex in the cab of a truck. It wasn’t something he would have allowed himself before. He could never cuddle in a bed or hold hands in public, but life was different in the city. It was different with Rowan at his side.

Rowan touched his chest, dull fingernails dragging over his skin to his stomach. Basil arched into the touch, his body responding before his brain. He grabbed Rowan’s wrist. “That tickles.”

Rowan laughed and sat up. “Sorry. Damn, you’re beautiful.”

Basil slid a bare foot up Rowan’s pale calf. “If I didn’t feel so good, I’d be offended.”

Rowan laughed and flopped back on the bed. He grunted unhappily and dug under his back. He grumbled and pulled out the flask. “Oh…” Rowan’s eyes went unfocused and wide. Something was wrong. Basil could feel it in his bones. “You didn’t have to get me anything.”

Rowan's thumb traced the etched lion on the flask and Basil shivered. It was almost as if he could feel the touch on his body. He *could* feel the touch. The flask was his, his vessel, his prison. "No," he whispered.

Basil watched as lines of black fire formed around his wrists, burrowing into his skin and leaving behind a defining mark of servitude.

Rowan shook the flask, his attention still on the magic digging into his soul. "This is beautiful. I don't even know where you'd find something this intricate."

Turning toward Rowan, Basil dropped his hands. It was a mistake. How could he not have recognized his own vessel? Basil turned toward Rowan, curling into his side. It was the only comfort he could get for his trembling. He was owned. He was nothing. He gave his freedom away with a thoughtless gift. And he *did* give himself away. He wasn't stolen or captured. He was given, willingly if not knowingly.

There was power for the master, too. It could change a person, make them crave power. He didn't know how it would change Rowan, who was such a soft touch but with an iron core.

Rowan pulled him close for a soft kiss, and Basil brushed the hair back from his eyes. It was still there, that absolute want and love. It didn't feel any different than half an hour before. Just an overwhelming urge to please his master. Master. The word came quickly to his mind. He was owned. It wasn't a game anymore. "Do me a favor? Take it with you everywhere. Don't let anyone touch it."

Rowan cocked his head but didn't ask. He always knew when not to ask. "Okay. Do you want to do anything? Have dinner?"

Basil shook his head and tucked his face into Rowan's neck. He needed to be close to Rowan. He needed to be close to his master, without the distraction of the outside world.

Rowan dropped the flask and turned to him. Basil felt a sinking feeling as he let go of the vessel. "Are you all right?"

Basil nodded silently. It wasn't all right, but there wasn't anything he could do.

“You’re not. Don’t lie to me, please? I can’t take that.”

Basil looked up but he wasn’t sure he could speak without a break in his voice. He wanted to vomit or die. He’d be happy with either, but he’d live for Rowan. He cuddled closer. “I’m all right. It’ll all be all right.”

CHAPTER THREE

Basil wasn't completely sure how it happened or when exactly he agreed to do it. That was hardly the point in the overall scheme of things. His only complete thoughts were that he was hard and Rowan was happy. The collar around his neck and the belt holding his hands together behind his back barely registered.

Rowan tugged on the leash, and Basil looked up languidly. He smiled slowly at his master. Rowan touched Basil's cheek, pressing cool fingers against the side of his upturned lips. Rowan's eyes were dark with lust and something domineering. Basil wondered if the magic that held him in servitude also made Rowan more assertive.

"Master," he whispered.

"Shhh," Rowan whispered. He traced Basil's lips before pressing two fingers inside his mouth. Basil opened his mouth willingly, running his tongue over the pad of Rowan's fingers. He tasted like salt and clay. Human tastes that he would never get used to. "Good boy. My handsome boy."

Basil shook his head. He wasn't any of those things. He was a liar and a monster.

Rowan pulled his fingers away. "Don't argue with me," he commanded.

Basil moaned, digging his fingers into the tail of the belt. "Fuck me, please."

Rowan rubbed the soft skin above the heavy black collar. "No, not this time, my good boy." The older boy leaned over him and flipped up the tab on the belt to release his hands. "How about we do something fun?"

Basil nodded enthusiastically. He wanted to do anything for Rowan.

Rowan reached down and rubbed Basil's jaw. "I want you to suck me. Do you want to do that?"

"Yes, Master, please."

Rowan jumped on the desk and wiggled back until he was comfortable, spreading his knees wide apart. "Good boy. Do as you are told."

Basil crept closer on his knees and carefully tugged Rowan's jeans apart. He rooted passed a pair of blue boxers and Basil had his prize. He skimmed his fingers over the hot red erection. Rowan whimpered and leaned back on the desk, looking up at the spackled ceiling. Basil growled, if only to make his master tremble. "Can I suck you, Master?" he asked.

"Yes," Rowan breathed.

Basil dove down on Rowan's engorged cock. If he had a choice, he'd never move, he'd stay like this with Rowan's dick tickling the back of his throat and moaning with pleasure. He couldn't think of a better place to be. He itched to let the fire out. He wanted to show Rowan the smoke and flame.

Basil looked up, catching Rowan's eye. The man reached toward him and touched the soft patch of skin under his eye. "Sometimes I think your eyes get lighter when we're like this."

Basil hummed, as much as an answer as he could give. Rowan groaned as Basil scraped his teeth over his cock. "Fuck, Bass, what are you doing?"

Basil let Rowan slip from his mouth. "You don't like it?"

Rowan grinned. "Hush boy, I was being rhetorical. Now, down."

Basil purred and did as he was ordered. Precome leaked over his tongue and he drank it down as if it was water. Basil made noises that didn't even approach human as Rowan trembled above him.

Basil slid a hand down his body and took himself in hand. Rowan was in no condition to repay favors, and this was just as good. His master rarely remembered him in the moment, but all that was fine as Basil stripped his cock.

"My boy," Rowan mumbled.

Basil laughed, causing Rowan to groan. "Oh fuck, I'm going to come."

Basil hummed and Rowan squealed, if that high-pitched noise could be called anything. Rowan's hips bucked up trying to shove himself deeper into Basil's throat. The djinn grimaced and eased back to suck hard at just the head.

Rowan screamed as he came, and Basil caught the bitter rush of fluid. Rowan hadn't stopped shuddering before Basil had to close his eyes, unable to

hold back the roar of smoke and heat. He groaned as he came over his hand, a few drops spattering the side of his desk.

Basil let Rowan's cock fall from his mouth and scooped up the little bit of come that managed to escape his tongue. He rubbed the small amount of fluid into Rowan's thigh. He didn't care. His vessel might be Rowan's, but Rowan was his.

Rowan stared down at him with an amused grin. "So, do we put that in the 'try again' column?"

Basil fell back on the scratchy carpet and wondered absently if the dorm management would get angry if they replaced it. "Definitely. Though we might need to get actual handcuffs or something."

Rowan slipped off the desk and picked up his discarded belt. "Right. This thing has much better uses." He grinned and waved the belt's tongue at him.

Basil pulled himself to his feet and flopped on the bed. It was so much better than the cold of the floor. "Sure, next time."

Rowan cocked his head and stared at him for a long moment. "You can take the collar off, you know."

"Oh." Basil tugged at the leash and collar. He didn't even think about removing it. Rowan liked to see it on him.

Rowan laid down on the bed beside him, still dressed. He unbuckled the collar and rubbed at the tender skin. "My perfect boy."

Basil curled into him, slipping his hands under Rowan's shirt to his lightly furred stomach.

"I have three brothers," Rowan said suddenly. "And a sister. They're all younger than me. My dad ran out after my sister was born, and Mom drowned herself in a bottle. I pretty much raised them, as best I could."

Basil looked up, unsure why Rowan was sharing this with him. "I'm sorry."

Rowan shook his head. "I think that's where I got my need to control things. I was in charge of four kids not much younger than me. I didn't know what I was doing, so I just mothered them the best I could."

Rowan was quiet for several minutes before Basil realized he was supposed to give something back. “I have some older brothers.”

Rowan looked down at him, his smile a little broken. “You can tell me anything, you know. All or anything.”

“What anything?” Basil asked. He wasn’t sure that was a good thing. Everyone needed secrets, him especially.

“Anything you want to tell me.”

Basil bit his lip. “I don’t want to... lie to you.”

Rowan stiffened against him but didn’t try to move away. “Please don’t lie to me. My dad kept saying he was going to come back. He was going to visit but he never did. I had to explain to my brothers that he was... busy, lost, something.”

Basil curled into him, pressing his bare body against Rowan’s clothed one. “I’m sorry,” he whispered.

Rowan sighed but he didn’t try to make Basil talk anymore. Basil tried to burrow into his body, close enough to apologize for what he couldn’t give.

CHAPTER FOUR

Basil stared down at Hassan until he twitched and affected the same horrified expression. Basil grimaced and Hassan copied it perfectly. Basil shook his head and dropped his bag on the library table.

Hassan cocked his head. “Did your brain fry? Because that looks a lot like your crazy face.”

Basil blew out a breath. “I’m dating Rowan.”

Hassan blinked once then rubbed the bridge of his nose. “I know. I’ve walked in on you, twice. I know.”

“It’s about that, kind of.”

Hassan held up his hands defensively. “Okay, stop there. You’re my friend, and I love you. If you give me any details, I will beat you to death.”

Basil waved off the threat. Hassan couldn’t be violent if he tried. “It was fantastic. It was transcendent. I have a problem.”

Hassan stared. “Are you actually straight? You know you can’t break his heart like that. Just live the lie.”

Basil threw a wad of paper at him. He always knew the best ways to make light of a situation, but it wasn’t the time. “No, and it’s still not the point.”

“Get to the point so I can go back to studying and blocking out this entire conversation.”

“I was...” He paused not quite sure how to express the need and the want—the compulsion. “Rowan would ask for something and I would do it.”

Hassan closed his book and sighed. “According to porn, that is the definition of sex.”

“Yeah.” Basil wanted to shake him. He should be able to understand. Hassan was his. If Hassan was a good pet then he wouldn’t need help understanding his master. “It was like I really, really wanted to do it, even if I kind of didn’t.”

Hassan narrowed his eyes. “Did he rape you?”

“No! No. Not that. I’m not mad or hurt or...” He didn’t want anyone to think Rowan did something wrong. He hadn’t. “I would have done it but I was compelled. I felt like I would die if I didn’t.”

Hassan stared at Basil for a long moment. A serious expression fell over him, unlike anything Basil had seen in a long time. “What are you saying?”

“He has my vessel,” Basil whispered, unsure if he should be ashamed.

“You don’t have a vessel.”

“I do. I found it in a drawer. I didn’t know what it was and I gave it to him.” Basil rubbed his face, dispelling the memory. “I thought the vessel wouldn’t let me hurt him or give him wishes. I didn’t think it would make me want to... serve him.”

“Kinky.”

He blushed. “Exactly.”

“Eww.” Hassan played with his pen. “You can’t disobey him, but could you tell me, if he made you do something you didn’t want to do?”

Basil smiled and tucked his bag under his head. “I could tell you. I will tell you.”

“Good.” Hassan nodded to himself. “Tell Mr. White-Boy I’ll punch him in the face if he breaks your heart.”

Basil laughed. “Thanks, man. You’re a good guy when you try.”

“I am beyond epic all the time, so you better wrap your tiny mind around that.” Hassan looked up. “Shit. Cold Claw McIcy-Pants is coming. This is now completely your problem.”

Basil rolled his eyes and watched Niall bear down on them with the blind wrath of a blizzard. “You’re avoiding me. I’ve been trying to find you for a week. What have you done?”

“None of your concern,” he said slowly.

Niall’s eyes flashed black. “There hasn’t been an owned royal in four hundred years. At least she had the decency to have him killed.”

Basil felt his eyes burn, the fire fighting for a way out. “Are you threatening my boyfriend?”

“I’m threatening your master!” Niall’s voice was stern, angry. “If you haven’t noticed, you are in debt to him.”

“I know the power he holds over me and it’s none of your business,” he growled. Niall would not step in his way. He would destroy anyone that tried.

“It is very much my business. I am your servant. It is my job to take care of you.”

Basil sucked in a shuddering breath. He was willing to tear Niall apart for one angry sentence. The magic connecting him to Rowan thrummed unpleasantly in the back of his mind.

“Your mother raised you among humans, but you are not human, Bass. You are djinn, son of the Lord King Djinn. You’re meant to be so much more than a servant to a human,” Niall said. “My prince should not be lessened by anyone.”

Basil looked up, watching the worry and the terror cross Niall’s face. “I’m not less because someone holds my vessel.”

“They will come for you! The other mythkin that would be happy to have a pet djinn. They are not going to care if you love your human master. They’ll kill him and take you just to prove they can.”

“Then I’ll deal with it then!” he snapped loudly.

The faerie hunched in on himself, Basil’s anger bringing him up short. “I apologize.”

Basil sighed. “Stop. It’s fine. Sit down and take a deep breath.”

Niall slipped into one of the rocky chairs. He stared across the table, but Hassan was looking resolutely away. “Basil, I will serve you as you see fit.”

Basil tried to smile. He really wished the faerie wouldn’t. Niall could run away and start a new life and Basil would just be glad to know his friend was happy. That wasn’t the world Niall lived in, even if he wasn’t physically part of it anymore. “Just teach, torture your students, and hang out with the other professors. Have a little bit of fun, okay?”

Niall looked a little confused but he nodded his head.

“Hey,” Hassan interrupted. “I don’t think I get the House of Tudor mess, wanna explain it to me again?”

Niall snapped his attention to Hassan, his mouth open in shock. Basil ducked his head as Niall started to expound on the Middle Ages. At least Niall was distracted for the moment, and hopefully it would take a while for the local mythkin to find out about him.

CHAPTER FIVE

Even for a college town there wasn't much choice in eighteen-and-up gay bars. There were even fewer choices when the straight best friend invited himself along. Rowan only grinned mischievously and shrugged at Hassan's sudden enthusiasm to go out with them.

Basil tried not to laugh, but it only took a couple of hours before Hassan was starting to twitch visibly. "We better go, before he freaks out completely."

Rowan snickered. "Sure. I think this is as much torture as he can stand."

Basil led the way out of the club and to the quiet street. Hassan shook himself as he left the club. "Dude, did you see that? He was waving his junk in my face."

Rowan chuckled. "He had pants on."

"Does that mean there are places without pants? Oh, my virgin eyes!"

Basil covered his mouth to keep from laughing too loudly at his traumatized friend. "Are you going to invite yourself to our clubbing night again?"

"No, no. I'll stay away from your male-on-male bonding from now on. I'll just sit at home and try to block out all the creepy deviant things you could be doing. But now I have like... visuals."

Basil shook his head and relaxed into Rowan's warm embrace. Winter was still blowing hard overhead and Rowan's limited human heat was better than nothing.

Rowan pulled him close, kissing him against the wall of the alley. Hassan huffed, but Basil heard his feet move a little further away. He curled into his master and tried to forget about everything moving in the world around him. It was enough to have Rowan holding him tight and keeping reality at bay.

"Bass..." Hassan said, a little panic leeching into his voice.

Basil looked up and saw three mythkin standing at the end of the alley. The leader smirked, static electricity making his hair stand on end. A thunderbearer, and they usually didn't like the cold weather any more than the djinn.

“Hello, little prince,” the thunderer crooned.

Rowan grabbed his arm in a vise grip. “What’s going on?”

Basil shook his head and kept his eyes on the three mythkin. “What do you want?”

“You are owned, little djinn. Naughty, naughty.”

“Bass,” Hassan whispered.

“It’s none of your business,” Basil growled.

“Poor boy, if you want a master so badly, I’d be happy to take care of you.” The thunderer stepped closer, an angry wind following at his back.

“What?” Rowan asked.

“We want the flask, pet.”

Basil bared his teeth, canines lengthening. No one was going to take him from Rowan. “Over my dead body.”

Lightning flashed through the sky, close enough that he could smell the ozone. “Not yours, pet djinn, just your master’s.”

Rowan held tight to his arm, trying to protect him, but it wasn’t needed. Djinn bowed before no one.

One of the faeries grinned. “Come, prince, we’ll be nice about this. We’ll be quick.”

“Poor boy,” the other said. “We’ll relieve you of your obligation to that dirty human.”

Basil snarled and lightning slammed down between them, throwing him into a wall.

Rowan yelled, his pained voice echoing in the alley.

“Ro!”

Basil was unprepared for the kick to his side. He should have known better. The mythkin were going to come after him eventually. He just wished he had more time. Fire sparked from his fingertips but it was too cold and wet to get more than a flicker of light. Another set of hands pulled his coat over his head, effectively blinding him.

Basil snarled against another kick to the ribs. He heard Rowan scream, all rage and pain. They were hurting his master. No one was allowed to harm Rowan. He felt a rage and a need he hadn't felt in years. Basil snarled and let his body morph into the smoke he was created from. It was freeing. It was powerful. He was the fire and the smoke. He was the destroyer.

He could see *everything*. Hassan was holding his own against a faerie, a heavy iron pipe in his hands. Basil turned to the thunderer, who was pushing Rowan back with little arcs of lightning. The anger felt far away but it was there. Basil surrounded the thunderer, burrowing into him, choking out his life before he had a chance to fight.

The thunderer clawed at his throat and the two northern faeries hissed in anger before fleeing Hassan's mean swing. Basil ignored the retreating mythkin and held tighter to the thunderer until the creature fell to the ground. Eventually, it even stopped twitching.

Basil pulled himself back to something resembling human. He could feel he wasn't quite there yet, his eyes fire-orange and his skin overlaid with pulsing red and black tattoos. He hadn't lost control in years, but he couldn't seem to get a grip on it at the moment.

Rowan stared up at him with wide frightened eyes. "Oh, my God."

Hassan tossed the pipe aside. "We need to go. They'll be back."

Basil closed his eyes and pushed the last of the magic back inside him. "Leila has a place with her brother, not far from here."

"We can't bring them into this," Hassan snarled.

Basil grimaced. He didn't like it either, but they would be safe enough. He had already put up wards around her apartment months ago. No mythkin should be able to find them there. "We just need a place to regroup. I'll put up extra wards. No one will find us there."

"You should call Niall," his friend suggested.

"Not yet." Basil reached out to Rowan but the man flinched back.

Hassan didn't hesitate and punched Rowan in the arm. "Hey, nothing's changed. He's the same guy you made out with like five minutes ago. Right now isn't the time to deal with this."

Rowan visibly shook himself. “Sorry.” He got awkwardly to his feet, favoring his right leg.

Hassan grabbed Rowan’s arm and hung it across his shoulders. “Bass, grab his other arm. We need to go.”

Basil reluctantly took his master’s arm and this time Rowan didn’t flinch from his touch. It would have to be enough.

They limped their way to Leila’s apartment block. There were bright lights on every floor and most of the building smelled like curry. Most people that lived there believed in the supernatural, and it gave them some small amount of protection.

Basil knocked rapidly on Leila’s door. He hoped it wasn’t late enough for her to be in bed. They didn’t need to be standing around bleeding on anyone’s welcome mat. Leila peeked out the door, her brown wavy locks spilling over her shoulders.

“Oh no, no way. You are not coming in here.”

Hassan grabbed her arm and shoved her back. “Yes, we are.”

Basil ignored her and helped Rowan to an overstuffed couch. His master fell with a groan as his body finally gave up all effort.

“Are you kidding me? I’m a whore now! I’ll never get married!” she screamed at them. Basil gave Hassan an irritated glare, silently asking him to deal with this.

Hassan held up his hands. “I guess you’ll have to marry me, then. Don’t worry, dear, I’ll respect you in the morning.”

Leila huffed and pulled an abandoned scarf over her head. “What happened to you two?”

“I have no idea,” Rowan said exhaustedly.

Basil cringed. He hoped to have more time. He hoped he had forever without Rowan finding out. “Some mythkin. They found the location of my vessel and they wanted to... take it.”

Rowan looked up, his face ashen. He looked sick and tired. It was too much. “Yeah, vessel. What the hell is that?” Rowan asked.

“The flask,” Hassan said when Basil hesitated.

Rowan pulled the silver flask out of his pocket. The djinn could feel the warmth of his fingers, the slosh of the scotch inside. “This thing?”

Hassan nodded. “You know, like Aladdin and the magic lamp, just with more alcohol.”

Rowan reached forward to drop the flask on the coffee table, and then pulled it back close to his chest. He frowned. “You’re a genie.”

Basil snarled. He wasn’t some caricature of a child of fire. He was a prince and a servant, a god and a slave. “I am djinn. I don’t grant wishes, not any you would want answered.”

Rowan went pale. “So your master thing. That wasn’t just a... kink.”

“My Master thing?” Basil asked incredulously. “You wanted it. You asked! The collar thing, the handcuffs. That’s all you!”

“Yeah, sure, it’s fun. You could have said no. You can say no.” Rowan looked down at the vessel with a dawning horror, and dropped it like it was burning. “You couldn’t say no!” Rowan stumbled to his feet. “Where’s your bathroom?”

Leila pointed toward the hall and Rowan practically ran.

“I can say no,” Basil said tiredly. He picked up the flask, and it iced over angrily. It wasn’t his to touch.

Hassan shifted uncomfortably, not looking at him. “You should tell him that.”

Leila rolled her eyes. “I’m sure you are all very traumatized, but I’m going to bed. The last room down the hall is Kasra’s. He’s not here, so have at it, and there’s the couch. Don’t do gross stuff in my home. Don’t wake me before nine.”

Basil sighed and tucked the flask in his back pocket. “Thanks, Leila. I’m really sorry.”

She crossed her arms and scowled at him. “Oh, you’re going to be making up for this for years.”

CHAPTER SIX

Basil looked into the bathroom. Rowan was washing his face, eyes more red than blue. Tired, injured, angry, he was still beautiful. "I can tell you no."

"Can you?" Rowan looked up, eyeing Basil's reflection in the mirror before looking back down.

Basil leaned against the doorjamb, trying to find the words to fix it. "We are forced to follow orders, but my loyalty is my decision. I could have let that thunderer kill you. Then I wouldn't be anyone's."

"Thunderer. Is that what he was?" Rowan's voice was flat, unconcerned.

"It's the common name."

Rowan didn't look at him, opening the cabinet under the sink. He dug through it until he found a first aid kit. "Is she kicking us out?"

"No, she has magnanimously granted us a room." Basil took the kit from him and waved him to a small room decorated in cloth and flowers. It was all rather girlie. It was easy to see that Kasra made very few decisions about the apartment. "I can sleep in the living room."

"No." Rowan reached for him, stopping before touching him. "Stay with me. If you're comfortable?"

Basil smiled but there was no happiness in the expression. "I want to stay."

Rowan eased himself onto the bed. "This is my fault."

"No. It would happen with or without you." Basil crawled onto the bed, keeping as far from his master as the mattress would allow. "I found my vessel. They knew about it the moment I was connected to it."

Rowan grabbed his hand and squeezed it tight. "I won't let them hurt you. You're mine."

Basil laughed. "My master."

"Stop that." Rowan shuddered visibly. "Now it just makes me feel gross."

"Ba'al," Basil said.

“No,” Rowan snapped, and shifted further up the bed. “It’s just supposed to be a game.”

Basil touched his hand, turning his wrist to show the flame tattoos. “It’s not a game, but that doesn’t mean I don’t love you.”

“You love me?”

“I love you and that has nothing to do with my vessel,” he admitted. It was freeing to finally say it even if Rowan didn’t reciprocate.

Rowan jerked forward, kissing him sloppily. “I love you, so much.”

Basil growled and tried to push him down onto the bed, but Rowan hissed in pain. “Shit.”

Rowan pulled at the bloody mess of his pants leg. “That one guy got me good.”

“A faerie,” Basil said.

He helped Rowan pull his pants completely off. Rowan hissed at the ugly lines of red and blue crawling up his leg. “Is that ice? It’s really cold.”

“Yes. The faerie scratched you. Hang on—this might hurt.” Basil laid his hand over the wounds. He let the fire out, touching the cold of the faerie magic. The fire quickly ignored the skin and chased after the cold and ice. He didn’t need to fight to control it, even the fire knew its true master.

Rowan hissed but didn’t fight him, only staring at the mass of melting ice and blood. After a full minute of heat and power, the wound started to bleed sluggishly as the shards of ice retreated.

“Wow.” Rowan poked at his abraded skin. “You can heal?”

Basil pulled out sterile pads and laid them over the deep cuts. “No. I just reversed the magic that was making it cold. Those low-bred faeries have nothing on me.”

“They called you a prince.”

Basil closed his eyes for a long moment. He’d promised to never lie, and Rowan had let him avoid it by not asking. He was finally asking. “I am. My father, the Lord King Djinn, has a habit of seducing human women. My mom

lives out in the country. Virginia. She never really liked that I was gay. Dad didn't care either way. He has his own issues." Basil smoothed the last of the bandages into place. "You never asked about this stuff before."

Rowan pulled his foot away and tucked his legs under him. "You always acted like you didn't want to talk about anything personal."

Basil nodded and looked away. "I didn't want to lie to you. Any story I could give you wouldn't be true. You told me to never lie."

"I guess you can stop now." Rowan wiggled down in the bed. "Let me see."

Basil looked up at him "What?"

"What you look like, like in the alley," Rowan explained.

Basil looked away, uncomfortable. The monster behind the guise of humanity wasn't a pretty thing. "Why would you want to do that?"

Rowan shrugged and grinned. "I get to see the elves in their birthday suits. I want to see you."

Basil twitched and reached for the lights. He didn't want anyone to have a clear look at his true form. "It's not... humans don't like to see us."

"I promise not to freak out again," Rowan begged.

Basil tried to find another argument against it, but in the end, his master had asked. "I warned you." He dropped the glamour, and Rowan leaned forward in the dark, watching the dark lines crawl across Basil's skin.

Rowan lifted a hand and traced the thin whorls across his cheek before moving to the delicate shell of Basil's ear. "They're pointed."

The light brightened as red flared along the tattooed lines.

"Oh, wow," Rowan whispered.

"Wow?" Basil whispered back.

Rowan's gently probing finger slipped past Basil's lips to touch a sharp fang. "I like you like this."

Basil pulled away. "You don't have to pander to me."

“I’m not.” Rowan tugged at Basil’s shirt and the djinn obliged him by taking it off. Rowan ran a hand down his chest. “You’re beautiful, in a wild tiger kind of way.”

“I’m not dangerous,” Basil argued. He’d never harm Rowan or Hassan or Leila...

The older boy snorted. “Maybe not to me, but I saw what you did to that thunderer.”

Basil frowned and tried to move away. “I didn’t like doing that.”

“That’s good.” Rowan grabbed his arm to pull him closer. “I still want you, Bass. Will you fuck me?”

The djinn stilled. “You want that?”

“Sure. I just thought you really liked to bottom. I’m good with anything.”

“We can do that.” Basil closed his eyes to push back the fire from his skin.

“Hey,” Rowan said, “don’t do that. I want to see you like you really are.”

Basil stared down at the marks on the back of his hands. “Really?”

“Yes. I want to see the real you. The one that can’t lie to me.” Rowan quickly stripped out of his clothes and tossed them off the side of the bed.

It took Basil a moment longer to accept that he could be himself; he finally shucked off his clothes and crawled to Rowan, who ran cool hands along his ribs, touching and tickling, tracing each swirling line of ash.

Basil pulled away from the touch and looked down at his master, at the muscles cording and flexing under his pale skin. “I want to fuck you.”

Rowan tensed and his dark eyes narrowed, then he made a sound of pure hunger. “Please, please.”

Basil placed his hand in the middle of his master’s chest. He didn’t push. He couldn’t force Rowan to do anything, but the willing submission made his cock jump. “Okay, I’ll... yes.”

Rowan relaxed completely against the sheets and stared up at him with glazed eyes. “Yes.”

Basil stared at the older boy. It was a heady feeling, to be that in control. He hadn’t felt control in months, since his flask had touched Rowan’s skin. He

ducked down to an uncovered nipple, gently laving it to hardness, then nipping it. Rowan moaned, trying to get away, but Basil only bit harder. Rowan ground up against him, his bare flesh over Basil's slick, wet cock.

Basil groaned, his head falling against Rowan's shoulder. Rowan chuckled and scrapped his fingernails along Basil's ribs. "Don't laugh at me," Basil mumbled. He flipped back over and pounced on the larger boy. "Don't laugh at me."

Rowan bucked under him, nearly unseating him. "Oh, no, genie."

Basil slammed his hands into the pink pillow under Rowan's head. "Don't call me that."

Rowan grinned. "Stop me, then."

Basil dipped down to where the masculine scent was heaviest. He followed a musky scented trail as he delighted in nosing at the lightly-haired balls, making Rowan squeak. He licked up the hard length, sending Rowan into a fit of cursing. "Oh fuck, that feels awesome."

He gave a final lick to Rowan's engorged cock before crawling up the boy's squirming body. He grabbed Rowan's hands, trapping them above his head. Rowan tried to hump into him but Basil moved to give him as little contact as possible. The older boy grunted in frustration but stilled.

Basil brought his hand to Rowan's lips, tracing them with his fingers. Rowan eagerly sucked at the fingers Basil allowed past his teeth. "That is so hot."

Rowan mumbled and continued to lick and suck his fingers. Basil pulled his fingers away slowly, in case Rowan balked, and touched the wet digits to his opening. Rowan didn't move, didn't even breathe as Basil pushed into him. The warmth was unreal. It felt so perfect as his fingers were sucked inside.

"Come on, Bass. Fuck me."

Basil nodded. He moved his fingers in and out slowly, feeling Rowan try to relax under him. "Those little packets still in your pockets?"

"Always prepared," Rowan grunted.

Basil leaned over the bed and pulled out a packet of lube. Rowan started carrying them after an unsatisfying bathroom adventure. They had been

invaluable more than once. Basil slipped two fingers into him, spreading the slick better than the saliva.

It was so good to own the young man below him. He completely understood Rowan trying to push his submission more and more. He scissored his fingers and poked around until Rowan let out an undignified squeal. “Good?”

“Oh God, do that again,” Rowan groaned.

“Um-hum.” Basil did it again and reached up to roll a nipple between his fingers. Rowan nearly arched off the bed. “Are you ready?”

“Yes, yes. I was ready ten minutes ago. Hurry up.”

“Okay. Just relax.”

Rowan laughed and pulled him up far enough to kiss him. “Do you really think I want to relax?”

“Just do as I say,” Basil said cheekily.

Rowan grinned and fell back onto the bed. Basil rolled on a condom and slicked himself as quickly as he could, so hard it was painful. He needed to be inside Rowan *now*.

The older boy lifted his legs against his chest, and Basil leaned over him. “I want you so much,” Rowan said.

Basil smiled and pushed into him. It was tight and strangely cool against his superheated skin. “Oh, Rowan, you feel so good.”

“Oh God. You’re hot, like heat-hot, inside. I can feel it.” Rowan trembled under him. “Am I okay? That’s really weird.”

Red flared along the lines of Basil’s skin. “You’re okay. I’m not going to hurt you.”

He tried to go slow and to make it last, but Rowan pushed up into him with panting whimpers and a virtual litany of curses telling him he needed to go faster.

He propped himself on Rowan’s shoulders and slammed into his pliant body. Rowan groaned under him. “Please, Bass.”

Basil felt the need to come rise up faster than expected. He ground his teeth together, fangs digging into his bottom lip. “Ro,” he whispered and came.

He let his body drop on top of his master, Rowan’s skin a cool balm to his hot blood. “Oh, shit. Sorry.”

Rowan laughed and pushed him over on his back. “That’s fine. I came, too.”

“Really?” Basil slipped his hand down to the sticky mess on Rowan’s stomach. “Wow. I didn’t... I’m sorry.”

Rowan snuggled close to his back, fitting Basil within the circle of his arms. “Damn, you are warm. That was weird. I never noticed when I was inside of you.”

“When I dropped the glamour I also lost the ability to control my body temperature.” He ran his fingers through the sticky mess on his stomach. “Hey, don’t you think we should clean up?”

“No. I think I heard someone out there. I’m not doing the walk of shame.”

“Fine.” He grabbed Rowan’s discarded shirt and wiped himself down.

“Do you want to stay with me?” Rowan suddenly asked. “I don’t want to make you do something you don’t want. I can give the flask to Hassan or...”

Basil pushed him down on the bed. “Don’t. You’re my master. I wouldn’t want anyone else, and I’d kill Hassan.”

Rowan smiled, his blue eyes soft and warm. “Good. I didn’t want to actually give you up.” Rowan jerked at the light knock on the door and grabbed at the blankets to pull over them.

Basil glared. He could smell the snow and witch hazel drifting under the door. “Niall,” he growled.

Niall eased the door open and looked around the room, dark spots of blood dotting his sleeves. “All right, my prince?”

Rowan tensed. “Professor Grady?”

Faerie blood, just not Niall’s. He’d used his powers liberally earlier in the night, and his eyes said he’d dealt with the problem to his charge. Basil was

safe, as was Rowan. Basil had hoped the faerie would never need to show that kind of loyalty. “I’m fine, Niall, thank you.”

The faerie nodded his head slightly and closed the door.

“What?” Rowan asked.

Basil shook his head. “It’s all fine. Everything’s good.”

“That was my history professor.” Rowan stared at the door. “You’re his prince? Is he a genie too?”

Basil smacked him with a pillow. “Eww, no, and don’t call me that.”

Rowan sat up and shoved the pillow to the floor. “What is he? He’s not human. I knew someone that anal-retentive couldn’t be human. You know, he tried to fail me because I was three words short on my final project?”

Basil laughed. “I’m not telling you anything. You called me the G-word.”

Rowan wrapped his arms around Basil. “Come on, just a little hint.”

Basil wiggled around and pushed him back onto the bed. “Nope, ask him yourself.”

He leaned close to kiss him, Rowan’s scent and taste stronger using his unhampered senses. He could spend the rest of his life in that moment, on a stupid, fluffy, flower bed with his best friends roaming on the other side of the door. They were safe, they were whole, and Basil was completely happy. It was perfect.

THE END

Author Bio

Azza has always enjoyed writing, mostly as something to do during algebra classes. Later she found slash fiction and m/m romance and hasn't been able to get away from it since.

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ASS OVER TEACUP

By Jackie Nacht

Photo Description

Picture is of sexy dark haired man taking a shower. He's tangled in the transparent shower curtain and falling ass over teacups.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

My friend Ulysses has always been a bit of a klutz but he seemed to be getting his act together better recently. Burdened by that name, he's always allowed himself to be bullied and take a back seat to everyone else. Added to that, he trips over his own feet or stutters when he meets a hot guy. This spectacular fall is just one more thing to make the poor guy think he's doomed. He was getting ready to go on a blind date tonight and now I just had to call the paramedics instead. What's a guy to do when he just can't stay grounded?

Sincerely,

Barb

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: friends to lovers, hurt/comfort, cute, accident prone MC, unethical boss, college, internship, HEA

Word count: 11,054

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ASS OVER TEACUP

By Jackie Nacht

CHAPTER ONE

As Ulysses tore ass down the street, he still could not believe his car had died three blocks from the office building where he was interning. He'd barely gotten the vehicle to the side of the road before it died a very dramatic death with smoke and all. To add another blow to his morning, the rain had started early and he was getting soaked. Add stepping into a pothole filled with muddy water, and Ulysses wished he could chalk it up to a bad day. However, this was pretty damn typical for him.

Making his way to the door, he tried to shake off some of the remnants of rain but was unsuccessful. *Please*. He thought of the budget he had to present for the department heads he was interning for. This was his big project to show the other accountants and directors what he was made of. If they liked his work, he was pretty much guaranteed a job there when he graduated. And he wanted to work here, he loved the company, environment, and most of the people. He just needed to get through this important day and be smooth, confident, and graceful. In other words, completely opposite of what he was.

Sliding his way on the linoleum in his dress shoes, he finally made it to his desk and sat down only to feel the water soak into his boxer briefs. *Excellent!* Trying to push the bad karma behind him, Ulysses tried to find the folder that contained the budget proposal that he was going to present with his boss. Rummaging around his desk he came up empty. What the hell?

Standing up, he walked out of his cubicle and to the one belonging to the woman who worked as a cost accountant there. She was in her mid-forties, but with her long dark hair, she looked much younger than her age. She had taken Ulysses under her wing from day one.

“Hey Richelle. By any chance have you seen my budget proposal?”

“Yep, Luke came by your desk at seven this morning and took it. He's been in a meeting with the directors and CFO's for the last hour.” Richelle gave Ulysses a sympathetic look.

“But... I thought I was supposed to present that? It’s my final project for my internship.” Ulysses could feel his throat drying up. If he didn’t present his project, he could kiss his possibilities of getting a job there goodbye.

Richelle stood up and came over to stand by the cubby wall with him. “Sorry, sweetie. I think Luke is presenting it now.”

“Um... should I go in there and help out?” Ulysses began biting his nails, a completely unprofessional thing to do at work.

“I would wait until he gets out. That’s just my advice though. It will look better to approach him afterward than to walk into a meeting full of CFO’s and directors soaked head to toe. If Luke snowballs you on this, I’ll help you get the recognition and credit you deserve for your internship. Okay?” Patting him on the shoulder, Richelle turned and began crunching numbers once again.

With nothing to do, Ulysses sat there trying to make himself look busy. He got up once to get Richelle and himself a cup of coffee, making sure to carry both with lids on since he’d burned his hands enough times on the coffee runs. Other than that, he flipped through work he had done earlier in the internship, trying to keep his thoughts away from what was happening down the hall.

Three hours later, the conference room doors opened and the heads of the company walked by, patting his boss on the back while he yucked it up with some of them. Ulysses’ stomach turned at the scene. Not a single one acknowledged him as they passed his cubicle on the way to their offices. There was only one reason for that... His boss had taken credit for his work.

God, his stomach hurt. He felt like he might actually lose the bagel he had eaten that morning. Why did this always happen to him? Did they look at him and think they could just bulldoze over him? Was it his name? He’d lived with that stigma for his entire life. From being teased in grade school, to getting hell in high school, his name was the catalyst for his life’s goal of trying to be invisible. Too bad his coordination usually tripped him into the spotlight.

This was the only time he really wanted that spotlight, when he’d nailed the budget and could finally show that he knew he had it together. *Nothing like the carpet getting swept out from underneath you.* Ulysses sat, staring down at his desk for a moment, just praying that lump wouldn’t choke him to death.

Ulysses had this sudden need to call his friend and roommate Brent but immediately tossed the idea out. He'd actually need the ability to talk, and right now, that wasn't possible. Plus, lately he had been having trouble viewing Brent as a friend when he wanted so much more. With as bad as he felt, he didn't need any confusing deep emotions brought into the mix.

Richelle came by his cubby. "Wanna go to lunch?"

Ulysses just shook his head.

Richelle walked closer. "C'mon. You need some air and it's my treat."

Pushing back, Ulysses stood without saying a word and followed her out of the building. Across the street was the diner they frequented. The place was crowded, but they were able to find a two-seater booth in the back. They didn't need to look at menus. They were two peas in a pod and always ordered the breakfast special for lunch.

"So..." Richelle started.

Blessedly, the walk had seemed to dislodge the ball in his throat. "So?"

"You know Luke won't get away with it. Those executives are too sharp. It's only a matter of time." Richelle leaned back as the waitress placed a coffee on the table. "Thank you." Richelle said to the waitress before she began pouring a generous amount of sugar in her coffee.

Ulysses thanked the waitress as his own drink was placed in front of him. "We'll see." He knew he was pretty small potatoes in the whole scheme of things and that might not garner him any notice in the situation.

"So, let's talk about something more pleasant. You busy tonight?" Richelle gave him one of her devilish grins. What in the world was she up to?

"Ugh... pizza and TV night with Brent." Ulysses looked forward to his Friday night ritual, but at the same time, it drove him nuts. He could feel himself getting closer to his friend, but the guy wanted to chum around. Ulysses rubbed the back of his neck, knowing he would once again have to fight his attraction all night long, while his friend had a way of teasing him within an inch of his life.

"Go out with my nephew, Gavin. He saw a picture of you and actually asked me to ask you out or get your number so he could. An anomaly, I assure

you, since he won't talk to anyone about his boyfriends. Nothing has changed between you and Brent? You are still just friends?" Richelle said gently.

Moodily, Ulysses replied, "Yes, we're just friends—I'm not sure I should go out with your nephew. My heart might not be into it, and it's your family. Doesn't seem fair or right."

Reaching across the table, Richelle took his hand. "Just give yourself a night out. I told Gavin about you... and Brent. Maybe this is what you need to figure out if you really do want more with Brent or if you need to move on. Gavin isn't going into it blind, I assure you. We had a long talk about it, and he still wants to take you out. Now, do you want me to tell him no or yes?"

The moment was broken by their food being brought to the table. Glancing down at his eggs, he considered his answer. Richelle was being nice but he knew his feelings for Brent were true. He really had fallen for his friend, but if his friend didn't return his affection, where did that leave him? Although the thought of tonight, trying to pretend he felt something less than he did, when his day had already been so bad was more than he could bear. Maybe he could just talk to Gavin and find a friend even though this would be considered a blind date. Whatever it was, he needed a night where he wouldn't feel the longing for his friend.

"Okay." Ulysses whispered even though his heart felt the wrongness of that single word to the very core.

CHAPTER TWO

By the time Ulysses finished the day, he was already regretting his decision to go on the date. He didn't want to offend Richelle so he would just have to go out and be as polite as possible. But he was sure he would have a horrible feeling in the pit of his stomach all night long. This wasn't going to help him move past Brent. If anything, it just reinforced that his feelings were that much deeper than even he realized.

Richelle was nice enough to give him a ride home since his car was still on the side of the road. Outside of a few pats on his shoulder, she left him to his thoughts. She was a sharp lady and wasn't fooled. Ulysses knew that she was just trying to help him out, but his heart just wasn't in it. They pulled up into the driveway of house that Brent and he rented, just a short walk away from the campus.

Ulysses unfastened his seatbelt before he turned to look at Richelle. "Thanks for the ride."

Richelle gave him a soft smile. "Do you want me to call Gavin and cancel, sweetie? You don't look like you're quite up to this."

God, she was being so nice. "No, I think it will be nice to go out and have dinner with him. Maybe I could use another friend."

Leaning over, Richelle hugged him. "Gavin's a good kid. If friendship is what you want, that's what he'll give. Have fun tonight."

Ulysses stepped out of the car, and then walked up to the house before turning and waving goodbye. Opening the door, he knew at once that Brent was home. The television was on, and he could hear Brent in his bedroom singing a song... badly. Ulysses took off his shoes, smelling the usual Friday pizza that he would not be partaking in tonight. It was going to be okay, or at least if he told himself that enough, he might actually believe it.

Even after Brent had graduated, they'd decided to rent the house together. While Ulysses still had one more semester to complete, Brent was done with his schooling. Brent did the major/minor thing, while Ulysses decided to double major. Four and a half years wasn't so bad, and with the field of

finance, he could find something quickly once he graduated in the winter. He would have had a little more confidence if the day would have gone a little better. A lot of people who did an internship tended to find a place within the company after they graduated. Brent did, Ulysses was questionable now at best.

Glancing at his watch, he saw he had about an hour before Gavin would be coming to pick him up. He needed to take a shower and wash the day away. Looking down, he began untying his tie while he made his way to his bedroom, trying to unknot the sucker that's only goal was to strangle him. He only made it halfway there before he ran right into Brent. He tried to steady himself and failed, landing on his ass on the hard wooden floor.

Brent made an attempt to grab him and missed. "Sheesh, you all right, Ulysses? Sorry about that."

Ulysses ungracefully scooped himself off the ground. "Don't worry about it. Wasn't watching where I was going. You okay?"

"I'm fine. Well, go get in some sweats. Pizza's here and I already bought a couple new movies for tonight." Brent beamed at him.

Brent was the epitome of masculinity and sexiness all rolled into one. At twenty-three, Brent was just a hair over six feet, just like Ulysses. While Ulysses wasn't a slouch in the gym, Brent packed on the weights to create defined heavy muscles so that you could bounce a quarter off his body—or Ulysses, as of a few seconds ago. Cerulean eyes outlined in violet with dark lashes that would look almost feminine if they weren't surrounded by a handsome chiseled face and constant five o'clock shadow. Brent meticulously styled his dark brown hair every morning only to make it look like he'd just had a wild time in bed with someone that had a fascination with running their fingers through his hair. Oh, how many times Ulysses wanted to actually be the one to do it and not the product in the bottle that Brent used.

Trying to pull himself out of the trance of the blue eyes before him, Ulysses attempted to talk, which was never a good thing when he got lost in Brent's eyes. "Um... I can't tonight. I... ah... got a date."

Brent's dark eyebrows rose up in astonishment. "What?"

“Richelle set me up on a... blind date.” Ulysses rubbed the back of his neck, feeling the tension begin to build there.

Brent furrowed his dark brows. He almost looked pissed at Ulysses’ admission. Was it because Brent hated the fact he was going on a date and missing Friday pizza and a movie? Or was it more? God, he wished it was, but Ulysses knew he was hoping for a damn miracle at this point. If Brent hadn’t shown any feeling more than friendship by now, he wasn’t going to.

Without saying a word, Brent walked past him and made his way to the living room. This was just turning into one big clusterfuck of a day, and he hadn’t even gone on the damn date. Angrily, Ulysses walked to his room, yanking off his clothes.

He didn’t know what Brent’s problem was, and right now, he was mad enough to not care. He walked bare-assed down the hallway to the bathroom they shared then turned on the shower to get the water warm while he brushed his teeth at the sink. Spitting out the paste, he turned and fought with the stupid curtain before he finally climbed over the tub rim to get into the shower. The curtain was the bane of his existence. The thing was too long and he endlessly stepped on it when he showered.

Ulysses leaned his head back and soaked his dark hair. Man, he needed to get a cut. With it wet, his hair was reaching his neck, which wouldn’t do in the professional environment he was working in. He went through the mechanics of washing his hair and rinsing, then began washing his face and felt the five o’clock shadow. He needed to shave but he’d left the razor on the sink. Should he just let it go? Nah, he would be rubbing his hand across it all night, because it would bother him.

Opening up the curtain, he leaned out to grab his razor. The razor was just inches from the tips of his fingers, so Ulysses went up on his toes and inched to the edge, stepping on the curtain. Just as he reached the razor, the curtain slipped on the bottom of the tub, sweeping his feet out from under. Grabbing the curtain with his right hand and trying to catch himself with the left, his head narrowly missed the faucet but slammed into the lip of the tub and then the bottom. He landed on his left arm funny and felt a white hot pain shoot into his shoulder and head.

For a second, all Ulysses could do was try to breathe and get reoriented. The pain in the back of his head turned his stomach. The shower was still spraying down over his body and face, making it hard for him to breathe. He was going to drown and there was not a damn thing he could do about it but lay there paralyzed in shock.

The door to the bathroom slammed open, and Ulysses winced at the noise. “Ulysses, what the hell... oh shit.” Brent came over and looked down at him in alarm, turning the handles above his head and making the water shut off. Thank God. At least he couldn’t add drowning to his list of accomplishments today.

“Hang on, let me go get a towel. Don’t move.”

Not if the house was on fucking fire, Ulysses thought. He didn’t know which was worse, the pain in his shoulder or head. Brent came running in, and Ulysses thought his buddy was going to cover him up with the towel. He didn’t expect him to take the towel and reach for the back of his head.

“What on...” Ulysses groaned.

Ulysses didn’t even get to finish the question. Brent ran out, and a second later, he was back with his cell phone, dialing it frantically.

“Hello, 911? My friend fell in the tub and his head is cut open in the back.”

Brent went on, but Ulysses ignored him as he attempted to touch the back of his head with his right hand. Feeling his wet hair, he pulled back to see the fingers covered in blood. Never good with blood—if Ulysses hadn’t been flat on his back, he would have passed the fuck out. He hated the sight of blood.

“Oh shit.” His stomach turned, and he took great gulping breaths to try and keep himself from throwing up. This was not good. How in the hell did this always happen to him?

Brent stayed on the call but kneeled next to the tub. “They told me not to move you. They should be here in a few minutes. How’re you doing?”

“Ugh... dunno... can I... have a pair of shorts or something?” Sheesh the last thing he needed to add to his day was having paramedics see his naked ass sprawled out ungracefully in the tub.

“Yeah, I can do that. I’ll be right back.” Brent reached down and grabbed his good hand. “Please don’t move, okay? I’ll be right back.” With one final squeeze, Brent shot out of the room to retrieve him a pair of shorts.

The pain was intensifying, and he felt like his head split in two. Brent came in a minute later with a soft pair of blue mesh shorts. “I’m just going to slide these on. Please don’t move. Shit, I need to wrap the towel around your head first.” Brent dropped the shorts next to him and very carefully wrapped the towel around his head instead of just placing it against the wound like before.

Ulysses glanced up into Brent’s worried eyes. “I’m okay, you know.”

“I hope so. I think you’re going to need stitches, and your eyes are dilated. I think you have a nasty concussion.” Brent went back to the shorts, slowly working them up his legs and finally over his hip.

Brent came back up and sat next him. “Keep talking to me, okay?”

“O... kay.” Ulysses felt a little lightheaded even lying down. The room began to spin. He tried to move his left arm to steady himself and cried out in pain.

“Ulysses, you need to stay still. C’mon, just focus on me.” Brent grabbed his right hand again.

“Hurts,” Ulysses whimpered. The shock of falling was finally gone, and all that was left was the blinding pain. He tried... he really did... to focus on Brent, but the pain seemed to take front and center of his brain and scream for all his attention.

After what seemed like an eternity, there came a knock at their front door. Brent ran to get it and made his way back in, followed by two paramedics. Ulysses was in so much agony now he didn’t even feel embarrassment as the two men assessed the situation. They began working on him, putting on a neck collar and looking over the injured arm before wrapping his bleeding head. Their voices were soft as they communicated to one another while they got him ready for a backboard, working efficiently and in sync with one another.

Ulysses locked eyes on Brent, who stood back by the opening of the door, wringing his hands in worry. “I’m okay,” Ulysses croaked out. Wow, he sounded like hell.

Brent just nodded and tried to give an encouraging smile that didn't reach into his blue eyes. They got him loaded up on a backboard and made their way out the house, followed closely by Brent. As they descended the steps, a car pulled up in the driveway. Man oh man, this day couldn't have gotten any worse... his date had just arrived.

This was just a nightmare, Brent thought. His best friend had always been on the clumsy side, but what he had just walked in on was a cherry topper he had never wanted to see.

Since the beginning of this year, Ulysses had slowly stumbled his way right into Brent's heart. He wasn't even sure when it happened, but it wasn't overnight. They had been friends all through college, but this year, his heart was definitely interested in Ulysses as more than just friends.

His mother knew all about it. Brent needed to talk to someone. She couldn't understand why he didn't just tell Ulysses how he felt. All Brent could do was try to explain that it was hard to tell someone he'd been friends with that he'd developed deeper feelings without worrying that the outcome would go abysmally. He cherished their friendship, but he knew time was running out. Especially judging by how utterly pissed off he'd gotten when he'd heard that Ulysses was going out on a date.

Now was not the time to be thinking about that. Ulysses was being carried through the house on a backboard. He needed to think about what he should take to the hospital with him. Running into the kitchen, he grabbed his keys, wallet and cell phone. Brent would need to call his mom and let her know what happened. He also needed to call Ulysses' parents too.

Following the paramedics out the door, he noticed a sleek-looking black car pull into the driveway. Nerves already shot from seeing Ulysses' blood all over the bathroom, he wasn't sure how he was going to handle this guy.

The guy stepped out of the car, and he could swear he'd stepped right off a runway. High fashion boy just looked around, confused for a minute, until he made eye contact with Brent. He began walking to him with his hand outstretched. Brent went to shake his hand and then noticed Ulysses' blood on his hand and pulled it back.

“Sorry.”

“I’m... ugh Gavin. Are you Ulysses?” The guy looked over as Ulysses was secured onto a gurney and wheeled toward the ambulance.

“No, Ulysses is indisposed at the moment. Can I have him call you later?” Brent looked back, seeing that they were loading him in. He needed to get moving.

“Was that him?” Gavin asked incredulously.

“Yep, sorry but I gotta go. I’ll have him call you.” Brent turned to see the ambulance getting ready to pull away. Running over to his car, he jumped in, waiting for Gavin to get out of the way so he could pull out and follow the ambulance to the hospital.

Sweat was building on Brent’s brow, and he rubbed it with his inner elbow. He would need to clean his hands when he got to the hospital. He just could not believe this had happened. He was going to throw that damn shower curtain away as soon as he got home.

Fifteen minutes later, the ambulance pulled up to the entrance and Brent made a beeline to the visitor parking area. Getting out, he ran to the emergency entrance. Upon entering, Brent found a nurses’ station.

“My friend was just brought in, Ulysses Carmichael. Can you tell me where they might have taken him?”

“He’s waiting to be checked out by the doctor. If you give me your name, you can have a seat in the visitor’s waiting room and I’ll call you when he can see you.”

“Oh... okay. Brent Saunders.” Brent hooked a thumb over his shoulder. “Is the waiting room over there?”

“Sure is. I’ll come get you when I hear something.”

“Thank you,” Brent whispered.

Walking over, Brent sat down in one of the vinyl seats. The place was surprisingly pretty empty. Glancing around, he saw a vending machine and the news on a television that was mounted in the corner. Too twitchy to sit, he found a restroom and went in to wash the blood off his hands and rinse his face.

Sheesh, he was shaking like crazy. Making his way out of the restroom, he fished out a couple quarters, needing to get some food in him even though his appetite was completely gone. His sugar level had plummeted, and seeing his friend hurt had him trembling so badly he could barely get the quarters in the slots. Selecting a pack of peanuts, he sat down on the hard seats, waiting for news of his friend.

Two hours later the nurse came up to him. “Mr. Saunders?”

“Yes, that’s me.” He put the magazine he’d been flipping through down and rose to stand in front of her.

“You can go see Ulysses now. Please follow me.”

“Thank you.”

Brent followed the nurse down a hallway and to the elevators. “Go up to the fourth floor. He’s in room 413. If you get lost, a nurse can help you find him.”

“Thanks again.” Walking into the elevator, Brent pushed the button and took the longest ride up in his life. The fact Ulysses was in a room meant he was at least there for the night. Never a good thing.

The elevator chimed and he walked down the squeaky hallway, looking at the numbers above the door. Brent finally found room 413 and made his way inside. The sight of his friend on the hospital bed had his heart beating out of his chest.

Ulysses’ face was as white as the sheets he was tucked into. His shoulder was in a brace and he looked uncomfortable as hell. His dark hair was matted and tangled and Brent had no clue what was going on in the back where he had hit his head since the back was facing away from the door.

Slowly walking over, Brent took a seat in the chair by the bed. Ulysses’ green eyes slowly opened. “Hey,” he croaked.

Brent couldn’t resist, he grabbed Ulysses uninjured hand, rubbing the soft skin. “How you doing?” Brent whispered. He definitely didn’t want to talk too loud. With a head injury, Ulysses’ head must be killing him.

“Oh you know, just decided to take my klutziness to a whole new level

with a concussion and a dislocated shoulder. Why does this always happen to me? God, I'm such a mess." Ulysses' eyes got shimmery with tears.

"You're not a mess. We just can't have land mines in the house anymore. Do you know how many times I've gotten tangled up in that curtain? It could've happened to anyone. And that damn glass coffee table is going too. Our bruised shins can't take any more punishment. We'll get a soft ottoman." Brent stroked a stray dark hair back. It was more than he had ever done with his friend, but he could feel his guard slipping, and his true feelings were coming to the surface. He cared about Ulysses and seeing him in this condition not only hurting physically, but emotionally, shredded him.

"Sorry you had to wait so long. You want to go home and get some sleep?" That was Ulysses for you. Lying in a hospital bed hurt and still worried about others.

"No, if it's okay, I'd prefer to stay right here with you." Brent kept on stroking Ulysses' hair.

"They give you something for your shoulder?" Brent asked.

"Ugh... yeah. They gave me some pain medicine and it's making me kind of loopy. They're keeping me overnight to watch the concussion. Fifteen stitches in the back. They had to shave part of my hair." Ulysses looked at him, his eyes drooping.

"It'll grow back. Don't worry about that." Brent bent down only inches from his friend's forehead and decided what the hell. He leaned the rest of the way and placed a gentle kiss right above the brow.

Ulysses sighed. "I wish you were mine."

Brent watched his friend in shock for only a few moments, but that was all it took before Ulysses fell back asleep. Well, even if that statement was drug-induced, there was a lot of truth behind it. For Brent, that was all he needed to hear. If both of them had these feelings for each other, there was no need to hold back any longer. He was going to take their relationship to the next level.

CHAPTER THREE

Ulysses woke feeling like he had been run over by an eighteen wheeler. Looking around, he was disoriented for a few minutes before he remembered the several times a nurse had come in to wake him up because of the concussion he had gotten falling in the tub. Feeling pressure in his hand, he glanced down to see Brent slumped over onto his bed, holding it.

The room was dark, which meant that it was still the middle of the night. Ulysses needed to wake Brent, and insist he go home and get into a nice, comfortable bed.

“Hey, Brent,” Ulysses whispered.

Brent raised his head, rubbing the back of a no doubt stiff neck. “Do you need me to get the nurse? Are you hurting?” Brent eyed him with such concern that Ulysses was completely blown away by the tenderness.

He was hurting, but he was more concerned with Brent right now. “You look so uncomfortable. Why don’t you go home and get some sleep. Have you eaten?”

Brent reached over and stroked Ulysses’ tangled hair. His long fingers felt amazing running through it. “I’m all right. If you want, I’ll go pick up some egg sandwiches in the morning if your doc okays it. Let me get you a nurse. You’re gritting your teeth.”

Ulysses didn’t even realize he was gnashing his teeth until it was pointed out to him. Brent reached over and pushed the nurse’s button.

The PA clicked. “Can I help you?”

Brent cleared his throat, “Uh... my friend is in pain. Is there any way someone can come and bring him some medication for it?”

“A nurse will be right in.”

“Thank you,” Ulysses replied.

He sat there, staring at Brent for a couple minutes, soothed by his friend just being next to him. Brent reached over and began rubbing his thumb on the back of his hand. Something fluttered in Ulysses’ stomach that had nothing to

do with pain and all about the fact that Brent was touching him in what seemed to be more than just a friendly gesture for the very first time.

He glanced up at Brent's eyes and saw there was warmth in them that seemed to be showing a whole hell of a lot more than friendship. Those beautiful cerulean eyes showed a deep care that Ulysses had never seen in them before. For the first time, he locked eyes with his friend and dropped all his barriers to show everything he had been feeling for Brent but was too afraid to reveal for fear of killing the friendship. Brent's eyes softened, and he leaned forward to place a soft gentle kiss to his lips.

Pulling back, Brent just continued to stroke Ulysses' hand until the nurse came in a couple minutes later. She attached the meds to the port on the IV tube that hung from a bag of saline then it slowly worked its magic juice into Ulysses' system. His body warmed almost immediately, and the pain just seemed to melt off the hospital bed.

After a few moments, Brent whispered, "Better?"

"Yeah," he sighed. "You gonna stay?"

"Yep, all night." Brent stroked a stray hair back off his forehead.

"Come up here with me."

"No, you're too sore." Brent protested.

"Please." He pleaded with his eyes.

Brent let out a soft breath and rose from his chair, gently climbing up onto the hospital bed with him. Ulysses haltingly moved over, careful with his shoulder. Lowering himself on the bed cautiously, Brent faced him and stroked his cheek. He leaned in, giving one more gentle kiss, his lips soft and full. "Get some sleep, Ulysses. Tomorrow when we go home, we can talk about what this is between us."

Ulysses closed his eyes. "Us?" he mumbled.

He felt one more kiss on his forehead. "Us, Ulysses. I saw it, you saw it. Let's not waste any more time hiding behind our fears. Okay?"

"Okay," he whispered before the medication did its job and pulled him under.

The next morning, Brent stood off to the side as a whirlwind of activity went on in Ulysses' room. Doctors came in and checked on the dislocated shoulder, along with the wound on the back of his head. He was declared able to go home if he had someone to watch over him and help him out for the next couple days. Brent volunteered without even batting an eyelash.

Discharge took some time, but once Ulysses had the papers, Brent ran out and got the car to pick him up at the entrance. Ulysses was waiting in a wheelchair, red-faced with embarrassment while a nurse stood behind him holding the handles. As soon as Brent pulled up, Ulysses stood and walked over to get into the car. Brent barely got to the passenger side to open the door in time.

Once inside, Brent glanced over to see that Ulysses' eyes drooped with exhaustion and from the medication that he was still taking. Brent drove to the pharmacy and filled the prescription for Ulysses while he stayed in the car. Once finished there, Brent traveled down the street to get some breakfast sandwiches. Ulysses slept through the entire ride home.

Pulling into the driveway, Brent unloaded the car first and then came back for Ulysses. "Hey, we're home."

Ulysses lifted droopy lids, accepting his help out of the car. The journey to the house was a slow one, but they finally made it inside. "Room or couch?"

"Couch please," Ulysses said around a yawn.

Brent steered him over to the old but comfortable couch. He made his way back to Ulysses' room and gathered pillows and blankets. Coming back in, he made a nest around Ulysses, careful of his shoulder and head. He grabbed the food and placed the sandwiches, along with drinks from the fridge, on the table in front of them, then opened a sandwich and handed it to Ulysses.

"Thanks, Brent."

Brent turned on the TV and grabbed his own sandwich. Going over to the DVD player, he loaded it up with the movies he had bought last night for their movie night that never was.

Settling in for a quiet Saturday of watching television with Ulysses shouldn't have appealed to him as much as it did, especially since Ulysses was hurt.

After he finished eating, he grabbed Ulysses' ankles and placed them on his lap, idly stroking them while the movie played. They had watched movies many times, but they usually sat on their own end of the couch. The simple change of just a small touch seemed to be a weight lifted off Brent's shoulder. This felt... right in so many ways.

He had wanted to touch Ulysses like this many times. Turning his head, he looked at his friend, who was watching the movie with a small smile on his face that had nothing to do with what was playing and everything to do with them. Ulysses glanced over with heavy eyes, but the message was loud and clear. He was good with this.

One movie went into two. They talked about Ulysses' day yesterday—from his car conking out on him, to his boss taking his work, to reluctantly accepting the blind date. The entire time, he kept stroking Ulysses' ankle and calf in comfort. Internally, he was seething at all the hard work Ulysses had done to then have nothing to show at the end of his internship.

Brent's own internship was leading him right into a job after the summer, so he knew how important it was to show his skills. It was an opportunity that Ulysses was going to miss out on because of some dick he worked for.

Halfway through the second movie, Ulysses fell asleep again. Brent got up and went to his phone and made a call to a towing company to get Ulysses' car in the shop. He was going to need to have a car eventually, but Brent was more than happy to take him in while his car was being fixed. He sent an email explaining the car situation to his boss, letting him know that in the morning he would be helping his friend get to work across town.

Reaching into the cupboards, Brent decided crackers and a can of spinach were not going to cut it for dinner, so he had to make plans to order in or run out real fast to get some food. Deciding they should just have food in the house, he grabbed his keys and made a quick run to the store on the corner, picking up only the essentials, not wanting to leave Ulysses for very long.

Fifteen minutes later, he walked in with two bags and spotted a very mussed up Ulysses on the couch. By the looks of it, opening up the door must have woken him up because he rubbed his face and looked disoriented.

“What time is it?” Ulysses mumbled out, half asleep.

“Just a little after five. I was going to make spaghetti for dinner, and got stuff to munch on tonight.” Brent walked over to the kitchen, which still had a view of the couch and Ulysses, then began unpacking the groceries. Ulysses winced and moaned as he tried to maneuver into a more comfortable position on the couch.

“Do you need me to get you another pain pill? You’re way overdue.”

“Please,” Ulysses whimpered. Brent silently berated himself for not giving him one before he left. He was going to need to make sure that Ulysses took them for the next couple of days. After that, Ulysses could manage his pain when he was able to get up and move around more. But for right now, Brent would keep a closer eye on it and make sure his man didn’t wait too long. *His man*. Yeah, that sounded right.

Grabbing a glass of water, he shook out a pill and went over to Ulysses. Ulysses took it and swallowed. “Thank you.”

Brent pushed Ulysses’ hair off his forehead. *What the hell*. Brent leaned down and gave him a soft kiss. Ulysses’ lips were warm and swollen from sleep. Brent licked the warm lower half before reluctantly pulling away. There would be time for this later, but right now, Ulysses needed to heal. When he was feeling better, Brent had a feeling both of them would have a whole lot of trouble keeping their hands off each other.

“Brent,” Ulysses whispered.

“Hmm.”

“Was it the concussion or did you really mean you want to be more than just friends with me?”

“I meant it. How do you feel about that?” Brent thought he had seen it in Ulysses’ eyes a few times but chalked it up to his own feelings clouding his judgment.

“I’ve wanted to be with you for a while but was too afraid of killing our friendship. Our friendship is really important to me.” Ulysses sighed and leaned back on the pillow to get a better view of him.

Brent walked around the couch to sit next to him. “I think if we’re both feeling this way, we need to give it a try.” Stroking the soft hair he continued,

“We’ve been friends for so long we should just go for it. I think it’s going to be pretty damn successful.”

Ulysses smiled. “You might want to be careful. My clumsiness could be contagious.”

Brent laughed. “I’m willing to take the risk.” He leaned down and gave Ulysses one more soft kiss before getting back up to unpack the rest of the groceries and prepare dinner.

Spaghetti basically consisted of a jar of sauce and boiling some noodles, but that was really all his cooking prowess allowed. Ulysses, although he did have a grease fire here and there, was the one who could cook. Hell, sometimes they were willing to take the risk and let him have at the kitchen while Brent sat with a fire extinguisher in his lap watching him. Okay... well, maybe not a fire extinguisher, since they didn’t own one, but a big damn box of baking soda.

Brent was stirring the noodles when he heard Ulysses shuffle into the kitchen to sit at the counter/pseudo dining table. He slid onto the stool, resting one elbow on the counter while the other arm was tucked into the sling.

“You shouldn’t be up. I was going to bring it out to you when I was done.” Brent went over to help Ulysses back to the couch but Ulysses put up his hand, stopping him.

“No, I want to eat sitting up. I’m uncomfortable lying out there. Once I have some food and the meds start kicking in, I’ll be ready to go back, but I need to stretch my legs for a while.” Ulysses leaned his chin on his hand and began to watch him cook.

They fell into a comfortable silence as Brent finished making the meal and served him a heaping plate of the noodles with red sauce. By the end of the meal, Ulysses was leaning a little to the left, falling asleep in his chair and almost doing a face plant into the plate that still had a bit of spaghetti in it.

“How about a bed tonight?” Brent helped Ulysses up, walking him down the hall.

“Will you sleep with me again?” Ulysses mumbled.

“Yeah, let me go clean and lock up, then I’ll come back and sleep there with you.”

Ulysses turned and grabbed him by the nape of the neck, meeting him eye to eye. Licking his lower lip, Ulysses leaned in and initiated a kiss for the very first time. Tilting his head, Brent deepened the kiss, moaning at the flavor of their shared dinner and Ulysses' own unique taste.

Brent felt himself being pushed lightly into the wall behind him as Ulysses molded himself to him. The sling got in the way, but Brent could feel both of their cocks rubbing against each other. Groaning, he pulled out of the kiss.

A small bead of sweat had built at Ulysses' temple. Brent took a deep breath, trying to get his arousal under control. No fucking way was he going to be able to, though.

"We are going to do this." Brent framed Ulysses' face with his hands as Brent leaned in to kiss him again. Stroking Ulysses cheeks. "Just not today. You're hurt and in no way are you in any shape to do anything right now. I care about you and we will do this when you're not in any discomfort. I can wait until you're better."

He wiped the beads of sweat off Ulysses' forehead.

Ulysses leaned forward and moaned into his shoulder. "God, I want you. I'm worried that after a couple days you'll regret it."

Squeezing Ulysses closer, Brent admonished, "Not gonna happen, okay? I regret us not getting together sooner. If we have to wait a couple of weeks to get physical, it won't kill me. It won't kill you either."

"It may," Ulysses grumbled.

"It won't, but your shoulder and head won't take us pounding each other into the mattress." Brent laughed as Ulysses gave him the stink eye, pulling out of his arms.

"You suck, Brent!" Ulysses marched off into the bedroom.

Chuckling, Brent yelled back, "Not yet, but I will."

Brent followed Ulysses in the bedroom, still laughing, and helped him into the bed, stacking pillows around his injury. "I'll be right back."

After getting the house closed down Brent went into his room and took a quick shower, then found a pair of shorts to sleep in. By the time he got back into Ulysses' room, he was sound asleep.

Brent crawled in and got as close as he could without injuring his man, and soon found himself losing himself to sleep.

CHAPTER FOUR

“I still don’t think you should be going in,” Brent yelled from his room.

Ulysses had heard it all morning long when he’d insisted on going into work today. His head was feeling much better and his shoulder—well, while it still hurt a lot, it wasn’t getting any better with him sitting on the couch. He needed to call the doctor this morning because he had a feeling he was going to be doing some physical therapy before it was all said and done.

Sighing, Ulysses replied back, “I’ll be fine.”

Brent leaned his head in while tying his tie. “Just call me if you need me to come pick you up at lunch. I already emailed my boss all the details. He’s cool with it.”

But Ulysses’ boss, Luke, wouldn’t be okay with him taking the day off, and that’s why he was going in. Luke needed help with the forecast coming up, and would be leaning on Ulysses heavily. No, he would go in, do his work, and then come home and crash later.

“I’m ready to go.”

Brent looked like he was about to protest, but instead walked into the kitchen to grab his keys and wallet while grumbling under his breath. Ulysses knew why. He looked at himself in the mirror this morning and saw that he looked like shit. His eyes were a little purplish underneath, and for the life of him, he couldn’t style his hair right with the stitches in the back. His dress shirt had a new accessory of the sling, which got pizza sauce on it last night when he dropped his slice. The stain was a testament to his unflappable grace... *not*.

Brent drove him right to the front door of his job. “Call me and I’ll come get you if you can’t make it.” Ulysses started to tell him he would be fine, but was cut off. “No, don’t even say it. If you are feeling bad, you need to come home. You’re not going to get better by working yourself too hard.”

Dreading the day, Ulysses walked into the building, a small headache already present. Sitting at his desk, he let out a puff of air and looked down,

lost at what to start with. Apparently, Luke had already been by this morning, and numerous files were stacked for him to work on.

He had just begun to work on the first file when he heard a throat clear behind his back. Ulysses turned in his chair to see Mr. Lewis, the Vice President of Finance, standing there. “Can I help you, sir?”

“You all right?” Mr. Lewis eyed him in concern.

“Huh?” *Nice...* Ulysses thought to himself. Way to sound professional to your boss’s boss.

Mr. Lewis made a gesture to the back of his head. “The stitches in the back of your head? And your arm.”

“Oh, that. I fell this weekend. I’ll be all right. It won’t hurt my performance, sir. I promise.” Ulysses could feel his nerves ratcheting up. He hadn’t ever talked to Mr. Lewis one on one before. He only had encounters when he was on the sidelines while his boss talked.

Mr. Lewis smiled back at him. “I didn’t think it would. If I could have a moment of your time, I’d like to meet with you in my office.”

“Sure.” Ulysses rose and followed Mr. Lewis down to his office, wondering what in the world was going on.

Mr. Lewis gestured him in with a wave of his hand through the doors, and Ulysses sat, rubbing his hand nervously on his slacks. He stared as Mr. Lewis sat down with a small smile on his face, leaning back and relaxing.

“So, I have a couple questions for you,” Mr. Lewis started out, and then for the next half hour the two of them went over the budget from last Friday’s meeting. He answered all questions proficiently, since he knew the budget front to back, even going so far as to expand on some of the questions. He wasn’t sure what it was all about, but he wasn’t going to question Mr. Lewis.

“Thank you, Ulysses. There were just a few things that were unclear to me, and I thought you would be the perfect person to go to for answers to my questions.”

He wasn’t sure how to reply to that, so he just sat there and nodded.

“You’re graduating in the winter, is that correct?”

Ulysses' eyebrows went up. How did he... "Yes, I had to stay an extra semester since I double-majored."

"Excellent. Make sure to send me your resume before you graduate. We have a high-potential program for people such as yourself who can become leaders in the company. Oh, and call me Patrick. We're colleagues." Patrick chuckled, reaching into his desk and pulling out his business card, handing it over to him. Ulysses winced in pain when he glanced down at the card.

"Do us a favor, take a couple of vacation days to heal up. I'll let Luke know you'll be in on Wednesday. I'll inform him he can take over your stuff until you're back." Patrick smirked.

Ulysses stared down at his shoes thinking, *Ooh, he was going to punish the poor bastard.*

Ulysses almost felt bad for Luke but... didn't. Luke shouldn't have taken credit for someone else's work and then tried to pull the wool over some very sharp people. Bite you in the ass every time.

Ulysses stood up, and shook the man's hand. "Thank you, Patrick. I'll see you on Wednesday, and I'll make sure to get my resume to you before I return for my last semester."

"Two weeks left?" Patrick inquired.

"Yes, then just four months more school." Ulysses couldn't wait.

Patrick clapped him lightly on the uninjured shoulder and walked him out of his office. Fate had it in for Luke on this fine Monday morning, because he was laughing it up, walking by at the moment. Dear Lord, the color drained from Luke's face as he saw Ulysses come out of Patrick's office. Turning, Ulysses spotted Patrick giving the most knowing look to Luke. How they were going to handle the situation, Ulysses didn't know. It wasn't his problem anymore.

Walking to his cubicle, he took out his phone to text Brent.

Can you come get me? Patrick gave me two days off.

A few seconds later, his phone vibrated.

Be there in ten.

Ulysses got up to leave and Richelle was standing at the opening. “You doing all right?”

“Yeah, I had a bit of a slip and fall.” Ulysses lightly touched the back of his head where the stitches were.

“I heard. I was going to call, but I heard from Gavin that you were in good hands.” Richelle giggled like a teenage girl.

“Yeah, yeah... Brent took care of me.” Ulysses could feel the blush creeping into his cheeks.

“Good,” Richelle said softly and came over to gently hug him. “I’m happy for you, sweetie.”

“Thanks, Richelle.”

Ulysses left to make his way outside and wait for Brent. The morning was beautiful and it would do him some good to sit in the sun, even if it was for a few minutes. He really didn’t have to wait long though. Brent pulled up just a few minutes later, a look of concern on his face.

“You okay?” Brent’s gaze scanned his face. He hoped he didn’t look any worse than this morning, but with the way Brent was looking at him, maybe he did.

“I’m fine. I had a meeting with Patrick this morning. Seems that Luke wasn’t able to answer all the questions in the Friday meeting on”—Ulysses made air quotes with one hand—“his own budget. Threw himself under the bus.”

“Yeah, if you’re going to steal someone else’s work, you better know your shit when presenting it. At my office, they would have fired him for being so unethical.” Brent shook his head, obviously showing his disgust.

“Well, I’m not sure what they’ll do to him, but it’s not my problem anymore.” And it wasn’t. He trusted the higher-ups to take care of it now that he’d gotten the recognition for his work. His hard work through this internship would not go unnoticed, and that’s all he cared about.

A short drive and Brent was dropping Ulysses off. “You need me to stay home?” Brent got out of the car and opened up the door for him.

“No, I’m just going to take a nap and make myself some lunch.” Ulysses went to walk toward the house but was stopped by a hand on his arm.

Brent leaned in and took him in an achingly soft kiss. Brent melded their bodies together, causing a heat to course through Ulysses’ body that had nothing to do with the sunshine. Brent licked his lower lip and Ulysses moaned, allowing him entrance. Tongues dueled and bodies began to rub against each other.

Brent pulled back. “We can’t get carried away. Go in, call the doctor and get your shoulder better.”

“You mean you’re not going to touch me until my shoulder’s healed?” Ulysses choked out. He was aching and hard.

“I didn’t say anything about total hands off, Ulysses, but we are going to have serious limitations.” Brent stroked the sling.

Ulysses sighed. “Okay, I’m going to call them today... before my nap.” *Spoilsport.*

Laughing, Brent got back into his car. “Do what you have to!”

Surly and horny, Ulysses charged up the stairs, tripping on the last step. *Dammit!* He had a mission to get better, and his clumsy butt was not going to make his recovery last longer. Going straight for the numbers on the fridge, he found his doctor’s. Opening his phone, he dialed. After getting through the various numbers that needed pressing to get to a receptionist, he said, “Hello, I’d like to make an appointment.”

CHAPTER FIVE

Four very long weeks later

Yanking off his tie, Brent made his way into the house. It had been a long-ass week, and he was ready to do some relaxing with Ulysses. God, things were going amazingly between them. His internship had turned into a full time position, so the two of them had kept the rental. With Ulysses back in school for his final semester, Brent made sure his roommate would only have to pay peanuts. Ulysses insisted on paying something, so Brent relented... grudgingly.

Between physical therapy and school, there was no way Ulysses could get a job right now. So all the money he saved over the summer was going into food and rent. It was only short term, though. According to Ulysses, he'd turned his resume on his last day, and Patrick Lewis was holding a part-time position for him when he was done with physical therapy. The absolute joy on Ulysses' face when he came home on his last day had them going out to celebrate that night.

And that's where Ulysses was now, at physical therapy. Brent was anticipating this day as much as Ulysses. He was waiting to get the all clear for physical activity. Oh sure, they had done some stuff, but they couldn't very well make love when his shoulder was injured. Well, they could, but it would hurt like hell. So, they both chose to wait and gave mutual hand jobs and oral sex to keep them from going out of their ever lovin' minds.

Walking into their bedroom, because yeah, they were sharing a bed now, Brent decided a quick shower would do him a world of good to wash away all the tension from the week. Shedding his clothes, he entered the bathroom, turning on the water to get it nice and hot. Stepping in, he moaned as the hot water cascaded down tight muscles.

Brent had his head thrown back and was washing his hair when he felt a draft. Peeking one eye open, he watched as Ulysses stepped into the tub in front of him. They had replaced that piece of shit shower curtain and got a new one that fit the tub much better. Plus they added rubber flowers on the bottom

of the tub to prevent slipping. It looked tacky, but at least no one would fall ass over teacups anymore.

Ulysses reached up and took over scrubbing the shampoo into Brent's hair, adding a nice massage with his strong fingers. Groaning, Brent commented, "I see you're using both arms."

"Yep, I just got the all clear. Step back." Ulysses rinsed Brent's hair, and then Brent felt full lips begin to suck on his neck. Heat rushed to his groin and he could feel his cock thicken.

"God, that feels good," Brent moaned.

"We're both going to be feeling really good tonight and this entire weekend. You're mine now." Ulysses smirked into his neck.

Brent was amazed to see that in just a few short weeks Ulysses had come into his own. A little turnaround at work and disclosing their feelings to each other seemed to make a world of difference. Hell, Brent felt different too. There was no weight of worrying that their friendship would be destroyed if he expressed himself. Ulysses must have been the same way.

They washed quickly, since the tub was still too small for them to do anything. Rinsing, they got out and Brent helped Ulysses. He couldn't help it, Brent had trouble with the lip of the tub too, and he didn't ever want to see Ulysses hurt like that again. Brent knew Ulysses wasn't spun glass but it didn't hurt him to be a gentleman... right?

Brent snagged a towel off the counter, then wiped Ulysses and himself down. He was hard and aching, making him rush and miss a few droplets. Without thinking, he leaned in and licked one off of Ulysses' shoulder. Then he lowered himself, seeing the wet cock, and decided that he would do a much better job than the towel.

Grabbing the thick, hard cock in front of him, he slowly licked away the water droplets.

"Shit that feels so good," Ulysses groaned out.

Brent continued to lick and suck, swallowing the cock all the way to the root. He loved the taste of Ulysses.

"Brent... need to stop... or I'm gonna," Ulysses choked out.

Brent pulled back, giving one last slow lick to the tip before standing up to see Ulysses heaving in pent-up passion.

Ulysses held his hand as he guided them toward the bed. Brent watched as Ulysses lay down on the bed with a welcoming smirk. Walking over to the nightstand to grab supplies, he almost tripped over his own damn feet when Ulysses grabbed his own cock and gave it a few strokes while arching his back. *Damn*. Fumbling his way through the drawer, Brent grabbed the box of condoms and lube before climbing up onto the bed next to Ulysses.

Uncapping the lube, Brent poured a small dollop onto the tips of his fingers and replaced his hand with Ulysses'. Feeling the heated flesh of Ulysses' cock was sending his body into overdrive. But since they had been patient this long, there was no way in hell he was going to ruin it with last minute rushing.

"Feels good, Brent... hmmm... more *please*." Ulysses keened the last part.

Brent sat up to get a better angle, using both hands on Ulysses' cock at first, then took one greased hand and began circling his entrance. Watching for signs of discomfort, Brent breached Ulysses with the tip of his finger. He worked the finger all the way in, and then used two fingers, scissoring them until Ulysses was pushing back on the digits. Adding a third finger was driving Brent to the brink when Ulysses began to fuck himself on them.

Shakily, Brent removed his fingers to Ulysses' protests and tore open a condom. *Damn*, his hands were shaking so bad he could barely glove up. Finally, after a few attempts, the condom was on and he spread Ulysses' legs, making room for himself.

Lining up his cock, Brent began to slowly push in.

"More, Brent. Please!" Ulysses shouted.

"Need to go slow. I don't want to hurt your shoulder." Brent groaned when he sank in another inch.

"I can take it. Harder." Moaning, Ulysses threw his head back on the pillow, squeezing his eyes shut in obvious frustration.

Trying to meet his lover halfway, Brent did a slow glide until he completely bottomed out. Ulysses' eyes shot open, pupils dilated, and for a

few seconds, Brent thought he'd hurt him until Ulysses grabbed his own cock and began to stroke it.

Brent only made a few pumps of his hips before he felt the warmth of Ulysses' cum hit his stomach, and glancing down, watched a shot hit Ulysses in the chin. Seeing that and feeling Ulysses clamp down on his cock was more than he could take. Huffing out a breath, Brent pumped one more time before he started to climax into the condom.

Ulysses reached up for Brent and together they claimed each other's mouth in a deep kiss that was anything but gentle. They grabbed at each other's hair to get impossibly closer, and Brent felt himself get a little hard just having his hair pulled. Learning something new, he would have to tell Ulysses hair pulling was definitely his new hot button.

Careful not to hurt Ulysses, he pulled out, and rolled off to retrieve a towel to clean them up and remove the condom.

"Forget it, Brent. We need another shower." Ulysses chuckled. "We have lube all in our hair."

"As long as we do it together. I wouldn't want you to fall again."

Ulysses gave him a smile that showed so much love it almost took Brent's breath away. Sure, they knew they both loved each other, but had never said it aloud. Everyday actions for the past month were the big tell for them.

Ulysses got up and pulled Brent into his naked body. "I won't fall. I've got you now to catch me. Right?"

Brent hugged Ulysses to him and whispered, "I don't need to catch you anymore, you are more than capable on your own two feet, but I can stand next to you and... love you."

Ulysses squeezed him tight. "Love you too, Brent."

Pulling back, Ulysses gave him a small kiss on the lips. Then they showered and got ready for their Friday night pizza and a movie.

THE END

Author Bio

Short, sexy and sweet—where a little love goes a long way.

That's the best way to describe Jackie Nacht's stories. I was introduced to M/M Romance through my sister, Stephani, and read it for years. Then, I thought it was time to put my own stories on paper. I began writing short and sweet stories that ended with a happily ever after... and sometimes more than one, in the case of my YA Fork in the Road series, which has interactive endings.

Thinking back to my own book addiction, where there were many nights I stayed up way too late so I could read just one more chapter—yeah, right—I decided to write short romances for young adults as well as adults. Hopefully, they will give high school and college students, or working men and women something they can read during their lunch hour, in between classes or just when they want to briefly get away from the daily stresses of everyday life.

Contact & Media Info

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[Website](#) | [Blog](#) | [Facebook](#) | [Twitter](#) | [Goodreads](#)

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B-SIDES

By Cheryl Nitely

Photo Description

A bare-chested cowboy stands in a stark, fenced pasture. The image is black and white—emphasizing the long shadows of the trees and the solitary figure of one man, alone. He is wearing faded, worn jeans and a black cowboy hat, which obscures his down-turned face. His chest is broad and deeply muscled; he carries a western saddle by the horn in one hand, as if the weight means nothing to him.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

All this time spent singing in those smoky bars trying to get to the top, and after finally making it, I now only have fame and fortune to keep me company. The one person I wanted at my side has left me and it is all my fault. What do I do now? I'm so lost.

Do I continue with my successful career that I worked so hard for, or leave it all behind for the love of my life? Can there really only be two choices? Someone help me, please.

Lonely Cowboy

[Notes: Mild BDSM and “make me cry” angst are okay but I’m a sucker for HEA or HFN. The song Weathered by Creed also inspired me along with the photo.]

Sincerely,

JoAnn

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: celebrities, closeted, country musicians, cowboys, edging, HFN, light BDSM, radio DJs, sex toys

Content warnings: explicit

Word count: 19,327

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Special thanks to A.L. Boyd and Nancy Canu for their editing talents, as well as everyone involved in the LHNB team. I'm astounded at the amount of time and dedication that goes into these events.

B-SIDES

By Cheryl Nitely

CHAPTER 1

February 28, 2011

I knew I could get into Wyatt Ford's pants when he tried to light my hand on fire.

As a guest star of his show, I was sitting on a stool in a Nashville radio studio where he and his buddy Phil host a nationally syndicated country-music morning show. Wyatt was standing just inside my left knee—closer than he needed to be. Any closer, he'd be straddling it. I admit my mind went there for half a second—long enough for my dick to wake up and tell me I'd kind of like to see that DJ ride me. The way he was brushing up against my leg was my first clue that if I wanted in his pants—or maybe even wanted to watch him ride me—I could get a front-row ticket to that show.

My rational mind was screaming to back off but my cock chimed in to my mental thought process with, *What are you thinking, son? A front-row ticket's fine and dandy but if this good old boy's gonna throw in a backstage pass, we're so getting in on that.*

The second clue clicked into place when he reached for my left hand to apply hand sanitizer. His back was to his buddy and the window of the control room was to the far right—the angle was all wrong for any of his coworkers to see his face and all right for some discreet indiscretion. Wyatt didn't need to hold my hand to run a line of sanitizer down the center of my palm, but he did it anyway. He rested the back of his hand holding mine on my thigh. His thumb massaged the sanitizer into the center of my palm... his fingers tracing my knuckles. I felt every skim of his fingers on my hand in my cock. The last thing I needed was to sport a boner if this guy was just a redneck with a man crush. I could just see it: as soon as I cleared out of here, the only thing he'd want was enough gossip to fuck up my career.

Almost involuntarily, I went to pull my knees together and bumped into his thighs. I was awarded with a quirk of his lips that leaned toward a smile, a

smile that seemed to scream at me, *I know. Oh, I know what you like.* My stomach dropped down five inches, and I felt my ass slam shut.

Constant creeping fear tends to douse arousal. The emotional crutch of fear has been something I've relied on for the better part of my career to hide my sexuality. What game was this guy playing? I'd come in to play a little guitar, talk some smack to promote the last couple weeks of a tour, and get a couple promotional pictures taken with their DJs or on-air personalities—whatever those boys liked to be called these days. Even with digital releases, country-music DJs were still key gatekeepers to my listeners. I'd been through this studio before—I'd interviewed with Phil for years. This Wyatt guy was new, though.

I wiggled on the stool. Under the bill of his ball cap, he wasn't looking at my hand. His golden-brown eyes peeped out to make eye contact with me. Long eye contact. Significant eye contact that carried along with it a ghost of a smile in the lines around his eyes and mouth. I met his eyes for a moment. Then, I'll be damned if those pretty brown eyes didn't dart down to my crotch, and then up to meet mine again. I shook my head tightly at him trying to communicate that he needed to chill out. I tried to swallow and reached for a bottle of water on the worktable behind Wyatt. My throat was suddenly dry—which was not a good thing for me. Yeah, he was a redneck. And he might even be one with a man crush on the country star. But he sure looked like he wanted more than gossip.

“Ford! You're not supposed to rub it in. Jesus. He's gonna go up in flames,” Phil Cooper called over to us from his board behind a bank of computer monitors.

Wyatt shrugged and smiled weakly at me, licking his lower lip. As he slowly pulled his hand away, he wrapped one hand around my index finger, squeezing it briefly, stroking it like... well, a cock. *Okaaaaaaay. And if that wasn't the universal hand signal for “I wanna give you a hand job”, I didn't know what was.*

In all honestly, I really didn't know what much was. My experience with men was severely limited to one guy and what I could watch on the Internet. When my career took off, that was pretty much the end of my one gay

relationship, if you could call it that. Women threw themselves at me on an hourly basis. But country music lent me a shield array that kept me off most guys' gaydars. Country stars just aren't gay. It might have happened to Chely Wright but she was a woman—and guys, that's just kind of hot, right? But male country stars? Big, masculine dudes like J.R. Hall—no way.

So, I'm a gay man with no idea of how to be gay and absolutely no idea of what to do with a dude trying to pick me up in the middle of a media interview.

About that time, their producer and staff brought out video cameras and Wyatt backed off. Ended up, my hand did go up in flame for about two seconds and that was the extent of it. Just a blue flash in the palm, literally. From the look on his face, that suited my manager Slade Allen just fine. He was over in the corner rubbing one of his temples probably trying not to imagine me finishing up the last two weeks of a tour with third-degree burns. The program director behind the glass wall looked pretty relieved, too. No one knows how to have fun anymore.

My palm's burn time didn't beat any of the records other artists had pulled when they came on this show—but in my defense, Wyatt rubbed in most of the sanitizer he applied. Guy would be damned handy at the beach... and my mind skipped forward to the mental image of Wyatt, naked, reaching behind his back, applying lube to himself. My eyes flitted over to Wyatt at that thought, raking over his waist, his chest, and up to his neck. He was cute actually—not what I've come to expect from radio DJs. Not to generalize but most of them are good old boy Bubbas. Balding, big guys with radio faces and smart mouths.

Not Wyatt Ford. He looked lean to me—tight but finely muscled like he was a runner, maybe. He had light-brown curls poking out from around that ball cap. He had that contradiction between country and cosmopolitan down pat. I knew musicians who paid stylists handsomely to accomplish that kind of incongruity. His jeans were ripped, artistically and purposefully, covering a round ass I'd noticed way before we even started playing with fire. Shelly, my wardrobe guru slash stylist, had a pair of jeans with that same designer tag on them for me in wardrobe. Like a lot of my country-star clothes, I refused to

wear them unless forced. No Wrangler's for Wyatt, though. The colors in his clothes also matched, something I paid other people to make happen in my life when I was going somewhere it mattered. His goatee was trimmed neatly but the tag of his tucked-in black T-shirt stuck out the back of his shirt over the collar of an unbuttoned flannel shirt. The guy had his shirt on inside out.

He was arguing vocally with Cooper over by his console about who was really their reigning flaming-palm champion, his hands animated and flying in the air. He'd be a screamer, I bet. When he caught my eye, he paused and grinned at me. I felt like I'd been busted. My interest in him felt like it was painted plainly on my face. I shrugged and smiled, then glanced over at Phil Cooper. He was rattling on about a contest but kept looking back and forth between Wyatt and myself, his eyes narrowing when they landed on Wyatt. Was Phil picking up on my interest in Wyatt? I kept my face blank. But, yep, my gut feeling said I'd been busted. I needed to say something to cover it.

"I see why you sit across from him and not next to him, Coop. Less collateral damage. He ever smack himself in the face arguing with you like that?" I leaned forward and spoke into the mic.

Cooper snorted. "Only every time I win the argument, which I guess makes that DAY-LEEE."

I laughed. "Y'all can't see this out in radio-land but when Wyatt argues with Coop he looks like a one-man catfight."

Cooper laughed.

"Hmm, yeah, real funny, Hall. Comedy? Not your calling. Let's see, how's that saying go? Oh yeeeah, I think it's 'shut up and sing'," Wyatt quipped and raised his eyebrows at me.

"Ouch. Harsh. But sure, how about a song? I think I still have enough feeling in my hands to pick out enough of a tune to be recognizable," I said into the mic. "Anyone got a request?" I reached for my guitar and Coop picked up my cue.

"We're down here at 1-800-555-7834 with J.R. Hall in the studio. Call us with your requests and we'll put this guy to work. You can hit us up on our Ford and the Coop feed online at..." Cooper rattled on about various ways for fans to send in their requests.

I adjusted my guitar strap, mentally bringing myself back to center. By rote, my hands ran over my guitar checking connections and drifting into the place I mentally go when I perform.

After I played a couple songs, the station's PR people took promotional shots around the station's call-letter signage and the guys' show-syndication signage. I cued in to what had tripped my radar. No matter what we were doing, Phil Cooper managed to physically insinuate himself between Wyatt and me. I needed to wrap this up and get away from these guys. Wyatt was a hot little country mess, and my instincts were telling me Phil was well aware that I was becoming well aware of it. I did not need to be in the middle of that. I did wonder if Phil was doing it because he was jealous or because he was a bigot. Or maybe both.

Sitting in the station manager's office listening to Slade make plans for later that week at CRS—Country Radio Seminar, I wondered what was up with Wyatt's handsy act in the studio. Was he gay? Had he heard a rumor that I didn't know was making the rounds and he was fucking with me? Either way, what kind of balls did it take to hit on a country star in the middle of an interview?

People handle me all the time—messaging with my hair, clothes, and makeup. They mic me and adjust me and my equipment before I step out onto any stage. All of it—impersonal. I don't think I remember the last time someone touched me for the purpose of just touching me. And Wyatt Ford had been most definitely touching me rather than handling me. He edged right past my intimidating rep.

See, I'm a big guy. Most people think I'm a scary guy, too, because I'm quiet. When I do say something, it's deep—dangerously low in register, in fact. I didn't used to be this way, but living a mainly public life that is ninety-five percent lie in the name of country music has taught me to hold back most of what and who is really, authentically, me. I used to be a little wild growing up, outgoing, loud and probably obnoxious if you asked my daddy. Now I'm what people call brooding. Some woman reporter actually wrote that about me—“Hall is the brooding Healthcliff of the country-music industry”—in an *Entertainment Country News* article last year. Like I'm some kind of dark romantic hero. The only thing she got right is my torment but she didn't

scratch the surface as to why. Don't believe my press. They think I'm a tragic widower whose silence is a way of mourning a dead wife. But they don't know anything real about me. They sure as hell don't know I'm gay, and the only thing I'm mourning is that the choices I had to make for living my dream left me guilt-ridden, with a life pretty much void of personal happiness.

The fact is, I was lonely, and I was tired of it.

The station manager and Slade were deep into mutual schmoozing and working out a schedule for me to record some promotional segments at CRS for their broadcasting corporation's affiliate stations. This was the last round of them I intended to do, but I wanted to get them done and Slade knew that. I excused myself to go find the men's room.

I was washing my hands when I heard the door open. I turned to leave and found Wyatt leaning up against the door, blocking my exit.

Drying my hands and tossing the brown paper towel into the trash, I moved toward the door. I expected him to step out of the way. He didn't.

"Finish your show all right?" I asked. I reached for the door handle and pulled. He moved slightly to block me and used his weight to keep the door closed.

"Show was great. You were great. Freddie told me you were still around. I'm glad I caught you," he replied.

"Hmm. Well, sure seems 'caught me' about covers it." I released the door handle and looked down at him expectantly. Standing face to face, I was a good eight inches taller. I'm six six and I put him a couple inches shy of six foot, if he was lucky.

"We'll be at CRS all week. Will I see you there?" Wyatt asked. He didn't seem to want to move, just kept chatting up his captive audience.

"You might. I think Slade was working that out with Fred when I stepped out."

"Cause, I gotta tell you, J.R., I'd like to see you again."

There it was. I took a breath. Released it. I waited. Silence was always my answer, my go-to when something related to being gay came up. For someone

who made a living creating sound, silence served me well. If I waited long enough, someone would always fill the blanks, hopefully with the wrong assumption.

This was apparently a lesson Wyatt also understood. He leaned his shoulders back against that bathroom door with his arms crossed over his chest staring up at me. He looked like he'd stubbornly settled into waiting for my reply as long as it took me to get around to giving it.

"Uh-huh." I eyed him. "You think that's a good idea, do you?" I figured I would just turn it around on him.

"Oh yeah. I think you do too."

I didn't know what to think of that or what to say. I was to the point where I wanted to know what was going on, for sure.

"What do you think is going on here, Ford?" *That's right*, I mentally congratulated myself, *use his last name and get some distance on this thing*.

He stared at me. I stared back. It was a moment of truth and the truth is: I'm a coward. I was a coward when I decided to lead a life that was a lie. I was a coward when I gave up who I loved to do what I love. He could stare me down all day long but when it came to coming out, I could hold this stare until one of us passed from this earth.

"Ah, J.R.," he sighed, and then he reached up and touched the side of my face tenderly, cupping my cheek.

Thinking back, I would have sworn I'd been holding my breath; but the moment I felt the touch of his hand on my skin, I inhaled sharply. All it took was a simple tip of my head to press my chin into his embrace.

"Yeah," I breathed a soft reply that was barely a whisper. "Yeah, I thought that was what you were getting at."

"I'm not wrong here, am I, J.R.?" His eyes traveled my face.

"Why? What are you gonna do with that? Tell the whole world J.R. Hall is a faggot on your show's country-music-gossip segment tomorrow morning?" The words came out harsh, angry.

He had the grace to look hurt and shook his head slowly. If my burden of guilt didn't already tip the scales at maximum capacity, I might have had the

conscience to feel a bit more. But fear and desire were too busy battling it out in my beating chest for me to hold any leftover remorse for Wyatt.

“I’m gonna do this,” he whispered this time. He gripped my face in both hands and pulled me down while he stretched up to kiss me at the same time.

You could say I was shocked but not surprised. The tension had been building since he’d played his little fire-starter game.

Dear Lord, his mouth. Hard and forceful in all the right places. It’d been two years since Ericka died. Hi left years ago, with the fame that brought the lies and the women. I hadn’t kissed anyone since before Ericka’s death and definitely no man after Hite. I hoped sometimes that maybe I was asexual or maybe I was just Hite-sexual and loving him when I was so young messed me up for loving women later. Wyatt was making me think otherwise.

I could feel Wyatt’s lips moving against mine. Part of my mind was screaming, *Oh no, no, no. Now he’s gonna know I’m gay.* And the other part was rejoicing, *Oh, yes, he’ll know I’m gay.*

Wyatt’s lips moved under my mouth, still seeking entrance. He tugged me to him face-first so he was pressed between the door and my body. His mouth opened to me and his tongue knew none of the pretense the rest of him played at. I knew, somehow, he was waiting for me take over, to step over that precipice in my nature. But I wasn’t sure I wanted to. His hands slid to my shoulders and then down around my back, falling to my waist. His mouth grew more aggressive as he hauled my hips against him. We didn’t quite match up because of our height difference, so he worked his thigh between mine and my thigh between his. I was already falling, lost, when I felt his hands slide around to my ass.

I planted my hands on either side of his head, my palms flat to the door, and opened my mouth to him: I just let him kiss me.

How do you even begin to describe the difference between kissing a man and a woman? Yeah, women are softer. But I think I would be able to tell I had a man under my lips if I were blind and deaf. The scrape of his goatee didn’t discourage me. Nor did the column of hardening cock I could feel him grinding against my thigh. I was that much taller than him. I knew my own

cock and belt buckle were probably digging into his stomach. All of these parts of him felt male, and something tight inside me unwound in relief. When I'd been with women, I had to always try so fucking hard. Just the maleness alone set me both at ease and off, simultaneously. Sex with women felt like some of the exercises the trainer I'd canned last year tried to make me take up. Spin class. Christ, so much work to get absolutely nowhere. This kiss felt like the pins in a lock tumbling open. It scared me stupid.

Stupid enough to stop. I pulled back and the kiss drew to a close. I was scared and I think we both needed air. I needed to get out before I fell into something deeper than a kiss.

I stepped back, untangling our legs, and wiped my mouth with the back of my hand.

"I got to get back out there. They're gonna miss me if I'm gone any longer," I told him.

"I want to see you," he said.

"I'm right here." I pulled the ball cap off my head and ran a hand through my hair.

"I mean again. I want more." He stepped away from the door and toward the sinks.

I followed him over. "I don't see how that can work, Wyatt. I need to know what you plan on doing about this."

"I told you, I want to see you. Hang out. I felt something with you. And you know how it is in this industry, if you're in the public eye and gay, you're in the closet. Country stars have the biggest closets in the world, and it's not because of their fucking wardrobes. Although the rhinestone cowboy hats probably take up a hell of a lot of room," Wyatt said with a smirk.

"Heh," I snorted. "All my cowboy hats are straw or felt—got a couple fancy leather ones the wardrobe folks keep around for shows. Can't say I have one rhinestone cowboy hat to my name."

"Cause you're not out. Come out and I'll send you one."

"Thanks, no. The last thing I need is a rhinestone cowboy hat," I said and rolled my eyes, not mentioning the other last thing I needed—being out.

“No? Not enough compromisin’ on the road to your horizon to warrant one yet?”

I laughed bitterly, and nodded to let him know I got the unsubtle hint. “I wouldn’t say that. You’re kind of a smart-ass, Wyatt. And, you don’t look all that out to me. Last time I looked, we had the same audience. Is that what you’re doing here, outing cowboys? Do you drag everyone in here and give them the Wyatt Ford Gay Litmus Test?”

“Hey I like that... the Wyatt Ford Gay Litmus Test. Can I steal that line?” He laughed.

I sighed. “You can have it. As far as we’re concerned, this” —I waved my hand back and forth between us—“never happened.”

“Noooooo. No, J.R. Don’t be like that. I... like you. I really would like to hang out some time.”

“I don’t have to ask you to keep this between us, do I? I mean something like this... my fans are your fans. It’d hurt us both.”

“J.R., I’d never out you.”

“All right, then. Well, maybe I’ll see you around CRS. We can grab a beer and talk there, maybe.”

He looked at me and knew what I was really saying. I turned and headed for the door before he could say anything else. The kind of hanging out he wanted to do with me wasn’t going to happen at a country music seminar event, or at a bar after said event, surrounded by music industry figures, both public and private. The events would be for networking and securing loyalties and, thereby, music airplay. The next week was for kissing radio-executive ass, not kissing hot little morning show DJs.

CHAPTER 2

“Where’d you go there at the end of the meeting?” Slade asked when we got into the SUV.

I still lived on the fifty-acre farm I bought with my late wife Ericka south of Nashville, out past Franklin. I didn’t hate it. I didn’t love it, either. What I did like was that it was remote, which normally translated to private. But remote at that moment meant I was going to be locked in a conversation with Slade for the next thirty minutes, at least.

“Don’t even try to tell me you were schmoozing. I know you better than that.” Slade weaved in and out of traffic.

I looked out the window and answered him, “Men’s room. I ran into Wyatt Ford. He was talking about getting together this week during CSR.” I shrugged.

“That’s not a bad plan. He and Phil Cooper just signed on several new, huge metropolitan areas to their show. They’ve got one of the highest-ranked syndicated morning shows in country music.”

“Yeah? Where’d he come from anyway? I never did get that story. Phil had some other good old boy with him the last time we did this gig, Buddy or something.”

“His name was Bob Edmundson. He had a heart attack and retired. I think Wyatt and Phil go way back. The production manager was telling me they went to Alabama together and worked together before, but not for years. They headhunted Wyatt when Bob retired. They needed someone with the right chemistry to balance Phil. I think Wyatt was with a rock station in California.”

“Is that so?” I turned to Slade for a moment and then looked back out the window.

“Yep, I think it’s so.”

“Well, it explains a lot,” I said.

“A lot of what?” Slade asked.

“Wyatt. Being from California. Not working in country music. The guy...

well, he don't have a radio face, if you know what I mean," I answered. I knew I sounded like a dick but Slade knew me better than anyone.

Slade looked over at me. "No, what do you mean by that?"

"Too pretty."

Slade was quiet a moment. "Is that so?"

"Yep, Slade, I do believe it's so." I looked over at him and raised an eyebrow.

Slade's mouth quirked toward a smile he didn't think I saw. He could be a snide bastard at times. "J.R., you stoic bastard, are you making a friend?"

"Don't be an ass."

"Uh-huh. But I'm so good at it."

"Did you schedule those promos for tomorrow?"

"Yes, it will be the last ones you can do for a while."

"Or like ever. I want to get these nailed down, now. I don't know what's going to happen with my voice... we have that TV thing that starts this summer, right? That'll be less straining."

"*Breakout Stars* starts filming in August. J.R., you need to just have the surgery."

"Not yet. I'm not ready to end my career yet."

"You know that's not going to happen. The odds that the surgery will be success—"

"The odds are my voice will never be the same."

I turned up the radio and pretended to watch the scenery fly by for the rest of the trip.

I hate coming back off the road.

The quiet of an empty house, or in my case, two empty houses, is constricting. I panic at the eclipse of the public light of scrutiny, the absence of the mad crush of people that pepper my every step, and the void of the

companionship I get from the band and the rest of the staff I travel with—even though I hold them at arm’s length. Even when Ericka was still alive, coming back to the farm meant shedding my public plumage and being myself. Facing myself is something I’ve tried not to do for many years. For me, it’s just easier to be performing and working, so I arranged my life so I would always be working.

That intensity had taken a toll on my life and my voice.

When Slade dropped me off, no one was around so I headed for my studio house. When we moved to the farm, Ericka and I converted one of the guesthouses to a recording studio, and left the other for the live-in farm manager. We both recorded there. Even if it had been just one of us in the business, it still would have been a reasonable addition, a sound investment. The rest of the studio house still had space enough for a bedroom and a business office. I mostly lived there instead of the three-floor monstrosity down the drive.

The staff all think it’s because I can’t bear to be in the big house after Ericka died. Most people misconstrue my guilt and my remorse, even I do at times. My wife died from aggressive esophageal cancer. The public onslaught of sympathy from the country-music industry was overwhelming; they, too, lost one of their own. I’d always stood a little apart because of my tendency to not let anyone get too close. But Ericka’s death shoved me into a whole other echelon. My career was still skyrocketing from the notoriety that came with the tragic loss of my sham of a marriage. The more I protested it; the more people credited me as being noble. Sleeping in the house I shared with her just made the guilt worse.

The other fact of the matter is I grew up in a small house on a ranch, as a ranch foreman’s son. When I was off the road, the loneliness was crushing, and the foreignness of a big, echoing house only made it seem worse. So, my housekeeper lived in the big house and I lived in the studio house.

That afternoon, it was there that I found my mail.

CHAPTER 3

I grabbed a bottled water on my way in—I nearly always have one with me to keep my vocal cords hydrated—and the stack of mail my manager and staff determined was either personal or something I might want to see. I flipped the TV on to ESPN and started to work through the pile. I noticed the masthead of the alumni magazine from the Agriculture college at the University of Florida in the stack. I am continually amazed at the ability of the university's alumni foundation to hunt me down and mail me at my personal address. I truly believe nothing short of witness protection would shield me from them; and even then, if I still had a dime to my name, I'm pretty sure they'd still find me. I pulled the magazine out, meaning to set it aside as the start of my toss-away pile when the cover hit me.

On the cover, a blond man leaned against the gate of a ranch I knew very well. Hite Loventhrice. I felt my breath catch. Seeing just a picture of Hi made my heart rate triple. He looked good. And he wasn't alone. A man I didn't recognize stood on the other side of the Love Trust Ranch sign. I thumbed the magazine pages looking for the story. Who was this guy? New foreman? No, no. Dad would have told me if he'd been retiring; I'm distant but I'm not an irresponsible son. I found the story, finally. The headline said that the owner of the Love Trust Ranch and his new partner published a range cattle study. My brain was in overdrive and pieces of words were coming at me in chunks. I wasn't going to be able to read this until I'd calmed down. What I was getting out of it was that the ranch had a new partner and no one told me. Were they in trouble? I told Dad I would buy in if it ever came to them losing or selling off parcels of land.

I hit the number for my dad on my cell and waited.

"Yeaap." I heard my dad pick up. "Jebidiah Hall speaking."

I shook my head. My dad almost has phone manners. Almost.

"Hey Dad, it's me."

"Lo, son. Where you at this week, John Roy?" He actually sounded glad to hear from me. I felt a fresh stab of guilt. My dad always supported me, even if he didn't agree with my life choices.

“Ah, I’m at the farm near Nashville. Have to be in town for this radio event—you know the one where Ericka won the New Face in Country Music Award before she got sick. Have to shoot a video if the weather works out next weekend. Gonna use one of the fields here on the farm. Just depends on if there’s snow,” I answered.

“You should shoot down here. No snow at Love Ranch, I guarantee it,” he said. He always tries to get me to visit. I rarely do.

“Probably won’t be snow here either but still—can’t do it in Florida, Dad. They want it all stark looking, and everything here is still brown from winter.”

“It’s the palm trees, ain’t it? Nobody ever thinks a cattle ranch should have palm trees.”

“That’s probably part of it. Listen Dad, I got this magazine in the mail…” I started.

“Oh, so you got that, did you?” His voice changed. I could hear a strain of weariness work its way into the cadence of his Florida accent.

“What is this about a new partner? Is the ranch in trouble? I told you I’d buy in if it ever came to that. It’s my home, too. Tell me Hi and his dad didn’t sell off any land. Jesus. Who is this guy?” I hammered him with questions, taking no breaths.

He waited and sighed. Jeb Hall approached people the way he approached a bull on a tear; he was the kind of man to let you run out of steam before he spoke.

“John Roy.”

“I’m done.”

“That would be Brad. He’s not that kind of partner. Not a ranch partner.”

“He’s some kind of researcher?”

“Well, yeah. That and more.”

I picked up the magazine and looked at it again, scanning the story. Dr. Brad Williams, life partner to Associate Professor Hite Loventhrice.

“Oh. Oh fuck.”

“Language, John Roy.”

I rolled my eyes. “Yes sir. Sorry. But what the hell does this guy do—” I started.

“Son, you made your choice. There’s no gay in country music. Isn’t that what you always said? Hite, well, John Roy, he took another path. Leave the boy be. He’s happy enough for the moment.”

“But...” I wanted to know more. Hite had a partner? He’d really settled down with someone else. The realization felt so... final. I always thought... Well, that one day...

“No but about it, Johnnie. As your life stands, you got what you wanted.”

“Fuck.”

“John Roy, language. Your momma’d slap you stupider than you already act if she was still around.”

I half laughed, half grunted. The man had my number.

“If your life ain’t what you want Johnnie, you change it. But I won’t have you goin’ and messin’ around in Hite’s happiness. He’s doin’ his research and workin’ on this tenure thing. He’s findin’ his way to fit in down here and be who he is. You boys...” My dad coughed. He was comfortable with a lot but not everything. “Well, he moved on and it’s long past time for you to do that, too. I think things with Ericka would have been easier if you had—” I didn’t hear anything else he said because I started talking over him.

“I know Dad, you think I don’t think about that every day?”

“That’s what I’m saying, Son, it’s time to let go and start finding somethin’ to make you happy. And right now, muddlin’ around with Hite ain’t gonna be it.”

We said our good-byes and hung up, with me promising a visit we both knew I wouldn’t make any time soon.

I grew up on a cattle ranch in South Florida loving two things equally with all my heart. One was country music. The other one was Hite Loventhrice. It didn’t dawn on me until I got a lot older that the two were mutually exclusive.

By the time I knew enough to understand that, we'd loved each other and hurt each other too much to do a damned bit about it.

If truth be told—and with me, it never, ever is—I wouldn't have changed it. What time I had with Hi was ours, something I felt was sacred. If it was all we were ever going to get, I now treasured all of it. Ericka's death taught me that. There's a cruel irony that my not loving her gave me the freedom to love what I had with him. That was one of the many gifts and curses of Ericka's death. I wouldn't have traded the time I had with Hi for anything. Usually dwelling on the point that Ericka showed me how to treasure my time with Hi only made me feel more guilty. But that day, thinking about Hi on that ranch in someone else's arms felt like a bow rake running over my soul.

Then again, I guess that's the whole point of a bow rake—it rips up the soil to prepare it for something else to grow.

I spent that long, dark night drinking beer—which I'm not supposed to do with the nodes and scarring I have on my vocal cords—and staring into the fire, measuring my daddy's words about moving on against memories of Hi and my encounter with Wyatt Ford.

There was a time when I was angry and hurt and I hated everything about Hi and myself.

My daddy works for Hi's daddy on the Love Trust Ranch, and he has for all of my life that I remember. I don't have memories from my childhood that start any earlier than that ranch and Hi. He'd always been my best friend and when we became teenagers, things changed between us. We became something more than friends. I thought for years it was just sex. It wasn't.

We went to college together. I majored in agriculture communication and Hi studied agribusiness. We lived together. I played in the country bars around Gainesville and in Ocala at night. After college, I went to Nashville and Hi went on to a master's program at Texas A&M. My first few years in Nashville, me and Hi were still together, if you could call it that. We hid it. I was working the bars, beating the pavement, putting in my time trying to get my name and my songs out—just generally looking to be found as a country singer. Hi was

in Texas learning how to make cows make better cows in an animal husbandry program. I'd tease him while we fucked that he was getting a degree in fucking. He'd retort that insemination wasn't necessarily fucking. Even back when we were kids, he'd been too smart for me.

Around the time I finally got a song writing contract with a publishing house, Hi went on to get his Ph.D. in California and that's about when things started to fall apart between us. I always knew deep down it was an either-or proposition for us, at best. I signed with a label and went on my first tour. Slade was the one who first figured out either Hi had to go or I had to act like a playboy—before the label and the public noticed. I don't hold that against him, now. I wouldn't have a career if I'd bucked him then.

However, it didn't hit Hi too well when I first started dating women. If I was going to see and date women for work, he was going to see other men. The jealousy burned both ways.

Hi called it an open relationship. I just called it doing what we had to—that was always the difference between us. I never got what being gay was about, while he did. I just loved him and wanted to fuck him. Not always in that order.

Maybe part of the problem was because I could date women to some, little satisfaction, while he never wanted anything to do with them. There was a part of him that thought I was cheating on him. At the time, I still didn't know I was really gay; I just had always wanted Hi. While Hi, he knew he was gay without a doubt. When he went out to Berkeley, he was finally living somewhere for the first time in his life where he felt like he could do something about it.

By that time he came to me and told me he was coming out, we'd done ourselves in for the most part. I knew we were over. I was opening at a big show in Mountain View and Hi drove down from Berkeley.

"I told Daddy last month," he told me that night in a motel room when we'd finally caught our breath after sex. "He and the family are fine with it. Johnnie, your dad's even okay with it."

"What? You told my dad about us." I was shocked.

“No, no. I told them about me. They already knew about us.”

I couldn't believe how dismissive he was about people knowing. I'd felt so... exposed just listening to him talk about it. “Jeez, I need to call my dad. How did they know?”

“Seriously? Are you that clueless?” He rolled his eyes and then rolled off the bed.

“Nice, Hi. Apparently I am.” Like I said, by that point, we were at the end of our rope.

“Besides the fact they aren't blind, if your manager could figure it out, don't you think our parents, who watched us grow up, could?”

I nodded. That made sense.

“Besides, your dad caught us in the barn when we were in high school.”

“Oh God. Oh fuck! No way.” I groaned. “He'll never talk to me again.”

Hi laughed. “Oh Romeo, he's known since you were sixteen. I don't see him cutting you off because now you know he knows.”

I sighed. He always called me that nickname when he was feeling shaky and unsure about us. It started in high school when I still used to go out with girls. He'd call me that when he asked me about a date I'd been with or a girl who he knew was interested in me.

“That's great, Hi, but you know this is something I can't do. I can't *be* out.”

He yanked up his briefs and turned to me, facing me off with a snort.

“Just because you can't *be* out, Johnnie, doesn't mean I can't, does it?”

I'll probably never forget him standing there in black underwear with some designer's name emblazoned on the wide band wondering where his tighty-whities went and worse, where he got the idea he needed fancy man-panties. The silence dragged out a bit and I sighed.

“Hi, I think it might.”

“That's just stupid. Johnnie, I don't want to spend my life hiding. I don't know how to tell you what it feels like to just be... God, me. No more

worrying about someone seeing me look at you too long, or hell, any man too long. It's just a such a relief."

"Who else are you looking at 'too long'?"

"Really, Romeo? You're gonna ask me that. How was that last date you went on with Ericka Eddy that I had to read about in *People* magazine?"

"Hi, I can't do my job and be gay. The two don't mix."

"You don't know that." He sounded so reasonable and so idealistically wrong.

"I do know. You know, too. Look at the Dixie Chicks a couple years ago. And they were way more established than I am when country music turned its back on them."

"It can't always be that way," he said.

I didn't say anything back. Because it's always been my fear that it would always be that way and I knew I was always gonna love him. That was a lot of always that didn't mix together any way I tried to fit it.

I'd heard this argument from my manager enough that I could spout it off to Hi and make it sound like I believed it was the right thing.

"Might not always be that way for but now, the fans... they'd see it as a betrayal."

He nodded. "Yeah. I see. You either betray them or you betray me."

My dad was right.

I'd made my choice and it was time to move on. That brought me around again to thinking about how good Wyatt Ford's mouth felt under mine when I started to feel the locks I'd kept on my sex life begin to tumble open. I wondered what the rest of him would feel like.

What it would be like to have a different life, one where I could bring home a guy like Wyatt and fuck him senseless? I didn't think I'd be able to be out and keep my career. Last year, Chely Wright tried it. The vacuum of silence in response to her Come-to-Jesus moment was telling. It was like

someone erased her presence in the industry. I don't think things would go so quietly for me.

If no one ever called me to play another venue, would I care? I wondered what my life would be like if my career was gone. I tested that thought emotionally and came up empty. That was the problem. I was always empty. I'd always thought maybe one day I could go back to the ranch and back to Hi. But he'd moved on. I heard my daddy's words in my head. *Leave the boy be. He's happy...*

I wondered what happy would be like. It'd been so long I wasn't sure I knew. I thought about the week ahead, seeing Wyatt again at CSR. I could move on, too. I didn't have to come out. But I could see what it was like to not be so damned alone.

CHAPTER 4

March 1, 2011

I met Slade early the next morning at the Convention Center. He had my publicist in tow and a busy itinerary plotted out.

I had a set of interviews scheduled that morning. We'd be doing this all week—with so many DJs in town at one time; this wasn't something any artist would pass up. I had a round of recording sessions for that afternoon reading promotional material that a couple national broadcasting companies used as cut-ins at their local affiliate stations. They generally went something like, *Hi, this is J.R. Hall with WKISS my ass. Only without the ass.* I'm positive it would have been more interesting with some ass in there.

I was expected to attend a Hall of Fame dinner that night. I was pretty pissed about that, actually, even if the Judds were going to be there. I wanted to watch the Gators' game that night and had to set my DVR to record it instead.

I didn't run into Wyatt until that afternoon. By then, I was nearly hoarse from running more than two hundred promotional lines. Doing them now was ego on my part. My voice had a character to it and I was afraid it was going to be lost or drastically changed when I finally gave in and had surgery on my vocal cords. If I did these promos now, they'd be out there, for posterity. Like I said: ego.

Turned out that Wyatt found me that evening, again, in the men's room. I turned to see him standing in the door way and my heart rate spiked. He looked good wearing a dark suit and a deep-red tie. I wondered if he wore an undershirt and if it was on inside out.

"Hey," I said softly. My voice came out a little raspy. Voice training taught me not to whisper but to speak softly, if at all, when my cords were irritated.

He put his hand up and waved. His eyes were running over the bathroom, sweeping the urinal area, and scanning the floor under the stalls.

"Just us," I said, again, quietly.

"Then why are you whispering?" He gave me a funny look.

“Voice going. You always pick up men in bathrooms, Wyatt?” I took a drink from my ever-present water bottle.

“I haven’t picked you up yet. So, no.” He moved toward the urinals. I wondered if he was going to whip his dick out and pee in front of me. I found myself curious. Heterosexual-man-law prohibited me from checking out the goods. I wasn’t sure what gay-man-law allowed. I’d never been at the urinals with a guy who knew I was gay, except Hi, and I already knew what his goods looked like.

“Hmmm. Time will tell.”

He turned, looking surprised.

“That wasn’t what you said yesterday,” he said.

I shrugged and replied quietly, “I thought on it last night. Slade mentioned to me that you and Phil are from Alabama—went to school together?”

A shadow passed over Wyatt’s face. He looked annoyed and suspicious. “Yeah, we did. Why?”

“Roll Tide, Roll?”

“Yep. And you’re from Florida. I read something about cows. They have cows down there?”

I laughed and started to cough. I covered the rough spot with another sip of water and said, “A few, yes. You going to this dinner tonight?”

“I am.” Wyatt looked completely flummoxed. I suppose the logic of my questions didn’t fit.

“I have to, too. I set my DVR to record the UF-Alabama game tonight. Should be over by the time this dinner tonight wraps. Interested in going to my place to watch the game?” I asked. After I said it, I realized I’d actually asked him out on what was essentially a date.

“You know, that’d be great. I’d really like that.”

We exchanged cell numbers and I gave him my address to put in his GPS. “It’s kind of hard to find, so let’s plan to meet up in the parking garage. Call me when you get to your car and we can caravan down to the farm.”

Wyatt pulled in beside me outside the garage of the studio house. He had a little red toy car compared to my SUV.

I parked in the garage next to a Jeep I used on the farm. I waited with the door open for Wyatt to join me.

“You know, I can never go anywhere with you if you drive, Wyatt.”

He looked hurt. “Geez, J.R., that’s harsh. Maybe this is a mistake and I should go...” He started to turn away.

“Wait. I just meant I’d never fit in that tiny car of yours. What is that thing?” I said.

I watched a smile dawn on his face. “Honda Civic. It’s a hybrid.”

“It’s a toy car. Come on in, let’s go see about this game.” I headed into the house. I noticed he’d changed from the more formal suit he’d had on at the dinner. I had just thrown a suit jacket over what I had on. Great thing about being a country star is that dressed-up means a decent pair of boots and black shirt with or without a jacket—every occasion is jeans-friendly.

“You live here?” he said as he followed me into the house and I reset the security system.

“Yeah, I have a studio in the house.”

He looked around. “What about that big house down the road? I saw the lights. Who lives there?”

“The housekeeper?” I shrugged and knew this was a weird thing.

“You’re not serious.”

I nodded at him.

“Why?”

“That place is huge. Who needs all that space? Most of it was stuff Ericka picked out. After she died... I just felt more comfortable here.”

“J.R., you are so far in the closet, your closet... your closet is actually a house?” he asked, somewhat dumbfounded.

“Don’t be a dick, Wyatt.” I said. “You want a beer?”

“Just callin’ ’em like I see ’em. Sure, beer’d be great.” I handed him a

bottle from the fridge and uncapped the lid from a fresh bottle of water for myself.

“Am I drinking alone? You plan to take advantage of me?” Wyatt gestured with his bottle to my water.

“I shouldn’t drink alcohol with my throat the way it is.” I was still speaking quietly. I headed toward the living room where the entertainment center was. “And, yes and yes.”

“And what way is that?” he asked. He either ignored my attempt at flirtation or he didn’t hear it. He looked serious. But I got it—someone like me losing his voice was a serious issue. Wyatt knew the industry well enough to understand the implications.

I sighed and sat on the couch. “I have some problems with my vocal cords and am going to eventually need surgery. I take... precautions so I can keep working and try not to damage them further.”

“Nodes? Why don’t you just go ahead and have the surgery?” Wyatt asked. He sat down next to me, closer to me than I expected.

“I have some scarring, too...” I started.

Wyatt waited me out.

“No one can guarantee it won’t change my voice. I have one more album contracted with my label. I’m just not sure I’m ready to end my career.”

“You’re what? About thirty-two? You’ve still got years left. And God, you are going to be so hot in your forties. Throat surgery is not going to end your career.”

“Well, it might. It’ll change it. And you know... eventually... it’s going to end anyway.”

“Why’s that?”

I looked at him evenly and put my arm up along the top of the couch behind him, “Why do you think, Wyatt?”

“Oh. Yeah. Sorry... I worked in the rock-pop radio until a couple months ago. Some of the... traditions of country music escape me.”

“Heh. Traditions.” I shook my head and picked up the remote to cue up the

game. “If you really do want to go up to the house we can. There’s a media room there with a bigger flat screen.”

“They make bigger screens than that one?” he said, seeming to actually not know for sure.

“Yeah.” I got the game ready. “Last chance.”

“You live here, right? It’s where you come to be yourself.”

I nodded.

“I’d rather stay here then.” He scooted closer to me on the couch, close enough so that if I let my legs fall completely open, I’d brush up against him.

I’m not sure which pleased me more—feeling him close to me or hearing him say that he wanted to stay where I am comfortable being me.

“You didn’t cheat and hear the score on the way down, did you?” I asked him.

He pressed his lips together. “Nope.”

“Gators win this one, we’ll probably go to the SEC Tourney.”

“What sport are we watching again?” He asked.

“Bas... ket... ball.” I answered slowly. “You seriously didn’t know that?”

He rolled his eyes at me. “Well, I knew it wasn’t football.”

“Oh my God...” I trailed off as he started laughing and fell into me.

I narrowed my eyes at him. “You shit. You’re fucking with me.”

“Not yet, but I hope to be.”

I pretended to concentrate on the remote and started the game, not answering him mostly from nerves. He leaned into me, my left arm slipping from the back of the couch to his shoulders. I thought to myself, *this boy moves fast.*

I had no idea.

I could feel his breath on my neck, making me feel the need to pace my breathing.

“You know what?” His words brushed over my ear.

I turned my head a smidge toward him. I didn't want to lose the contact. "What?"

"I think we should make a little wager on the game, don't you?" He leaned in close enough for his lips to caress my ear.

"You think? What should we bet?" I was afraid to move my head because what Wyatt was doing felt so good. It reminded me of Hi, who used to kiss my neck and my ear, but he always poked me with whatever hat he wore. I shoved Hi from my mind as Wyatt slowly ran his tongue around the helix of my ear—the outermost shell—down to the fleshy lobe. I was already hard and we hadn't made it to tip-off yet.

"Winner gets the first blow job," he said. Then he nipped my lobe and sucked it into his mouth.

At that moment I knew for with absolute certainty what I'd long suspected: I had an electric current that ran from my earlobe straight to my cock. I didn't think I would make it to the end of the game and I swear I almost didn't. The game was tied at the half. I had mixed feelings about watching a recorded game for the first time. If it'd been live, then I could have made out with him through halftime. As it stood, I just wanted to get to the end of the game and skipped over the break altogether.

The Gators picked it up in the second half. We'd been kissing off and on during replays, long wet, delving kisses that made my lips numb and my cock throb. I liked to pull him on top of me and massage his ass, letting my hands trace where his crease was under his jeans, where I wanted my dick to be. He was remarkably cool about letting me pull away mid-kiss and let my eyes track the game while I rubbed the front of his pants, pulled on one of his nipples or just idly touched him. The first couple of times it happened, I expected to get yelled at. Not that I could remember one time ever making out with Ericka outside of the bedroom just for the sake of making out, but if I'd ever looked away from her to watch a game, I'd have been sleeping in the studio house—which honestly, I did my fair share of anyway. But Wyatt just treated the ball game like a long round of foreplay.

By the last ten minutes of the second half the Gators had pulled ahead enough so that Wyatt had the button fly of my jeans open and was crawling down to his knees on the floor in front of me.

“We didn’t win yet,” I said, while I lifted my hips and let him tug my jeans and briefs down to my thighs.

“Oh, you want me to stop and wait.” He’d captured my cock in his hand when it flopped up and out of my jeans. God, I couldn’t remember the last time I was that hard and that ready. I knew my cock, especially the top third, was palpably wet with precome and had been for some time.

He fisted my cock and looked up to watch me. I gave up on the game, my attention drawn to him kneeling compliantly before me. I traced the inner seam on the collar of his T-shirt around his neck. He had his shirt on inside out again.

“What’s up with this? You do know your shirt is inside out, that it’s always on wrong,” I asked him softly. My voice had been quiet all night. I should have spent the evening resting it.

He laughed a little and blushed. “Yeah. My skin is really sensitive... the tags drive me crazy. Sometimes the seams even bug me. I just wear them this way.”

“So that was why you went so crazy when I pinched your nipples earlier,” I pondered aloud, thinking back to when I had my hand up his shirt, squeezing and releasing his nipples to watch him wiggle under me and moan.

He smiled and pulled the head of my cock to his mouth. I watched that pink tongue I’d been sucking on for the last couple hours start with the top of my cock, circling the head, running up and down the sides.

“Taste good?”

“Mmmm. Mmmm,” he said after he captured the head in his mouth and began to suck me down.

I didn’t know what to think of him. We hadn’t talked a lot, just made out and frothed on the couch. He sucked my cock in earnest and I groaned. He gripped the base in one hand, slipping his other hand down to my balls, lifting them, and letting his fingers dance under them. I felt his finger pressing and rubbing at the root of my cock under my perineum.

His head, bobbing up and down in my lap, was a magnet for my hands. I knew I wasn’t going to make it to the end of the game. I’d discovered earlier

how soft and fine his hair was and I wanted to touch him, to bury my fingers in his loose brown curls. I threaded the fingers of my right hand through the curls on the back of his head.

“This okay?” I asked. I hadn’t had a lot of experience with getting blow jobs and that experience was limited to only one man, whose boundaries I knew like my own. Asking just seemed... right. Besides, I’d watched my fair share of gay porn and read gay erotica on the Internet. I even had a collection of toys hidden in a locked trunk in my bedroom. I wasn’t a complete novice. Apparently, asking was the right thing because he nodded and picked up speed, my hand riding the back of his head until I was tapping him with my fingers.

“Wyatt... baby... I’m not gonna last much... I’m gonna come,” I moaned and got another nod around the mouthful of cock he didn’t want to release. The knowledge that he wanted it down his throat was all it took to tip me over the edge.

I dragged him up on top of me again after I came and kissed him, wanting to taste myself in his mouth.

“Come back to the bedroom?” I murmured to his lips, pulling back to look into his face.

His eyes met mine, darting back and forth between them, and he nodded.

When we got to my bedroom, I unlocked my trunk to dig out the condoms and lube. Wyatt immediately wanted to see what else was in the trunk. I made him undress first. The idea of him being naked, while I wasn’t, turned me on. When he shed his clothes, he fell to his knees in front of the trunk to dig through my toys.

After Ericka died, I started buying sex toys and books online that interested me—things I’d read about or seen in gay porn. Some I tried; some I didn’t. All of it I hid under lock and key away from the housekeeper.

“Why did I have to be naked to look in your toy box, J.R.?”

“Because I want you that way. Next blow job is mine to give, so I get to be in charge.”

“You got to be in charge when I gave you one.”

“Was that what that was? Me in charge?”

He made a *hmph* sound. “Which is your favorite—and don’t tell me you don’t have one,” he demanded.

I pulled out a flesh-colored dildo that was incredibly lifelike. I didn’t tell Wyatt but it always looked a little like Hi’s cock to me in the length and the shape of the head. I pushed the thought away.

“You’re a bottom,” he stated as if he’d been betrayed by the implausible, like I was really a woman in man-drag. He kneeled there forlornly looking up at me with my dildo in his lap.

“You sound so disappointed.” I laughed at him. “Don’t worry, I like to top. But I have my moments. I have a prostate, too, ya know.” I shook my head and pointed to the dildo. “It doesn’t see much action because I’m never home.”

“What, your dildo isn’t allowed to leave the house?”

“Close actually,” I said and watched the disbelief dawn on his face. He was about to add another smart-ass comment when I added, “Wyatt, what if a TSA agent decided to check my carry-on because they saw a tubular object on the scan, and then they want me to show ’em that my dildos and butt plugs do, in fact, vibrate and are not bombs? Can you even imagine the YouTube hits from the camera-phone videos?”

“Don’t you have your own jet or tour bus?”

“No jet, actually. I looked into one but it’d cost as much as this farm. We charter them and sometimes the label arranges one. But I fly commercial a lot, too. Even when we’re touring on the bus, I might have to catch a flight when I least expect it,” I answered. “And there’s no privacy on a tour bus.”

“Poor, lonely sex toys. I’ll play with you.” Wyatt began digging deeper into the trunk.

I rolled my eyes. “So much for being in charge,” I commented.

Wyatt pulled out one of my pictorial books with images of men having sex in varying positions and some light BDSM. I found a number of the images beautiful and erotic. A few pages were well worn.

“You’re kind of a bad boy, aren’t you, J.R.?” Wyatt asked.

“What do you mean?”

“You’re a dirty boy—kinky.”

I shrugged. “Well, hot is hot.”

“Hmm, so you ever do any of these things?” He flipped through the pages.

“Some... a long time ago I was with someone,” I answered.

“You do like to be in control, don’t ya? Got a little bit of a dominant streak in ya? I picked up on that.”

“I don’t know how you did, but, yeah, I like to call the shots at times,” I told him. “Or I like to fantasize that I’m calling them. I’ve only been with one other guy.”

“Really?” He paused and looked speculatively at me.

“Yeah.”

“Someone important?”

“Yeah, when I was younger. He... he didn’t want to hide and I wanted to be a star.”

“Yeah, I had a relationship kind of like that when I was younger, too. First loves, huh? A bitch to get past,” Wyatt said with a shrug.

Wyatt stopped flipping through the pages when he got to an image of a guy tied to a bed.

“The page is dog-eared on this one, J.R.” Wyatt sat back on his heels, looking up at me. He was beautiful, with a sparse covering of light-brown hair on his chest, trailing down his stomach to his half-hard cock.

“Yep... Um. Hot is hot?” I grinned at him.

“When you look at this, do you wanna be the tie-er or the tie-ee? No let me guess, Mr. I-like-to-be-in-charge-when-it’s-my-blow-job-turn.” Wyatt mimicked my deep voice. “You wanna tie me up.”

I looked at him evenly.

He looked right back. “I asked you if you wanna tie me up.”

There was a sharp inhale on my part. Jeez, just when I thought this guy couldn't make my dick any harder. "Yeah, Wyatt, I do," I said.

"Okay." He got up, climbed into the middle of my California king-sized bed and was dwarfed in the expanse. I kind of liked it because it made him seem... smaller and vulnerable... and made me want to dominate him before I fucked him into my mattress.

He lay on his back with his arms and legs spread.

"What? Now?" I asked.

"Yeah. No time like the present, right?" Wyatt said.

Shit, shit, shit. I was trying to think of what I could use to tie him down. I had no rope in the studio house, not even neckties. Those were up in the big house or in my wardrobe. I needed rope. I grew up roping cattle. I was good with rope. It was one of the reasons tying a guy up originally appealed to me.

"You gonna think all night?" he asked.

"I might."

I thought there might be some rope in the barn but then I remembered all the tags sticking out the back of Wyatt's shirts. His skin was too sensitive for a T-shirt tag. Even if I could find rope in the barn with a softer lay to it, it would be way too abrasive for his skin. I wanted to dominate him a little, not hurt him. The idea of hurting someone did not turn me on.

"Okay." I tossed him the book. "I'm gonna be back in five minutes..." I thought a second about how far and back I was going and amended that. "Well, maybe ten. You have to stay right here."

"All right."

"I mean it, don't move from the bed." I could grab a jacket by the door; I wasn't going that far.

"I said I wouldn't." He told me.

"Promise me."

"Okay, okay." He rolled his eyes.

"No, promise me."

“Geeesh, I promise.” He was sitting up on the bed with his arms crossed, looking mildly perturbed.

“If you move, you’re gonna be in trouble.”

“What are you gonna do, spank me?”

“Yes.” I wouldn’t. Well, I might smack his ass a couple times with my hand but like I said, pain really wasn’t something I was into.

“*Pffft*. How do you know I want to be spanked?” he asked me, indignant.

I thought about that. He had a point. I had no idea what his limits were.

“You’re right. I don’t know if you want to be spanked.” I walked out of the room to the office.

“J.R., wait, you’re going now? You’re just gonna leave me naked in your bed,” Wyatt called after me.

“No,” I called from the office in the next bedroom. “And at least I didn’t leave you naked *and* tied up in my bed. Bright side to everything, Wyatt.”

“Look who is suddenly the optimist,” he muttered. I don’t think he thought I heard him and it kind of made me smile. I realized suddenly that I was having fun. I didn’t think I remembered the last time I had fun in my life that didn’t have singing attached to it.

I came back and tossed him a pad of Post-it notes. I also tossed a book onto the bed.

“You got an assignment,” I said as I dragged the open trunk over to the side of the bed where he could reach it. “While I’m gone, I want you to mark the page with a Post-it for ten things in this book you want me to do to you.”

He blanched. “What if I can’t come up with ten things?” he asked.

“Then I’ll know you weren’t working on looking and were moving around instead. And I’ll spank you,” I replied.

“Jeez, control freak much?” he mumbled.

“Um, yeah, kind of the point isn’t it? That was what you were trying to get at here, or have I read this wrong?” I asked him, totally serious.

He grinned.

“Annnnd...” I said, “I want you to pick out five toys from the chest you want me to use on you.” I watched the grin fade.

I shoved my feet into my sneakers, not bothering with socks, and headed off to find me some soft rope.

“You got ten things?” I walked in holding my bounty.

“Barely.”

“Good. I found what I needed.” I toed off my shoes as soon as I got into the room. I’d left my coat by the door.

“Lie on your back in the middle of the bed—spread eagle.”

I tossed the gold-and-light-sage ropes on the bed, took one of the cords and began tying his right hand to the bedpost.

“What the hell, J.R.? Are you using drapery tiebacks to tie me up?”

I laughed, “Yep.”

“You went up to your big, fancy mansion and stole these off the curtains to tie me up?”

“Pretty much.”

He craned his neck to look up at his hand. “Shit. Those gold ones even have goddamn tassels on ’em. I’m gonna look like fucking Carol Burnett dressed up as Scarlett O’Hara here.”

“Not sexy, Wyatt.” I tugged on the cords restraining his first hand. Secure.

He rolled his lips into his mouth and swallowed a laugh. “Funny though. You gotta admit that.”

I turned away so he wouldn’t see me smile and walked down the bed to his ankle, going to work on it with another tieback. “You got a smart mouth on ya.”

“Frankly, my dear...” he started.

“Go there and I gag you.”

“Hey, I didn’t pick out any gagging pictures or toys.”

He was right. He hadn't.

A little while later, Wyatt was securely tied down and moaning in my bed.

I'd flipped through book and put it with toys down at the foot of the bed while I looked over him and what he'd deemed acceptable. My eyes landed on one of my favorite toys.

"Interesting selection, Wyatt," I said.

I turned to the trunk to get a condom and lube.

"What are you getting?"

"That's for me to know," I told him and watched him roll his eyes at me.

I went back to the foot of the bed with the lube. Before I'd tied up his legs to the bedposts, I'd shoved a pillow under his ass. From where I stood, I could just catch a glimpse of his hole peeking out between his spread legs, under his balls. I crawled up onto the bed between his legs and popped open the lube, smearing some on my fingers. I pulled his balls up with one hand and rubbed my lubed fingers across his puckered ass. I petted and pressed the pad of my forefinger to the twelve o'clock spot on his pucker until he relaxed and I slid my finger in: sliding it in and out, twisting and testing, lubing him up to see how he accommodated the size of my finger. I had a smaller toy, similar to the bigger version he'd chosen, but I wanted to use the one on the bed. It had more interesting features.

He moaned and I smiled at the reaction. He was watching my face intently. I pulled my finger away and added another bit of lube to the outside of his ass and then swiped his cock with my hand, pumping it until he was stiff and a bead of precome slipped from his slit, then I let him go. He groaned when I stopped. I turned away from him for the moment so he couldn't see what my hands were doing.

I tore open the condom wrapper.

"Don't tell me I picked out all those toys when I could have been snooping through your stuff and you're just gonna fuck me," Wyatt complained when he heard the wrapper ripping.

I rolled the condom over the protruding, bulbous end of the prostate massager and laid it on the bed in the V between his legs. I only had one massager like the one he'd chosen and I'd used it—repeatedly. If I was going to share it with him tonight, it got wrapped up.

“You really do have a smart mouth.”

“Smart, talented mouth.”

“True. But what I'm interested in at this moment is your ass rather than your mouth.” I applied a bit of lube to the bulb of the massager and then pushed it against his ass.

“Oh my God, what is that?” He tried to crane his neck, looking down his body.

“You picked it out, don't you remember?”

“Noooo. I wanna see it.”

“You can see it later. Push out a little for me, baby.”

“So bossy,” he complained, but I felt the tension in his muscles change and the massager slid right in. I slowly pressed until it was seated with the little curling arm situated in the center of his perineum.

He moaned. “Oh God, that's um... good. So good.”

I turned the pulse on low and listened to his groans. I watched him tug on the ropes while he writhed. He really was beautiful, finely muscled, lean and long.

“Be right back, baby.” I turned.

“Oh, God... J.R., don't leave me here.” I heard him as I walked to the kitchen and pulled a glass from the cabinet.

“You son of bitch. You promised me a blow job,” he yelled at me. It was probably a good thing I lived in the sticks.

I laughed and got some crushed ice and water from the fridge's auto dispenser. Wyatt might want me to dominate him a little but he was never truly going to be a sub.

“Problems, Wyatt?” I asked when I strolled casually back into the bedroom.

“Oh my God. J.R., please...” Wyatt said, moaning. I could see how he’d figured out that the massager got the massaging part of its name from his movements. I watched his abdominal muscles and pelvic area contract and release in time with his groans. I could see him clenching his glutes together as he bore down on the massager, working his ass as much as he could, considering his restraints. His cock was stiff, with drops of precome gathering on his belly.

I drank from the glass before setting it down on the bedside table. I turned up the intensity on the vibrator a notch and then bent and took a nipple into my mouth, sucking and then letting some ice chips fall from my mouth to his chest. I pushed the chips around with a finger, watching and listening to him moan, groan and finally beg me to touch his cock.

“Wyatt, baby, the way your skin is so sensitive... you’re beautiful,” I told him.

I loved watching his reactions, how he would move and grind his hips and then groan from the effect that movement had on the bulb pushing on his prostate. I pinched his nipples, holding them tightly for a moment and then releasing them to watch him cry out and throw his head back.

“Please, please J.R., touch my cock. Stroke it. I don’t even care if you blow me,” he bargained.

I lightly dragged my fingers, callused from guitar playing, down his stomach to his neatly trimmed pubic hair. This amazed me, actually. I’d suffered chest waxing just recently for the video we were filming, but no one ever touched my hair there. I love how the clean look set off his cock.

I ran my fingers over the trimmed hair. “Will you show me how you do this? I’d like to do mine.”

“J.R., don’t you get it, I will do anything you want if you touch my cock already. Please.” He took a deep breath, getting control of himself. I couldn’t have that, so, I took the remote and turned it up to the highest setting before wrapping my hand around his cock and fisting it and pumping hard.

I pumped him until he started to come and then I released his cock and flipped the remote off.

“No... no. J.R. Don't stop.” He protested.

I got up off the bed and took my jeans and briefs off. I'd lost my shirt earlier, but now I wanted to be naked with him. I stroked his chest, tracing his nipples and the lines of his muscles while his breathing started to slow. When he had himself back in control, I turned the remote back on low.

On my knees between his legs, I started to slowly stroke his cock. I gradually increased the pace, stopping to blow air across his glans. As more and more fluid oozed from his cock, I ramped up the intensity with the remote.

He was babbling at this point. I fisted his cock, pulling up for several tight strokes, bringing a stream or two of seminal fluid with each stroke. The massager was, essentially, milking his prostate. I ran my tongue over the head of his cock and up and down the sides. His cock was covered in precome and tasted sweet and salty, not overpowering. I wondered how his come would taste in comparison. I knew my come and precome tasted different. When I thought about discovering how Wyatt's come tasted in contrast to his precome, a little knot of anticipation formed in my stomach that wasn't necessarily all related to arousal. I stroked his length again, pulling another heavy stream of fluid to the tip of his cock.

“Wyatt?”

“Yeah?”

“Look at me.” Meeting his eyes, I pumped lightly and quickly at the base of his cock, ran the tip of my tongue through the thick fluid and pulled it away from his dick in a viscous string leading from his dick to my tongue. His eyes got wide and he groaned. “J.R., now. Now. Now.”

I took him into my mouth and sucked, pumping my head in rhythm with the tight pulls of my hand gripping the base of his cock until he came down my throat, and I did, in fact, exactly learn the nuances of his taste.

CHAPTER 5

March 5, 2011

Saturday started early in order to catch the light, which put me in the utility barn where wardrobe was set up at five in the morning. They didn't expect rain but the wind was chapping that early—especially with the state of dress they expected me to be in.

Shelly Browne was my wardrobe manager and stylist. She looked like someone's grandma rather than a fashion consultant. The woman kept track of all the clothes I wouldn't allow in my house but insisted I own despite my feelings on the matter. I actually had on a comfortable pair of jeans and boots. At the end of the day, those jeans were going to make it back to the house with me. I *did* make exceptions, now and then.

“Cowboys do wear shirts, Shelly,” I cajoled her.

“They shouldn't if they have pecs like yours, honey.” She tossed a belt at me, and then one of the dreaded leather cowboy hats.

I firmly believed cowboy hats should be lightweight—a symptom of my upbringing in south Florida. They're supposed to keep the sun off but not keep the heat in. Ranches other places called for heavier material. I just wasn't used to it.

“You need a haircut, too, J.R.”

I pushed back my nearly black hair and pulled the hat on. I had my mom's part-Seminole coloring and my dad's Irish frame. “Nobody's gonna see much of it under this hat, anyway.”

“Still, I'm going to have Susan nail you down next week when she has you in the chair and a little more time,” Shelly said. I don't remember much of my momma, but if I did, I think I would have liked her to be like Shell.

The worst thing about the shoot turned out to be the wind during the first couple hours of the day, when the sun cast long shadows and I had to stand around in various states of undress.

That wind just blew away the heat from the off-camera industrial heaters before they did me any good. The day finally did warm up to nearly sixty degrees, but not until half of it had passed. I rode horses, pretended to herd some of the farm's poor, confused milk cows, and carted around all kinds of cowboy gear. I could see my farm manager didn't think too much of it. I didn't blame him. It was a farce—but a farce that would sell songs. I'd thrown my hands up over arguments regarding authenticity ages ago.

The best thing about the day was seeing security escorting Wyatt out to the pasture where we'd been filming. He got there about nine a.m. He didn't have a show that morning so I knew he'd be free. When I asked him if he wanted to come out and watch the video being shot, he asked if he could bring a camcorder and do a short for the station. I wasn't crazy about the idea of him wanting an interview. It made me question his motives. He'd said it would make it easier to explain to Phil why he was coming out to the farm if he was doing an interview. What I didn't expect was that he brought Phil along with him. That guy was going to screw up my plans for the day with Wyatt; I could just tell.

They called a break to set up a new shot and I approached them in the tent.

"Hey, Wyatt. You made it out." I nodded at him. I reached over and held out a hand to Phil. "Phil, good to see you. Decide to tag along for the fun?"

Wyatt mumbled hello and gave me a weak smile.

"Hey, when Wyatt here said he was coming down to make a short, I grabbed the chance to see a real country music video in the making. Hope you don't mind me crashing the party. I'm sure my invitation just got lost in the mail, right?" Phil shook my hand, firmly. He took a step closer to Wyatt, putting Wyatt behind him a bit.

I nodded in a slow, exaggerated way, making a little time to watch the two of them. I was even more sure that there was or had been something between them. This guy had never blinked at me over the years and now he suddenly turned all caveman around Wyatt and me.

I heard my name called, letting me know they were ready for the next shot, so I waved Slade over.

“Hey Slade—you remember Wyatt and Phil, right? We talked about Wyatt doing a little short for their show’s Web site. Can you work with them so they aren’t shooting something that’s gonna get my ass in hot water with the production team? I can do a one-on-one interview when we have a longer break.”

When we wrapped, I found Wyatt in the tent they’d set up for the crew.

“Wanna ride back with me?” I asked. It was less than a mile back to the studio house but when I started the morning, it’d been much darker and colder.

“Definitely. Listen, J.R., I’m so...” he started.

“Where’d Phil get to?” I asked, leading him toward my Jeep.

“Security took him back to his truck. He had to go. Tee Ball registration today, something about getting signed up for the ‘best’ team. But that’s what I was trying to say—I’m sorry about him tagging along. I was checking out the equipment yesterday and he insisted.”

“You should have at least called or texted me. They might have hung you both up at the gate. Hell, they should have.” We’d reached the Jeep at that point and we got in. “Wyatt, I need to ask what’s going on with Phil.”

“Man, I don’t know. I said I was sorry he invited himself.”

“No, I mean what’s going on with you and Phil?”

“I’m doing a show with him. He’s an old friend.”

“Wyatt, he goes all alpha male every time I look at you.” I cut my eyes toward him to see his expression. He didn’t look happy.

Wyatt sighed. “What are you asking me, J.R.?” he said cautiously.

“Are you fucking him?”

“Seriously, do you think I’d be here if I was with him, too? Thanks a lot. I see you have a high opinion of me.”

“Wyatt, we just met. I’m just trying to figure this thing out. Not to mention, I never do this... dating thing. So I’m sure I’m crap at it. I don’t know what you’d do. I know what I hope you’d do. But I need to know what’s going on with you and your buddy.”

“Nothing. Show business. That’s it.” He sighed. “Now anyway.”

“Were you fucking him?”

“Please don’t ask me that. I don’t talk to him about you and me. It’s only fair that goes both ways.”

I pulled into the garage of the studio house. “I guess that’s a yes,” I mumbled.

The door rolled down and we sat in the Jeep in the dim garage, with only the late afternoon sun filtering in through the window at the end of the garage.

“You know I said I was in... that there was someone important to me when I was younger, in college. Well, Phil and I got into radio together in college and did a show for a few years after we graduated. But we had... well, a parting of the ways... we didn’t agree on some... lifestyle choices, if you know what I mean. I went into rock and ended up in California and he stayed with country music.”

“Why did you come back? To Nashville?”

“Phil and his wife separated a year or so ago, not long before Bob Edmundson retired. Phil asked me to replace Bob. We have the kind of chemistry that you need for a syndicated radio show. For a while, after I moved here, Phil and I were pretty close again, close like we were in college.” Wyatt paused and looked at me pointedly.

“Okay, then what happened?”

“When Chely Wright came out last May, Phil freaked out—”

“What? That’s crazy. What does her decision have to do with Phil’s life?”

“Well, it was the way the whole industry just quietly turned away.”

“That was weird. When the fans blew up over the Dixie Chicks, it was loud and proud. But this thing with Chely... the non-reaction is almost worse than the reaction.”

Wyatt nodded. “Because it’s discrimination. You saw the study they did at CSR again this year where they poll listeners?” Wyatt asked. His hands were moving so I could tell he was worked up about this. “They always ask them if the Dixie Chicks should be played and if they deserved what they got. There wasn’t a goddamned word about Chely.”

I nodded.

“My grandma used to put this white stuff under the sink in the bathroom when it got too humid... desiccate?”

He looked at me and I shrugged, not sure of the word, but willing to wait to hear where he was going with the point.

“Well, it sucked the water out of the air. You were left with a cup of a water. Coming out for Chely... it was like desiccate for her career. Quietly and thoroughly sucked away,” he sighed.

I licked my lips because this was something I’d faced... since I was a teenager. I knew, too well, what he was saying.

“So Phil...” I asked.

“This scared the crap out of him. There are all kinds of gay men and women in the country music industry but they aren’t in the public eye. Phil and me—we’re just enough in the public eye for him to be worried. I was out when I lived in California but I don’t play it up here. He ended up going back to his wife, to try again for the kids, he said.” Wyatt looked down. I reached over and tugged on the tag sticking out of the back of his collar. I rested my hand on his neck and massaged the tight muscles at the base of his skull.

“You think he loves her?” I asked. I knew the having-a-wife defense too well. If Phil really loved his, it would make a difference.

“Don’t really know. I know he loves his kids.”

“Sometimes I really hate this industry,” I said. I moved my hand to his shoulder, rubbing at the tense muscle in one and then sliding over to hit the other.

Wyatt moaned and dropped his head back against the seat. “I’ll give you all day to stop that. Feels good.”

“We don’t have all day. We have a game to get on the road to in—” I looked at my watch “—about an hour.”

I had one of the reps at the label get me a pair of tickets to the UF-Vanderbilt game at Memorial Gym in Nashville that night. It’d been years since I’d been to a Gators’ game—football or basketball.

“We’ve got some great seats. We’re front row of the donor side. We’ll be looking up the legs of the players’ shorts.”

He looked over at me dubiously. “That makes no sense.”

“You’ll see. Their gym is freaky, set up weird, like a stage. The floor is above the seating for the first couple rows.”

“Well, since neither one of these teams are mine, those better be some cute legs,” he said. He rolled his head in my direction and reached over to flick one of my nipples. “Do you think that director took your shirt so you’d be all nippy for this vid?”

“I wish. They never gave me a shirt to start out with.”

We headed into the house. I re-armed the security system and then followed Wyatt into the living room. He turned before we got to the couch.

“I thought you told me you didn’t have any leather cowboy hats.” He flicked the brim of my hat with a fingertip.

“I said I had them in wardrobe. This isn’t the stuff I wear normally, though I’m planning to steal these jeans,” I answered. I pulled off the hat. “This is one of Shelly’s ideas and it’s going back.”

Wyatt cleared his throat and coughed twice. Purposely fake.

“What?”

“Can we... um... maybe hang on to it?” He raised his eyebrows and smiled up at me.

I looked at him questioningly. “Sure. Why?”

“I feel like maybe having a little rodeo.”

“You know, Wyatt, I grew up going to ranch rodeos and festivals and I spent all my time playing cowboy music. I didn’t do a lot of riding.” That was Hi’s thing, not mine. I pushed thoughts of Hi out of my mind.

“Did I say you were gonna be the one ridin’?” He grinned and I handed him the hat.

He wore it to the UF-Vandy game and the rest of the night—only taking it off when I knocked it off his head.

Later that night we were on the living room couch naked with Wyatt straddling my lap.

On his knees with his shins tucked up against both sides of my thighs, he straddled me with his legs stretched wide open. He had that black leather hat tilted way back on his head. I rested my hands on his waist, waiting to see what he wanted next.

He started stroking my cock and kissing my neck. For once, I had to look up at him.

“Gimme that rubber, cowboy,” he demanded.

“Who’s supposed to be the cowboy here? Me or you? I was kind of hoping to be the horse.” I reached for the condom and lube and tore the packaging open with my teeth. I handed the rolled rubber to him.

“Haven’t you heard? You know, save a horse, ride a cowboy?”

“Oh my God, is corny a personality requirement for DJs?”

“Humor me. I’m a country-music-cliché virgin; I’m allowed a grace period to get all the clichés out of my system.” He pinched the tip of the rubber and rolled it down my dick. I exhaled. I loved his touch. I wasn’t sure about loving him yet but his touch definitely moved me.

“You played it in college. You’re not a country-music virgin.”

“Sure I am; it grew back.”

I shook my head. “That grace period gonna last much longer?”

He didn’t deign me a reply. “Lube, hoss.”

I grabbed for it off the cushion beside me and handed it to him. He squirted some in his hand and reached back behind him. I wanted to come just from the sight of him; I’d imagined him like this.

“That day I met you and you were putting that crap on my hand, I thought about what you’d look like doing this.” I reached around to where he was smearing lube on his hole, touched his fingers where he was touching himself.

I looked up into his face. His eyes were mostly closed. “Look at me, baby. I want to see your eyes.”

His eyes met mine and I told him, “Finger yourself. I want to watch you watching me while you do it. I want to feel your fingers in your ass.”

“You’re so bossy,” he complained.

But he nodded and got quiet for once, and pressed his lubed forefinger into himself. I ran my fingers up and down the sides of his embedded finger, tracing where his ass stretched around his finger.

”Oh baby, you are so sexy. You know that?” I leaned forward and flicked my tongue over one of his nipples.

He hissed. “Um...” He gave me a weak smile. He was so cute... all I had to do to break down that wall of smart ’tude was breach his tight little ass.

“You ready for another finger?”

I got a short nod in reply. His pupils widened.

“Go ahead. Add this one.”

I stroked his middle finger. He slipped his forefinger out, lined the two fingers up and guided them back inside him.

“Oh, nice, baby.” I reached up, pulled his head down and kissed him briefly. “You are such a good boy. You gonna finger-fuck yourself for me?”

He pressed his lips together, rolled them into his mouth and then nibbled on the bottom one. He nodded his head, his eyes looking down into mine. I could smell his precome. When his cock brushed against me as he swayed forward and back a little, I could feel the warm, wet trail he left behind. I took our cocks in my other hand and stroked them together in a couple of swift tugs, transferring some of his precome to the condom covering my cock. We weren’t at all perfectly aligned, but his cock felt amazing against mine. I pulled my hand all the way up to this cockhead so I could see drops of his precome ooze out.

He arched his back a little and began to push his fingers in and out of his ass. His eyes were drifting closed and I reminded him, “Don’t close your eyes, baby. I want to see you.”

His eyes flew open to mine.

“Scissor your fingers for me.” I stroked the webbing between the fingers buried in his ass and felt them open and close, stretching his hole for me.

He groaned.

“Keep stretching yourself for me babe.” I grabbed the lube and spread some on the hand I had been feeling his exploration with and ran it up and down my latex-covered cock.

“Oh God, J.R. I’m gonna come if I don’t stop,” he moaned. “And I want to ride you... oh God.”

“Show me how you fuck yourself with your fingers. I promise I’ll still fuck you.”

I got a short nod and he started pumping his fingers faster, like a piston in and out of his ass. His other hand gripped my shoulder for leverage and I watched him arch his back.

He hiccupped and groaned. “I can’t hold it,” he moaned.

“Stop, baby, shhhhh,” I said. I took the globes of his ass in each palm and squeezed, pulling them apart. “I’m gonna fuck you now, baby.”

“Can I take my fingers out of my ass now?”

I laughed. “I love that you asked. Yeah. If you wanna ride, you’re gonna have to.”

I pulled him up onto his knees again long enough to situate my cock under him and let it slide into the crease between his cheeks. He was pressed against my chest, his precome glazing us. I canted my hips a touch to feel my cock slide back and forth between his ass cheeks and hissed. I stroked his back with my hands, tracing his spine down to the spread of his cheeks.

I slid my hands under each side of his ass and lifted him up. “Kneel here for me a minute, baby.”

He worked with me and I lined the head of my cock up with his hole. “Come on, baby, push out for me.”

His head fell back and he lost his hat. I caught it and pushed it down on my head for safekeeping. I felt him level himself with his hands on my shoulders. He slid down over the head and I growled, my voice deep.

“God, I love it when you growl at me and order me around in that deep voice,” he said as he was trying to slide down my cock. “Oh fuck, wait... just a minute. I need a minute.”

“You okay?” I asked, brushing my lips over his chest, aiming for the closest skin I could reach with them.

“Getting there,” he answered.

I wasn't sure if the angle was off or what but he reached back and grabbed my cock. He knelt up and off, then pushed the head of my cock against his ass, again, and sank down. I felt him contracting around me, adjusting and then sliding down further. It was an excruciatingly slow process but eventually I was fully seated in his ass—with his balls resting in my pubic hair.

“Oh God, Wyatt.” He was so tight and hot. I watched his face as I tilted my hips up, angling to hit his sweet spot.

He groaned and then smirked. “I want the hat. You promised.”

“You got it, cowboy.” I plopped it down on his head and said, “Okay, baby. Ride me. Giddy-the-fuck-up.”

And he did.

I'm not sure which approach remains my favorite. I loved holding his waist and helping him bounce up and down on my cock, his own hard dick flopping and smacking my stomach and chest. But then, I also loved it when he ground down side to side and back and forth with my cock buried completely inside him. Eventually, I had to help him, working us into a position where I could piston my hips up and into him while he rode me and stroked his cock.

After a few moments of this, he moaned, “I'm gonna come.”

“Do it, now, Wyatt. Come for me. I want to see your eyes when you come, baby,” I told him.

And I did see them. His eyes got wide, his huge pupils making his eyes appear much darker than normal. His cries got higher and his hot spunk hit my stomach. His orgasm clamped the muscles in his ass down on me and I lost it, groaning into his neck, pumping into his ass.

I reached up and pulled his chin down and kissed him. He wilted around me. He wrapped his arms around my neck and sank down on my lap, his head falling to my shoulder, nearly losing the hat again. I put it on my head and let him rest his head on my shoulder.

We were both quiet for a few minutes, regaining control of our breathing. I ran my hands over his body, finding all the places where his skin was damp with sweat. I softly kissed his neck under his ear, darting my tongue out to taste the sweat there and burying my nose in his curls.

“Hey, that’s my hat. I’m keeping it,” he told me, his head still on my shoulder.

“I can already hear the lecture about continuity from Shelly when she looks for it for the next shoot.”

“Yeah, but I’m worth it, right?”

“Totally worth it, cowboy.”

CHAPTER 6

March 7, 2011

Slade and I were on the way to the airport Monday morning to finish up the last two weeks of the tour when I broke the news to him.

“Can you call my surgeon and schedule surgery for later this month—after we finish recording?” I asked him.

“Really? Are you sure?” he asked.

“Yeah, we got that TV *Breakout Stars* reality thing starting this summer, yeah?”

“Filming starts in mid-August.”

“Great, so I will have some down time before I have to perform again and the TV thing won’t be intensive for my voice.” I didn’t mention that I’d have several months of down time to spend getting to know Wyatt a little better. We’d just leave that unsaid.

“The Academy of Country Music Awards show is on April third, it will have to be after that,” Slade said.

“Sounds good.”

“And if your voice is different?”

“Then, it’s different. I’ll have time to recover and retrain it. Maybe I’ll crossover and become a rock star instead.”

Slade glanced between me and the road, a mildly alarmed look on his face.

“Can you call the realtor, too? I want to get started on putting the farm on the market. It’s got to go in one piece though—as a farm. I don’t want to sell off chunks of land for someone to try to develop.”

“This is Tennessee, not Florida, J.R. I think it’s less of an issue here.”

“My daddy brought me up that you don’t sell off your land to developers. Nashville’s like any big city. It’ll keep spreading out. Someone else can carve it up but while it’s my land, I won’t be a part of it.”

“And where are you going to live?”

“At this point, anywhere else would be a step up. Shhhh...” I said and reached over to turn up the radio. Wyatt’s show was on and I could hear Phil Cooper ranting about not being invited to the Vandy game with us.

“I saw you and J.R. Hall on TV at the Vandy game on Saturday. Did y’all lose my ticket?”

Wyatt laughed. *“Yeah, blew out the window, Coop. You had that Tee Ball thing. J.R.’s a huge Gators fan. He had an extra ticket so he invited me. I thought it was a cool thing for him to do.”*

“We’ve got a huge surprise for y’all out there. We got some great video this weekend that we’re going to post on our Web site in a couple days. J.R. Hall invited me and Wyatt down to his place to check out the filming for his music video for ‘Ridin’ Ahead of the Herd’.”

“I thought you didn’t invite Phil Cooper along Saturday,” Slade commented.

“I didn’t,” I answered, tightly.

“Y’all should be able to check it out in the next day or two. They have another location or two to film, I think, before but I think J.R. said the video would be released in April.” Wyatt said over the air.

“You two really hit it off, you and Hall, Wyatt. Y’all have a whole bromance thing going on?” Phil badgered.

I shifted in my seat. Slade head turned sharply, giving me a pointed look.

Wyatt laughed. *“You’re just jealous, Coop.”*

Coop didn’t reply so Wyatt kept at him.

“You’re jealous I got to hang out with the big country star and you didn’t,” Wyatt taunted. *“He’s really a great guy.”*

“Oh, he is. I know, I’ve known him for years,” Phil replied.

I rolled my eyes.

“So what’s his house like, Wyatt? I only got to see the fields.”

“Oh, you know, huge mansion. Really fancy curtains—like Gone-With-the-Wind fancy. My condo would fit in one of the bathrooms.”

I laughed and released the breath I'd been holding. Wyatt and I never made it up to the big house over the weekend. I texted him: *I'm going to kick your ass, Scarlett.*

A song came on and Slade said, "You got something to tell me, J.R.?"

"Nope," I shook my head. I knew he knew, but it was *my* business. "Nope, I sure don't." *Yet.*

"I'm going to set up a date for you for the CMA Awards in April," Slade said.

"No. No, you're not," I insisted.

"John. I'm not stupid. Remember Hite?" Slade countered.

I shook my head. "Fuck you, Slade. Like I could forget Hi. Ever."

"J.R., I had to..." Slade started.

I sighed. "I've lost enough already. I don't blame you for what happened with Hi. I wouldn't have had the career I've had otherwise. But I'm not hiding anymore. I'm just not gonna do it."

Slade sputtered and protested, "Come on, J.R., THINK about this!"

I held up my hand. "I'm not gonna flaunt it, either. I'm not ready to have NO career. But I'm not gonna lie to any more women, or my fans, by dating people for appearances."

Slade nodded.

"Ericka... God. I'm going to Hell for that, you know that right? I might as well find some happiness while I'm still in this world."

"John, you can't believe that. You never hurt Ericka."

I shrugged.

Slade went on about how Ericka's death wasn't my fault. I tuned out the lecture. We'd beaten this horse dead and bloody; I'd seen road kill that stood a better shot at recuperation.

"You sure you want to give it all up for this guy? Seems like his attention really isn't all on you." Slade nodded at the radio. Wyatt and Phil were bantering about whether or not Donald Trump would make a viable presidential candidate for the 2012 run.

“I’m not giving anything up, Slade. And my attention... it ain’t all on him, either. Me and him—we’re a pair of vinyl B-sides to each other. Our A-sides just skipped too much and didn’t play. I guess ’til country music takes a liking to scratching, we’ll make do.”

Slade sighed. “Hmm. I don’t think it’s going to be as easy as a country listeners buying into country-rap collabs, for some reason.”

“Well, they buy into something new every year. I have to think, eventually, people change. It’s too soon to tell if Wyatt and me are some kind of B-side hit or not. But right now? I’m happy. That’s not a place where I’ve spent much time in too damned many years.”

EPILOGUE

March 5, 2011—Arcadia, Florida

Hite Loventhrice had his finger on the button of the remote. The Gators' game was in an extended time-out so Hite thought he'd flip to the other ESPN channel and see if he could find some highlights of the Texas A&M win over Texas Tech earlier that day or maybe even the Alabama victory over the Bulldogs.

The image on the screen abruptly halted his surfing.

He hadn't been surprised to see John Roy on TV or even at the game. He'd grown used to seeing his face in the media and hearing his voice on the radio years ago. He'd grown calloused to the repeated shocks of encountering "Celebrity J.R." over the years.

But what kicked Hi in the nuts this time was J.R.'s reaction to the man he was with. The announcer rattled on about how celebrities often popped up in the Nashville area and people forgot the Music City was the home of so many famed country stars. They mentioned something about J.R. Hall being a UF alum who lived in the Nashville area. They didn't mention the name of the man Hi saw sitting next to J.R., patting his arm and nodding up to the where crowd cam must have been displayed. Clearly, they'd seen themselves on the screen at Vandy.

Nice looking guy, Hi thought. He wondered... then immediately convinced himself it was someone J.R. knew from the business; it couldn't be a date. J.R. was so closeted his only dates, real or otherwise, had breasts.

Then, Hi saw the man lean over and say something in J.R.'s ear and then Hite saw J.R.'s eyes slide to meet the other man's before he reached back with his left arm and tipped the cowboy hat off the guy's head.

Hi gasped. "Aw, no Romeo..."

Hi personally knew that hat tip. Whenever he rammed the bill of a ball cap or cowboy hat into J.R.'s neck to whisper to him or kiss him, J.R. would knock it off his head. He'd never seen J.R. do it to anyone else.

An announcer laughed and went back to talking about the Gators' shot at the SEC title that year. Brad came back in the room carrying two beer bottles.

"What, babe?" Brad asked. He sat down next to Hi on the couch and handed him a bottle.

"Oh, nothin'."

"What'd I miss... Oh! Isn't that Johnnie?" Brad pointed his bottle at the TV.

"J.R.," Hi corrected. Brad had never met him, but picked up the name Hi and Jeb Hall sometimes used to refer to J.R. "Yeah. I think so. Looks like he caught a break, after all."

A few days off tour wasn't the kind of break Hi was referring to, though Brad didn't pick up on it.

"That's great. I thought his dad said he'd be on tour for another month or so," Brad said. His partner always seemed way too enamored of the idea that Hi's childhood friend was a huge star. Hi had just let him think that. He loved Brad and he did trust him with everything—his ranch, his research, his heart. J.R.'s secrets, even the ones Hi shared with him, weren't his to reveal.

But seeing J.R. out with another man and *just knowing* by watching them together that it was more than a couple of guys at a ball game made Hi wonder why he kept that secret, how unfair it was, and why it wasn't him up there at that ballgame with J.R. After Ericka died, Hi always kept a small spark of hope in his heart that maybe J.R. would come around, literally and emotionally, but it had been two years since her death. Apparently, J.R. finally came around but not around Hi.

"Wow, you think he'll come down? It'd be great to finally meet him." Brad said.

Hi shrugged. "I don't know when he'll come around Brad, if he ever does."

THE END

Author Bio

Cheryl Nitely is from Florida. Since the age of fifteen, when she used to steal her mom's Loveswept novels, she's wanted to write romance—the steamier, the better. Her degrees and academic background are in the journalism field. She loves both country and blues music and enjoys swimming.

Contact & Media Info

[Email](#)

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QUALITY CONTROL

By Cherie Noel

Photo Description

Two men stand close together at a park, laughing toward the camera. The man in front holds a baby in a soft, blue denim dress. The man holding the baby has dark brown hair and the one standing behind him has sandy brown hair.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

See the man on the left, holding that baby? Yes, that's me. I worked in a condom company as a quality product supervisor. You would think that it would get me lots of dates, right? WRONG. It seems that once people know where I work, all they want is free condom samples. Damn it.

But then I met this guy (you decide HOW) and he has this most amazing baby—I could fall for him, I swear. But then he told me HOW he ended up with the baby. Broken condom. And it's the condom products from the company where I work. In which I am responsible to supervise the quality.

head desk

How can I possibly have my HEA with him?

PS: I don't want the other guy to be straight—he can be gay or bisexual or experimenting during the night in which the baby is created. And please, don't let the female character (a.k.a. baby mama) be a bitch or irresponsible or anything bad. In fact, I would love it if the baby mama is still around and the two of them make an agreement to raise the baby together (they are NOT married or live together). I want the female character to be portrayed well, in positive way. No bitching the female character, please

Sincerely,

Ami

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: men with children, nursing profession, unplanned pregnancy, HFN

Word count: 24,296

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Dedication

Because love truly has no boundaries, and because Ami asked, I got to meet the lovely boys of Quality Control. Thanks also go to all those at the Goodreads M/M Romance group who work so tirelessly to make the group run and be able to sponsor fabulous events like this. Oodles of gratitude go to the real life Sasha, who inspired my main character's fictional best friend. And as always, special thanks go to my dear Balthazar for giving me the push I needed right when I needed it. Because of him I will always yearn and strive to become the best writer I can.

QUALITY CONTROL

By Cherie Noel

PROLOGUE

Paulie stared blearily at the machine in front of him. What were the calibrations supposed to be set at again? The numbers blinking at him from the monitor looked completely foreign to him, despite having overseen others doing this job for nearly two years. He'd come straight in as management. Jeff, his mentor and surrogate father, had insisted he take the position once the plant was up and running. He heartily wished for the millionth time that at least two of his quality control staff would come back from sick leave. He was no damn good at their jobs. Shivers raced up his spine, followed by a sneezing fit that had him falling half off the stool he sat on. He banged his elbow hard against the console, scraping against one of the multiple toggle switches standing like tiny little black-clad sentinels on the far left side of the monstrous machine. The techs who usually worked in here called it "Pinky", claiming they were the brains of the operation. The two guys who worked on Paulie's shift were both skinny little guys, so it was probably easy for them to move around in here without banging into "Pinky" and sending shafts of white hot fire lancing up through the bones of their arms. Paulie clenched his elbow, moaning and mumbling.

"Aarrgh. Shoulda stayed home. Jesus Christopher Christ! No, Mary on a moped with baby Jesus in a basket on the back!"

He sat, watching through the big Plexiglas window in the wall directly in front of him, as the automated machines inflated condom after condom with air to check for weak spots or with water to test for leaks. The machines whirled through endless motions. The condoms moved like a dizzying, multicolored, all-condom musical. Paulie giggled to himself for a second until his vision wavered. He shook his head to clear it, but that only made him feel dizzier. His mouth pinched at the corners as a stronger wave of nausea rolled through his midsection and pushed a sourly acidic taste up the back of his throat. He'd been the first one hit with this rotten flu bug, right as he was

getting over bronchitis, so he ought to have gotten better before the others came down with the malady. He refused to stay home today, especially after he got the call that Tim and Carl had both called in sick. Sweat popped up on his brow, his face flushed, and he lurched to the side to empty his stomach into the half-full wastebasket next to him. Oh, gross. His stomach heaved again at the sight of readily-identifiable chunks of multigrain bread smeared with strawberry jam splattered across the wadded up office memos and half of yesterday's evening newspaper. The hot, bitterly pervasive scent of bile rose up to envelop him, triggering a fresh bout of heaving stomach muscles, but there was nothing left to come up other than a thin dribble of saliva from his mouth. A small, defeated whimper escaped his ravaged throat. He wanted to lie down and wrap up in the cool cotton sheets of his own bed so badly his eyes stung, but he couldn't go home. He'd promised Jeff they'd make the quota needed for this first shipment to the new client, a small family owned chain of drug stores located in and around Syracuse.

Paulie's vision wavered for a moment, and was something beeping? He turned his head back and forth, to listen to both sides of the room with his good ear. God, if he didn't owe Jeff everything for taking him in when his papa had tossed him out for being gay, he'd have his well-padded Sicilian ass firmly planted in his big brass bed. Jeff had made him stay in high school, put him through college, and even offered him this job when Paulie's old quality control job got downsized right out of existence. Another wave of nausea washed over him. Paulie moaned again before reaching over and tying up the sourly stinking bag in the waste can.

“Two more hours—that's all I have to last for. I can hang on for two more hours until the second shift gets here. Then they can finish up getting everything boxed and ready for the truck in the morning.”

Pausing, he swallowed thickly. Oh, crap, he was talking to himself like crazy old lady Guthries who lived down the block from him on Ashworth Place. Another wash of heat rolled over him. Raising bloodshot eyes to the glass separating him from the very expensive machines busily testing condom after condom for microscopic holes, he pushed a hank of dull, nearly black hair off his forehead. His mama would cry if she saw him looking like this. First, she'd whack him with the wooden ladle she cooked with and shriek for

him to get his idiot ass in the bed, and then she'd cry. Paulie sighed. Over six years later, he still missed his mama fussing over him.

“Maybe one day Papa will forgive me. Then I could visit Mama and Teresa again, at least. The boys are never gonna speak to me, but maybe Mama and Teresa...”

His words trailed off as another wash of heat flooded over him.

“Ah, I don't care if I sound as crazy as Mrs. Guthries. At least I listen to myself. Jeff's the only one who does, besides me, and he's way too busy these days to have time for the whiny crap coming out of my mouth lately.”

Four quick sneezes in a row nearly knocked Paulie off the stool again. He braced one hand against the console, reaching over to the left to find the jumbo cup of tea he'd made half an hour ago in hopes it would help him make it through the rest of his shift. His team was supposed to test this entire batch of condoms and get them boxed up, but there was no way he could do all that by himself. Besides, as sick as he was, he really shouldn't touch the product at all, except from right where he was, safely sealed in the control booth. The machines wouldn't sneeze all over the product. The tea, cold and bitter, made his stomach heave a few more times. His mama swore by hot tea for helping to get over minor ailments. Even if the crap out of the box didn't taste quite as good as what she brewed up in her fancy rose-covered china teapot, he still felt kind of obligated to drink at least one mugful a day when he was sick.

“Ugh.”

Casting a quick glance at the Christmas tree like blinking lights of the console, Paulie guessed it wouldn't hurt anything if he scooped over to the break room for two minutes to make a fresh cup. A little weaker, a touch hotter, and the stuff would morph from grosser than licking a slug's balls, to as warmly comforting as his mama's kitchen in the winter.

Paulie sniffed. Okay, so maybe slugs didn't have balls. But if they did, licking them would be pretty much the grossest thing he could think of. His stomach gave a warning little lurch, so Paulie dropped that line of thought. He pushed the same hank of overly long dark brown hair out of his face, and wobbled to his feet. Wrinkling his classic Roman nose and pressing his plump,

dusky-pink lips together, he gingerly picked up the waste can to dump and rinse it while he was there.

As he turned to push open the door with his ass, he dimly thought that the new red lights flashing among the blue, green, orange, and yellow ones made the console look even more like his mama's Christmas tree. He sneezed, stumbled backwards, and bumped into a solid form. Craning his neck around, he found himself looking a few inches up into the blue-gray eyes of Ryan Saunders. Ryan was making a face; his eyes, which always reminded Paulie of a storm at sea, were wide and watering slightly. Ryan's nostrils flared as he swallowed repeatedly and a small, tight smile flickered on and off his firm-lipped mouth. With one last convulsive movement of his throat muscles, he spoke.

"Geez, Paulie, you look like shit. Why don't you—oh sweet fuck, how long have the warning lights been on?"

Paulie peered back through the window in the quality control room door. Ryan was pointing at the pretty Christmas lights. Flinging an arm up to cover his nose as he started to sneeze again, Paulie managed to soak the entire front of his last almost-clean shirt with cold tea. The short-sleeved button-down had been one of his favorite work shirts, but that was all over now. The light green material sucked in the dark brown color of the tea like a cactus sucks in water. The sea foam shade would never look the same again. Paulie sniffed, gagging a bit as a big glob of snot ran down the back of his itching throat. Ryan jumped back at the noise, his gorgeous eyes taking on more of a steel gray color and widening as he took in the object in Paulie's other hand. Paulie blinked at him. What had he asked? Oh, he wanted to know about the lights.

"The blue and green ones were there all along. Um, but the pretty red ones just started."

Paulie swayed on his feet. Ryan caught hold of his upper arm, a frown flitting across his face as he touched Paulie.

"For Christ's sake Paulie—here, lean against the wall. I gotta stop the machines."

Ryan hustled into the control booth, swearing at the machinery as it whined and groaned to a halt.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake, turn off, turn off, turn off!”

Moments later, he was back, reddish brown brows pinched together tightly, and wide, sensuous mouth in a pinched line as he spoke into the shiny black cordless handset pressed to his ear. Huh. How about that? Paulie hadn’t even noticed him calling anyone.

“Yes sir, that’s right. I don’t think he can drive himself home. No. That would be great, Mr. Murchison. Yes, thank you. No, Paulie said it just started. Yes. I’ll reset the machines and retest everything that went through in the last five minutes. Yes sir, I think we can still make the order for the new client up in time. I’m going to take his car keys and get him situated in the break room. All right, I’ll make sure he knows. Yes, he’ll be there waiting for you. Okay. Good-bye, Mr. Murchison.”

Two months later

Eli blinked at his bestie Sasha’s beautiful heart shaped face in astonishment. She didn’t appear to have hit her head. Eying her head carefully, he couldn’t detect any discernible damage. No bruises showed on her forehead, and no goose-eggs pushed her perfectly arranged red curls awry.

“Have you lost your fucking mind, Sasha?”

Sasha blinked back at him, her dark blue eyes gazing steadily up at him. Long black lashes fanned against her cheeks as she blinked at him. Tilting her head to one side, she pursed her pouty looking lips tightly together and gazed up toward the left for a moment. The sun beat down on them as they stood near the center of the cafeteria courtyard. The warm rays combined with her body heat enhanced the faint touches of jasmine scented oil Sasha was obsessed with wearing. The other students bold enough to brave the unusually hot day by eating outside were all lounging around the edges of the space in the shade provided by strategically placed overhangs and a few patio tables with big navy blue and white striped table umbrellas. He and Sasha leaned against a big rectangular slab of white concrete. The kids at the school all laughingly referred to the thing as make-out rock, because you couldn’t even sit too close to a member of the opposite sex there without Mr. Raychik, the kitchen and cafeteria workers’ supervisor, practically having a coronary.

Sasha had one hip leaned against the structure, the hand on that side idly picking at the remaining fruit from her lunch, and the other hand tucked into the pocket of her boot-cut jeans. Pushing aside a wedge of orange in favor of the large green grapes that were left, she popped one in her mouth, chewing slowly as she seemed to give serious consideration to Eli's question about her mental state.

"Hmm, no I don't think I have, Eli. You know I always have somebody trying to get me to do it. And I want to. Like I mean, I really want to, you know? But..."

Sasha broke off, a tide of red washing through her cheeks before she tipped her head down, hiding the midnight blue of her incredible eyes. Eli regarded her downturned head thoughtfully. Though he'd never been with a girl, he liked them well enough. He just liked boys better as far as fooling around went. There was something to what she was saying though. He'd never gone all the way with someone for nearly the same reason. He wanted it to be somebody he loved. Christ, he was actually gonna do this, wasn't he? Snorting, he reached under her chin and lifted her face up.

"Okay, Earthgirl, but you better not turn green and scary after dark, or actually be taken over by an evil alien from some crystal planet, 'cause we're gonna have to wait 'til my parents go to that work thing of Dad's this weekend. The evil alien will totally eat your brains before I can save you if that's what's going on. So... okay. I get it. And, seriously, I'm kinda glad you thought of this. I haven't gone all the way with anybody else yet either. I bet I haven't had full-on sex for all the same reasons as you, or at least for most of them. So, um... just let's have no weirdness after, okay? We're not gonna pretend we're boyfriend and girlfriend, okay? That would just be too weird for this Spaceman."

Sasha, laughing as she made a far too realistic gagging noise, smacked the back of her hand into his stomach.

"Hah. You should be so lucky, dork-boy."

Eli grinned crookedly down at her as a gust of wind sent his blondish-brown hair blowing into his face. He ran the long fingers on one hand down over the creamy pale skin of her nose.

“You’re right, Sasha. If I could find a guy as great as you I’d marry him tomorrow. Are you sure you won’t do the gender reassignment surgery?”

He’d meant it as a joke, to keep them from getting too spooked by the huge plans they’d just agreed on, but Sasha stepped back, glowering hotly enough to cow even the bright red of her hair.

“That’s horrible, Eli. I can’t believe you’d mock trans people that way. I’m ashamed of you. Just forget it. I don’t—”

Eli clapped a hand over her mouth as she started to get loud, praying she wouldn’t bite him. Well, that she wouldn’t bite him *again*. Lord knew she’d bitten him more than once over the years. Wench was waaaaay too free with her teeth.

“Oh crap, you’re right. I’m sorry. That was a shitty thing to say. I know you’re a girl and you like your parts just like they are, and you prefer to match them up with guy parts. I’m a dick. I’m sorry. I won’t—I’m sorry, Sasha. I’d never say something like that in front of Michele.”

Sasha’s little sister, Michele, was five. She was also, according to Sasha, accidentally born into the wrong body, and Sasha was lobbying hard to have her parents take Sasha to see a psychiatrist so they could start the process of helping her transition before puberty gave her the bulky shoulders and low voice her accidentally-male body would force on her without medical intervention. She was winning too, as she’d already convinced her dad of the merits of at least getting a qualified doctor’s assessment of the situation. Eli ducked his head to look her straight in the eye.

“Hey. At least they gave her a name that could go either way, so she won’t have to pick a new name.”

Sasha’s frown eased, though her bottom lip still stuck out. Eli poked it with the tip of his finger. Batting his finger away, Sasha gave a reluctant sounding chuckle.

“You really are a total dick. Why am I friends with you again?”

Eli shrugged. “I’m the only one who sees past that movie starlet face of yours to recognize the twisted sister living within.”

Sasha choked, sputtered, and then burst into her trademark dying-donkey bray. She claimed the hideous noise was a laugh. Eli flashed a quick glance

around the courtyard of the high school. A few faces turned toward them, but no one stared overly long. Thank God he and Sasha were both seniors. They were both going to college in the fall, though Sasha would be going to Syracuse University while he'd be headed for Onondaga Community College. His mom couldn't afford the big bucks to send him to S.U. like Sasha's folks could. Sasha's folks had wanted her to go away to a school like Yale or the University of Michigan. Fortunately, she, like Eli, had turned eighteen toward the end of this school year, and her parents felt the change to legal adult status meant she should have a bigger hand in deciding her own future, at least as far as where she went to college.

Sasha smacked her hand into the dark blue fabric covering the taut muscles of his gut again. "Oi. Spaceman. What are you wool-gathering about?"

Eli laughed, flicking his finger gently against her nose. "Yeah, Tenth Doctor and Donna all the way, huh?"

The bell ending their lunch period rang, and Eli leaned down to press a quick kiss to Sasha's cheek. "Make sure you tell your folks you're sleeping over at Taylor's on Saturday."

Sasha rolled her eyes at him. "Your sister is going to rat us out one day."

Eli lifted one broad shoulder negligently, the well-worn cotton of his favorite school shirt creasing with the tension. Buffing his neatly trimmed fingernails against his dark blue polo—chosen to match his girl Sasha's eyes, of course—he smirked down at her. "Nah. I have waaaaaaay too much dirt on her."

Sasha laughed as she turned to walk toward her fifth period chemistry class. Winking over her shoulder, she blew him a kiss while crossing her eyes. Eli's chest filled with warmth. He had the best life in the whole world. Two more weeks and high school would be over. Three months after that he'd be starting college, along with his twin sister Taylor. And even though he couldn't afford the fancy school his best friend was going to, he wouldn't lose her friendship to distance and gradually diverging lives.

Hal Matheson bumped his shoulder as he stood staring after Sasha. "Hey man, I know your girl is smoking hot and all, but you better get your ass to class or Principal Jenkins really will give you detention every day until

graduation. You know he has a total hard-on for you ever since the pot-belly pig incident last year.”

Hal nodded down the hallway to where the dark haired, kinda-hot-for-an-old-guy principal stood glowering at them both. The second bell rang, and Eli spun around, loping off toward his calculus class. God help him get through the rest of the school year without getting caught in the principal’s crosshairs. Geez, he really hadn’t meant for the pig thing to get so out of hand. It was supposed to have been funny. Eli huffed out a breath, and reached up to push his hair out of his eyes. He bolted through the door to his class and slid his ass onto the unyielding plastic seat of his desk just as the final bell rang. Whew. Two more weeks until his life started. Holy fuck, he could barely wait.

CHAPTER ONE

Four Years Later

Paulie stretched his back, gratified to hear the pop of the small bones at the base of his spine realigning. God, that felt so good. It just about killed him, working the doubles every Saturday and Sunday, but doing so let him work full time and go to school full time without having to juggle his schedule around too often. He went to school Monday thru Friday and worked all day Saturday and Sunday. It hadn't left much time for a social life, but for the first couple of years after he single-handedly ruined Jeff Murchison's condom company, he'd been too depressed to do much of anything. And since then he'd been too busy to worry about it. He was never going to be able to take back what he'd done to Jeff or all the other people who'd been affected by that one stupid decision—when he'd chosen to try running the quality control section of Jeff's small company all alone on a day when he was sick as a dog. No, he couldn't take it back, but he could go into a career field where he could help people. It would never make up for all the harm he'd caused, but maybe it would let him get back to a place where he could look in the mirror without flinching.

Paulie bit down on his bottom lip. He allowed his mind to continue to wander as he got his time card from its slot in the metal rack next to the time clock and waited for the seconds to count down until the clock read the correct time. Shaking his head, he slid the proper day and time space into place under the stamping device. He laughed, low and tired but still, it was a laugh, right? No one punched-out on old fashioned time cards anymore, not at any of the other places the temping agency sent him, and not at the first long term care facility he'd worked at while training for his certification. It was good that some of the things around here, like the so-last-century time clock, could inject a little humor into his days. He needed reasons to laugh after another grueling thirty-two-hour workweek crammed into two sixteen-hour days.

As back-breaking and soul-consuming as working in the nursing home could be, he got a lot of satisfaction out of the little moments. When he got someone to the toilet before they wet themselves, or got to mark off in his aide

binder that someone got their shower on time, ate well, walked down the hall with assistance, or finished a crossword puzzle. Those things would have seemed like nothing four years ago, but now he knew better. The little victories were the sweetest.

He wouldn't be here, wouldn't be anywhere if it weren't for Jeff. After Paulie set off the great baby boom of the greater Syracuse area—and he shuddered to think of what could have happened if Jeff had gotten the contract to supply condoms to vending machines in the local bars, he'd been horrifically depressed. God—it still pained him to contemplate all the things that could have gone wrong. Paulie could think of at least four gay bars where those things sold out so fast the resupply guy had to stop by four to six times a week. He didn't know about the straight bars, because he didn't frequent those, but he figured they likely had the same rates of condom usage. He could have killed people if they'd been drunk and dropping quarters in vending machines for Murchison Rubbers. At least the people who'd gotten the faulty condoms had most likely been sober—at least when they bought what they thought would protect them. Thankfully, thus far all the complaints had been in regards to unplanned pregnancies, and a few curable types of sexually transmitted diseases. There hadn't been any new cases of HIV linked back to the error, but Paulie still woke up some mornings afraid to turn on the television or pick up the paper.

Two good things—no, three, had come out of the whole fucked up chain of events. One, he'd learned that Jeff and Ryan were the best friends a man could ever ask for. Two, his mother had put her foot down and told his papa that he could either be the dad of a gay man or he could be the divorced dad of a gay man, because she was done mourning a son who lived right across town from her. Finally—and Paulie personally liked number three the best of them all, even though one and two were pretty damn stellar—Paulie found a career that he absolutely loved. He was just a few weeks away from graduating with his two-year degree. Once he passed the national testing, or nursing board exams, he'd actually be a registered nurse. His mom and sister were bursting with pride. His papa said it was a good job for a gay boy to have, because that way if he got the “gay disease” he'd know which ones were the good doctors for that sort of thing. Paulie was pretty sure that comment was gonna earn Papa a

solid month or more sleeping in the guest room while Mama served him cold food and discussed potential divorce lawyers with Teresa right in front of the old man.

Eli stared into the beautiful midnight-blue eyes that were a few shades darker than his precious Adrianna's. Gritting his teeth together, he counted to twenty in his head. Ten just wasn't going to cut it. When he reached seventeen without any discernible lessening of the acid wash his brain was currently putting his stomach through, he bent down, picked Adrianna up, settled her on his hip and then pressed one of her ears against his chest while he covered the other with his hand.

“Have you lost your fucking mind? Again? No, I am not quitting my job and going to school. Adrianna's insurance is through my job. I pay for her daycare. You don't even have a job yet!”

Pausing to bite the inside of his cheek, Eli glanced around the clean, bright lobby of the mid-sized Unitarian Church they'd opted to attend together. This was not the place to have this discussion. Mrs. Peters was pretending to adjust the fit of her wide-brimmed sunhat while avidly watching them with a concerned look on her face. The church's minister, a short, perky middle-aged woman with shorter hair than his, was due to walk out of the meeting room at any minute. And while Eli liked the woman, he didn't know her well enough yet to feel comfortable discussing personal things in front of her. Worst of all, he couldn't send Adrianna to play with her pet, a fat, lazily tolerant old cat named Snickers, while a *Dora the Explorer* tape handily masked the sounds of him talking Sasha out of her latest leap-before-you-look plan. “Talking”, as in arguing in furious whispers, about why she needed to think things through more. The whispers only lasted until Sasha got good and pissed, and told him loudly to stop acting like an old man.

He really hated when she gave him the “old man” speech, one hand planted on her hip, the other waving an accusatory finger in his direction. She always talked about how he needed to take time for himself and that he shouldn't carry the larger share of the bills... dear God, it went on and on. But somehow, no matter how much they argued about him working two jobs, or her chronic,

serial leap-first syndrome, they never let things devolve into bitter recriminations. They had a great set of role models in the Tenth Doctor and Donna, so figuring out the whole co-parenting with a partner who was a best friend rather than a—well, a romantic partner came pretty easily.

Hah.

If easy meant crying a lot—Sasha, and Adrianna covered this end of things. Eli concentrated on holding down a pretty good job where he worked full time in a machine tooling shop, and another not so great part-time gig in a crappy warehouse. At the warehouse, he was basically a brute-force laborer, pulling heavy flats of various candies and sweets out to be assembled for differing vendors and then packed onto the proper delivery trucks. On weekdays, he worked from six in the morning until three in the afternoon at the machine shop, then picked Adrianna up from daycare, and kept her until six or seven when Sasha got home to their shared duplex from whatever classes and clinical rotations her day had held. Thanks to her parents co-signing on a loan, they'd been able to purchase an awesome side-by-side duplex and make minor modifications that enabled them to easily split time with Adrianna.

“Oh my God, you aren't even listening to me.” She stomped her sensible white nursing student shoe—did they have to make the things so damned ugly that even Sasha couldn't quite pull them off?

Eli squinted at her, wondering why she was still harping on this same tired subject. He'd thought the matter settled earlier at the church. Clearly he was mistaken. Sasha huffed out a body shaking breath.

“Take that stupid frown off your face, Spaceman, and listen for two seconds before you start in about how you need to keep working yourself to death. Eli, I got the job. The one I wanted up at the VA hospital. The pay isn't as high as some of the other hospitals around here, but the benefits are unbelievably good and they do the team nursing thing I liked so much in my clinicals. You can quit the crappy warehouse job. Go part or three-quarter time at the machine shop so you still have health care, but damn it, go to school. Get your degree. Have two minutes a day that aren't about Adrianna and me. For Christ's sake, fucking go out to a bar. Have a drink. Get laid.”

When her eyes filled with crystalline tears, shimmering and tugging at every single raw place inside him, he knew she'd won. Damn her and her ugly white leather nursing student shoes anyway.

“What... wait. Did you just say you got a job? How? You haven't even graduated yet.”

Sasha smirked up at him, her pretty mouth twisted into a ridiculously smug cupid's bow that every single one of the glaringly hetero dudes he worked with would give their left nut to get near. Not that any of them were good enough for his best friend, so he'd warned them all off. She laughed, reaching up to pull the neon blue Scunci brand hair band she wore in her hair to fuck with the latest clinical instructor's neurotic sense of propriety.

Buffing her nails on the front of her garishly-white scrub top, Sasha quirked a gingersnap reddish-brown eyebrow at him. “Yep.”

She made sure to pop the *p* at the end of the word as annoyingly as possible, grinning wider when he gritted his teeth.

“Sasha, give over. How is that even possible?”

Whirling around, she flopped down on the cool—well, Eli thought it was cool even though the first time Sasha saw the blue leather sofa he'd found second hand at the Goodwill she'd smirked, pointed at him and trilled out the words, “Super-Gay”. Wrinkling her nose at him, she stretched her legs out in front of her, curled one hand behind her neck and used the other to pat the sofa cushion next to her.

“Nurses are in really high demand, Spaceman. It's one of the reasons I liked the career so much. Good job security. So, I get that plus the bonus of most places being willing to hire us right out of school, and let us work as graduate nurses while we're waiting to take the Nursing Board's licensing test. You know, the NCLEX I keep whining about studying for? Close your mouth. Yes, I got a job.”

Eli thought about that. Whoa. No wonder she'd insisted on going into nursing. She got her degree in two years, and from what she'd been telling him for the last six months, she could keep going to school part-time while she worked, and in about six years be the nursing equivalent of a General

Practitioner with an M.D. license but without all the insane student loans. All the bits of information she'd been feeding him over the last few weeks lined up in his head, finally clicking into place.

“Oh my God, Sasha... we're finally out of the woods, aren't we?”

Sasha's eyes welled up again. “Yeah, Spaceman, we really are.”

CHAPTER TWO

Paulie eyed the suddenly blank screen in front of him, hands sweating as he tried to believe that the test had cut off so quickly because he'd passed with the least possible amount of questions asked. The sudden shut off could also mean that he'd failed miserably. Oh, God, what if he'd failed? What if he was the most miserable failure ever in the history of the NCLEX? His normally dark olive skin paled to a shade far too close to white. He bit the inside of his cheek and smacked his thigh. There was no way he was going to pass out in the middle of the scrupulously tidy NCLEX testing site. Not only was the place way out in a suburban shopping complex that he'd never be able to get back to on a bus if he got carted away in an ambulance, but he'd be forever known as the gay guy who fainted at the nursing licensure exam. His father would never shut the fuck up about it, and he really didn't want to be the cause of Mama and Papa finally getting that divorce Mama threatened Papa with practically every other week at this point.

“If you're done, it's all right to get up and leave.”

His startled grunt didn't disturb everyone in the testing room. The girl at the far end of the room, wearing jeans and a hot pink Nerds shirt didn't even flinch. Then again, Paulie knew from being in a clinical rotation with her that she was profoundly deaf. She wouldn't have heard a freight train roll through the room. Wiping his sweating palms against the light tan fabric of his Dockers, he glanced up at the little woman standing next to his chair, with her mouth agape and one thin hand clutched over her heart. His smile came out then, an anorexic thing wobbling at the corners and doing nothing to hide how freaked out he was.

“Sorry. I didn't expect anyone to touch me. Sorry.”

Wire rimmed glasses slipping down the sharp line of her thin nose, the testing monitor nodded at him warily. Paulie raised his brows, waiting for her to step back so he could get up without knocking into her. The woman continued to hover where she was. A spark of temper lit at the back of Paulie's mind.

“Do you mind, ma’am? I can’t get up without bumping into you.”

The woman cleared her throat, pointing behind him with one frail looking finger. “Ah, you need to tell the test you’re finished.”

Paulie spun around to find the blinking cursor and blank page had been replaced with a message asking if he was okay with exiting the test, or if he wanted to review his answers. His cheeks heated and his right leg started to jiggle.

“Oh. Um, thanks.”

A strange, constricted sound issued from the woman’s throat. Flinching back slightly, Paulie found himself automatically assessing her for signs of distress. Her face was growing redder by the moment. She nodded and spun in the opposite direction. As he took in her shaking shoulders and listened again to the rhythmic noise she was making, Paulie realized she was trying to stifle laughter, probably at his dorky behavior. Well, at least she was nice about it. Shaking his head at himself, Paulie sent a quick prayer winging toward who or whatever might deign to answer to help him pass, or at least not die from the knots in his stomach before he got the results back in two days. He’d heard that they used to have to wait weeks and weeks before getting their test results back. Pushing the button to select the ‘yes please close the test’ option, he snorted softly to himself. Glad he hadn’t taken his exam back then, he heaved a sigh as he levered himself up out of the chair. He was pretty sure he’d never have lived through the torture of waiting that long.

A red-haired girl he remembered vaguely from one of their lecture classes together stood up at the same time. She smiled as they walked out the door, hiking the strap of her white and blue sundress over her shoulder as she blew out a huge gust of air. Geez. She looked way too small to hold that much air in her body. Sticking out one hand in greeting while she used the other to push a hank of coppery hair out of her face, she started talking in a melodic rush that would put a xylophone to shame.

“Hey, I remember you from the Cardiac rotation. You were in ‘Black Mamba’s’ clinical, weren’t you? How’d you do? On the test I mean—I couldn’t tell, it cut off so fast and maybe I totally failed but at least I have a job already—did you get picked up at the job fair like I did?”

Paulie blinked at her, nervously straightening his favorite charcoal grey hoodie's sleeves. It didn't match the tan pants he had on, not really, but he made them sort of work by wearing the black Converse All Stars he'd found at the thrift store by his little three room apartment. The girl was watching him out of the most incredible midnight-blue eyes. She looked like something off a runway with the startling mix of copper and flame tones in her hair—it had to be natural, because no nursing student could afford the kind of hairdresser who could pull off that level of believable variation.

“Um. Job fair?”

The cupid bow lips parted, rounding into an O-shape that told Paulie he'd missed something important. Great. Even Nursing Student Barbie was two steps ahead of him. He mentally smacked himself for the unkind thought. From the little he recalled about her, the girl was a nice enough sort. Her mouth was moving though, so he tried his damndest to rein his brain in to pay attention.

“Oh my God, you didn't go to the job fair? They even held it on Saturday afternoon so no one would have a conflict with classes or their clinical rotation. Geez, have you been hiding under a rock?”

Paulie's cheeks flamed in mortification. “Um. Yeah. That's a pretty good description of the past few years. Ah, nice to see you. Good luck with the test and all. Bye.”

Paulie turned and trotted away as quickly as he could without looking like he was running from her. He was out of breath halfway across the parking lot to where his pathetic excuse for a car was sitting. Gah, he really needed to start getting more exercise now that he was done with school.

Of course, the slightly gasping breaths might have more to do with the mild panic attack trying to sneak up on him, but he wasn't going to admit to that. He was done with those, and once he had an actual nursing job, maybe he'd join a gym. He patted his less than firm midsection with one hand, wishing he'd opted to wear just a T-shirt that morning instead of giving in to his desire to wear the hoodie. As light and comfortable as the soft gray cotton of the jacket was, he could feel sweat starting to pool in the dip where his lower back ran into the ginormous swell of his jiggly, bubbled-out butt. Well,

at least his butt seemed ginormous and jiggly to him. His sister Teresa said she would kill to have a nice ass like his, but she was his sister so of course she said nice things about him.

Paulie shook his head at the reflection of himself in the driver's side window. Nah. The sweaty back was worth all the comfort of having his chubby belly covered so he didn't obsess about it during the test. A waft of salty, fetid air blew across his face from the little wetland area in front of where his car was parked. He pulled his keys out of a slightly too tight pants pocket, gazing out over the marsh sprawling out from behind the building where the testing center was. Fumbling, he dropped his keys. Of course, the damned things skidded halfway under his rust-bucket of a vehicle. Crap. The old Nova sat too low to the ground for him to get his thick body under there. This wasn't the first time he'd dropped the keys and had them end up under the car. If he was home, he could get one of the kids from the block to shimmy under there and fetch them out. Well, maybe he'd be able to reach if he kneeled beside the car and stuck his arm under. Squatting quickly, and then kneeling with his face pressed to the pavement as his eyes scanned the underside of the car, Paulie searched for the tell-tale silver shimmer of the keys...

The low purring sound of a well-tuned engine crept closer and closer until it stopped immediately behind him. A car door opened and then closed with a thunking sound. Paulie wondered if that was the girl's ride picking her up. Grunting he wiggled a little as he tried to shove his arm farther under the car. He could swear he'd seen—

“While I'm terribly entertained by the view, I can't help wondering if you'd like some help?”

The rich deep tones of the voice danced across his ears in the same way a pancake drenched in a puddle of Mrs. Butterworth's syrup would dance across his tongue. His stomach clenched, his breath stilled in his chest, and he immediately sought to drop his rear end down, tuck his legs under him and spring effortlessly to his feet. He'd clearly lost all sense of who he was. Attempting to jerk upward with an arm half under over two tons of steel and rubber didn't really work out so well for Paulie. He lurched up about half an

inch, got caught on his own arm, and then face planted against the side of his own car. Fire exploded in his nose and his vision went white.

“Shib. Tha hursss.”

Oh, crap. The last time he sounded like this was the night his father broke his nose while tossing him out the front door. Mama had been at bingo, and—avoiding the whole divorce thing—Paulie had never told her about it. He wasn't even sure if the blow had been intentional or more of the collateral damage he wound up carting around after that night. Bracing one hand against the side of his Nova, he extricated his other arm completely from underneath the car. Then he flopped around to land inelegantly on his butt.

“Thorry. I thimb I boke iith.”

With one hand cupped under the edge of his jaw directly below his nose, Paulie vainly attempted to capture the warm, bright red rush of fluid filling his cupped palm quicker than he could figure out what to do with it. Wincing, he flicked a glance up to send whoever it was on their way. Scuffed black work boots led to long, lean and—Baby Jesus in a sidecar—mouthwateringly muscular legs. The guy had to be at least three to four inches taller than Paulie, and dear God in Heaven, every one of those inches was packed with long ropes of muscle. Paulie swallowed thickly as his gaze slid past the man's rock hard thighs to the rather large bit of divinity he cradled at their apex. Hoping he hadn't let his gaze linger on the f-ing amazing package—holy Moses on a pogo stick, Paulie had no doubts he was going to be seeing that gorgeous bulge in his dreams and fantasies for a long time to come. He jerked his gaze upward, jumping past a forest green Henley and what he suspected were some truly gawk-worthy abs to a land on a face of chiseled, nearly god-like perfection. Reaching up to confirm the goose-egg he must have on his forehead to be seeing Roman demigods come to life, Paulie was surprised to find only smooth skin. The guy's sandy brown brows drew together.

“Hey, buddy. I didn't mean to make you hurt yourself. Damn. Hang on for a second and I'll see if Sasha stuffed an ice pack in that nursing student emergency wonder-kit of hers. And I'll grab the towel from my work out bag—it's clean. I was going to the gym after I dropped Sasha and Adrianna off at home.”

He loped back toward the Subaru, all sleek male animal, buzzing with energy and alpha in his prime intensity. The long thick muscles made Paulie's mouth water just a little. Looking like that—not an ounce of spare flesh on him—and hurrying back to a car with the beautiful Sasha waiting, his fine male form was just another that Paulie would have to admire from afar. So, Paulie sat on the pavement that was starting to burn his plump ass a little through what used to be his second best dress pants. He pressed the hand not trying to stem the flow of blood from his nose against his soft, round little pooch of a belly and sighed very, very quietly.

Maybe someday he'd find a gay man who wanted a chubster like him. Hah. Maybe he'd find a way to fix everything he'd ruined for Jeff too, right after he won the lottery and got declared Mr. Universe in the same People Magazine issue where Andrej Pejic lamented the fact that he'd never been brave enough to ask the uber-hot Paulie Bellizi for a date. He was still chuckling painfully when a set of slim feet encased in brown leather sandals and topped by glittering toenail polish in bright pink edged into his line of vision.

Holy fucking hotness, Batman. Eli paused for a second with his hand on the top of the Subaru, breathing deeply as he tried to will his unruly cock to stand down right the hell now. Okay, so maybe he'd been celibate for too damn long. Maybe hearing that he was going to be able to start having a life that didn't revolve around making sure Adrianna and Sasha had what they needed had pulled his libido out of the deep freeze and set it out in the corner to thaw. Either way, it somehow still seemed just wrong to spring wood when a—admittedly smoking hot—guy nearly knocked himself out at your feet. But Goddamn, that was a double handful of yummy man back there. Even with the painful misplacement of his nose distorting things, he had the sweetest Little Italy accent Eli had ever heard. Eli could so see himself pinning the round cheeked, olive skinned guy to his mattress and fucking him within an inch of his life. The big brown eyes and that dark brown hair waving over his forehead were absolutely delicious. Even better was that flash of something—needy and vulnerable in the man's gaze. It looked sweet and shy; Eli could see himself giving the man just what he needed until they were both sweaty and spent.

Vivid flashes of just what that might look like flooded Eli's brain. So. Not. Helping. Shit.

A tapping on the driver's side window had his eyes springing open. Sasha's face was looking out at him, her nose wrinkled in that way it did when she was trying not to laugh. The strap of her favorite sundress fell down her shoulder, revealing a dark tan line. A heavy pang of sweet warmth shot through his chest. Eli was damn glad he'd caved and bought her the thing last year for her birthday. She'd been feeling so down, struggling in school and just so damn sad all the time.

The night before they went shopping for Adrianna's spring and summer clothes, he'd overheard her on the phone with her mom. She'd been crying, telling her mom how she was fat and ugly now with stretch-marks all over her belly, and she didn't know what she was going to wear when summer came because they couldn't afford new clothes, except for Adrianna. So after she hung up, Eli had swallowed the bitter taste of his pride long enough to call his mum up and see if she could lend him a hundred bucks until he got paid the next time. The next day he'd bought Sasha the sundress and a pretty gold and blue bikini. She'd tried to make him take back the bikini, saying she couldn't wear one. Eli had laughed at her and then told her she should be proud of her silver lining showing. She'd looked at him like he was crazy, and he'd grabbed her in a big bear hug.

"Listen, Donna" he'd said, affecting a very David Tennant as the Doctor stance and an English accent so bad it was a wonder the Anglophile Accent Police of America didn't slap a huge fine on him, "I don't know what anyone else has been telling you, but every time I see those marks I think about how my best friend took what could have been the darkest day of our lives and turned it into the most precious thing in the world. Don't you put down those warrior marks in my hearing, okay Donna? I don't think I could bear it."

She'd sniffled, and then replied with this. "Oi, Spaceman, now you've gone and made me ruin my face."

She started coming to the gym with him after that, and they'd taken turns working out while the other one watched Adrianna. As soon as they put the word out that they weren't a couple, she'd been surprised, and pleased, to find

herself on the receiving end of numerous invitations to dinner, drinks, and even a hot air balloon ride. Though after Eli had informed the guy that he'd better treat her like a lady or Eli would rearrange every molecule in his body via a good old-fashioned ass-whooping, he'd slunk off like the snake Eli had suspected him of being all along. But seriously, who asked someone out on a hot air balloon ride as a first date? That was a psycho move.

Sasha tapped at the glass again. Eli blinked. The noise recalled him to the present, and he stepped back, bending down to see her face better before motioning for her to roll the window down. Once she had it down a few inches, he started to speak.

“Hey, your friend from nursing school kind of broke his nose against the side of his car. Do you have an ice pack in that monstrous first aid kit you made me put in the car?”

The laughter fled Sasha's face. She'd only been in one clinical rotation with Paulie, but nursing school was a lot like going to war. The other students were your fellow soldiers, guarding your back in the dangerous nearly militaristic maneuvers where you fought the actual illnesses, as well as your own lack of experience. The instructors were like drill sergeants trying to beat every hit of weakness from your nursing skills, and the patients were the territory you sought to conquer. Even one day spent together would have been enough for Sasha to learn a lot about Paulie. After a whole semester guarding each other from the gimlet eyes of their instructors while trying to give the patients assigned to them the best care possible she knew more about Paulie than any ordinary acquaintance would.

“Oh, no! Poor Paulie... he's always been kinda clumsy, but I never saw him actually hurt himself before. Sh—oot. Sugar, honey, iced tea.”

She grimaced, pointing toward the back seat where Adrianna watched them avidly as she sucked on three fingers and clutched a stuffed monkey to her chest. Her eyelids were heavy, dropping shut every few seconds. Sasha undid her seatbelt and opened the passenger side door, climbing quickly from the car.

“Let me go take a look at him. Um, if he hit his head hard enough to break his nose he might have given himself a concussion. Let me see him—I'm sorry I think you might miss your workout time.”

Eli waved his hand at her. “Go, go check him out. I’ll wait here. He—geez, Sasha—”

His voice cracked on the last bit, and Eli could feel his cheeks heating up. Sasha blinked at him, and then hopped up to stand on the edge of the doorframe by the base of her seat. Leaning forward, she spoke in a whisper.

“Oi, Spaceman... you like him. No, wait, you think he’s hot—hah. He is just your type. And you had to go scare the shize out of him and make him almost kill himself. Even worse, now you have to rely on someone else to go patch his boo-boos.”

Eli glared at her, answering just as quietly without even trying to put on a fake British accent. “Don’t push it, Donna.”

Cackling, Sasha hopped down, strolled with agonizing slowness to the back of the car to lift the hatchback and rummage around in the big red emergency travel kit she’d put together for the back of their car. After a thousand eons, she emerged with a single ice pack no bigger than Eli’s hand. Eying her incredulously, Eli pushed his hand through his hair. The humid air blowing across the marsh seemed to be gluing the stuff to his forehead.

“That’s all you’re taking? What about something for pain? And gloves... didn’t you get all huffy about how we always have to remember blood transfer of germs?”

Sasha grimaced, reached back into the still open hatch, and came out with a pack of gloves and bottle of water. She bit her lip.

“I don’t have anything in there to deal with more blood than I can clean up with a couple of gauze pads unless I want to use the sterile dressings to clean up a nosebleed. Do you have something in your gym bag?”

Eli’s stomach did a slow roll as he smacked his hand against his forehead. “Geez. Yeah, I think I already told him I’d give him my towel... maybe. I dunno. Sure, you can use it. I meant to tell him we’d get him something.”

Sasha grinned. “Thanks, Spaceman. I’m a little rattled too. I think when it’s somebody I’ve known for two years, it makes things different, you know? And his name is Paulie. We had the same lecture time for our first semester of nursing.”

Eli rolled his eyes before giving her a lopsided grin. “And with your memory, of course you remembered. And it was no problem reminding you about the gloves Sasha. I have a vested interest in keeping you healthy, ya know. Otherwise, I have to go looking for a new bestie and baby mama. Sheesh. Way more work than I want to have to do. You know how lazy I am.”

Sasha snorted, flipping a hand at him as she gathered her supplies up into a bundle wrapped in the towel, and made her way over to Paulie. Eli grinned to himself as he watched Adrianna’s cute little button nose scrunch up. She batted a strand of silky reddish blond hair out of her face, and clutched her monkey tighter. Eli mouthed the sexy Italian-looking man’s name. Paulie. He liked the name, liked the way it felt in his mouth, the way saying it made him press his lips together and then open his mouth. It also fit the sweet, round-cheeked look the man had going on very nicely. He would have to make sure they exchanged numbers before they left the parking lot.

CHAPTER THREE

Paulie watched Sasha approach with an acid spewing, ten-foot tapeworm eating holes into the tender surface of his stomach. She was everything he would never be. Graceful, slim, obviously well off to judge by the costly diamond studs she wore in her ears, and most damningly, female. He didn't want to be a woman. Paulie was plenty happy being born with a dumbstick and two balls in the center pocket. He liked being a guy who liked other guys. He just wished he were more the kind of guy that other guys who liked guys went for. Or better yet, the kind of beautiful guy that everyone went for. Sasha sank down like a willow bending in the wind, standing above him one moment and sitting in a tidy little half kneeling position with her skirt belled out in a perfect circle around her the next moment. She sat back on her heels, opening the towel she held and using her skirt as a sort of makeshift barrier between her supplies and the ground. Huh. That was clever. Shaking out the towel she'd carried everything over in, she held it out toward him.

“Here, use this to help you catch the blood.”

Paulie took one end of the towel gingerly, careful not to touch her with his bloody hands. He was disease-free, but she had no way of knowing that. With brisk, efficient motions, she snapped a pair of gloves onto her hands before opening the bottle of water she'd brought over.

“I doab thin I caaan dink”

Sasha slanted a long look at him out of those dark blue eyes. One corner of her mouth tipped up. “Yeah, well that's good, because the water is to wash your face off so I can pop your nose back into place. It's gonna hurt less and heal faster if we do it now.”

Paulie leaned back away from her. “We dibent learn dat in cass”

Laughing, Sasha shook her head. “Hah. I know. My uncle runs a gym for boxers. He taught me—well, his trainer, Matty, taught me. I honestly know what I'm doing.”

Regarding her closely, Paulie thought for a moment. His brothers Tony and Luigi both had plenty of broken noses growing up, and he thought he recalled Tony saying something about his nose feeling better as soon as they reset it.

“Okab.”

Reaching over, Sasha placed her thumbs on both sides of his nose. Paulie’s gaze strayed over her shoulder toward the car where he could just make out the big, gorgeous man’s beautifully firm ass pointing straight toward Paulie as the other man bent to look in the open car window. When Sasha cleared her throat Paulie guiltily jerked his gaze back to her. Looking deeply into his eyes, her little hands spread over his round cheeks, she smiled angelically at him as she spoke.

“Eli’s gay you know.”

Then, while his brain was trying to wrap around the most delightful thing he’d heard in over five years, she wrenched her thumbs sideways with a sudden snapping motion of her wrists. White-hot fire exploded up his face and knifed through his brain. Paulie bellowed, attempting to scuttle back from the evil harpy before him. Clearly, she thrived on the pain of—holy Mary, his nose felt better already. Whoa.

Paulie blinked at her, and the motion felt intensely different from two minutes ago. “Wow. That feels better.”

Tipping her head back, Sasha laughed before gesturing for him to move forward again. “Come on, don’t be a baby. I promise not to do anything that painful again.”

Paulie shook his head as he scooted back toward her. Tipping his head to one side, he bit down on his bottom lip. “Why did you say that? Um. About Eli.”

Dumping water on a gauze pad, Sasha looked up at him with one eyebrow raised. “I said it to get your attention off what I was about to do... and because it’s true.”

Paulie gulped. “Really?”

Sasha pulled off one glove, and then used that hand to draw an X over her heart. “Cross my heart. And you, sir, are just his type.”

Eying him with a wicked twinkle in her blue eyes, she smirked slightly. “Yep, he’s always gotten hot for men with sexy Italian or English accents. I

would have fixed the two of you up a year ago, but he was too preoccupied to make anybody a decent boyfriend then. Eh, he's still a big geek, but trainable. You think you might wanna apply for the position?"

Paulie gaped at her as she pushed up to standing with the same willowy grace she'd utilized lowering herself to the ground. His head echoed with the small sounds of wind rattling through the tall cattails on the other side of the low rail lining this side of the parking lot. His brain floundered, completely bereft of any response to her statement. She'd forgotten completely about washing his face off, but before he could mention it Sasha grinned, and the expression was so sly and naughty he half expected a cute little pair of horns to suddenly sprout from her head.

"Huh?"

Laughing, she turned to walk away. After a few steps, she paused to look over her shoulder. "Hey, do you have someone at home to keep an eye on you and make sure you didn't give yourself a concussion?"

Paulie didn't even have to hear the end of her sentence before he was shaking his head from side to side. "Um. No. I live alone."

Delicately arched copper eyebrows lifted toward her hairline. "Well. All right then. Do you want us to leave you at Crouse Hospital's ER or do you want to stay at our place tonight?"

Paulie blinked at her again. Shit. "I thought you were sort of a life-sized Nursing Student Barbie, but you're really more of a deceptively innocent seeming Kick-Ass-Ninja-Drill-Sergeant Barbie, aren't you?"

Sasha smirked at him again before turning toward the hot sex-god loping back toward them. The sight of his thighs flexing knocked any idea of protest at being called Italian clean out of his head.

Adrianna finally lost her fight with the tiny little zzzzz-monsters dangling from the ends of her eyelashes, and Eli lost no time taking advantage of the opportunity to zip over to where Sasha was taking care of her hot nursing buddy.

"Paulie."

He tried the name on for size, liking the way it felt in his mouth when he actually said it aloud. And nearly as much as he thought he might like to have some part, any part, of the man where he could lick and nibble at it. He got close enough to hear Paulie just as the man made his comment about which Barbie Sasha most resembled. Eli snorted, catching her gaze as her eyes widened and her mouth quirked up at the ends. With a laugh tickling the back of his throat, Eli nodded toward Paulie, who was currently making Eli's dick do the Macarena in his pants.

“Make another conquest, Earthgirl?”

Sasha's eyes danced with mischief. “Nah. He's more your type anyway, Spaceman.”

A rush of heat flooded down into Eli's groin. He glanced behind Sasha, surprised to see Paulie simply sitting on the ground watching the two of them with his head tilted to one side, brows scrunched up a little, the hint of a smile playing around his mouth. Turning his gaze back to Sasha, Eli gave her his best shark smile.

“Good. I call dibs.”

On the ground, there was a short burst of laughter followed by the best quote possible from Eli's favorite Brendan Fraser movie ever. “Nobody gets dibs on the mountain guide.”

Sasha and Eli both cracked up at that, Sasha actually going so far as to set the ice pack she still held down on the car's dull yellow hood. Eli did a double take.

Wait a second. What was she still doing with that?

Eli's laughter evaporated as he realized the little bit of relief they could offer Paulie hadn't been given to him. He tapped Sasha's arm.

“Hey, isn't he supposed to be holding that up against his face?”

Sasha took a second to wipe her streaming eyes, and then looked where he was pointing before turning stricken eyes to Eli. “Worst. Nurse. Ever.”

He pressed a finger to her lips. “Oi, nobody talks about my best mate that way, Earthgirl. I'll take care of it.”

Then he picked up the little icepack, breaking the pouch inside to release the activating chemicals to mix with whatever other stuff was in there. Eli shook the bag back and forth as he waited for Sasha to squeeze past him to get to the car. When she paused at the driver's side of their car, he squinted one eye at her.

“Sash? What are you doing?”

She tipped her head toward Paulie, and Eli turned his head to look at the man again. He had dark stains down the front of his charcoal grey shirt, and his tan pants were a complete loss with the bright red blood on them rapidly turning rust-colored as the heat of the day quickly dried the precious liquid. Paulie was still sitting on the ground, face covered in blood and his mouth open as his gaze flitted between the two of them. His brown eyes were wide and his short, dark brown hair flopped appealingly over his broad forehead. Sasha's voice came from behind Eli, but he didn't take his eyes from Paulie to look at her. He couldn't.

“I'm waiting to find out if our mountain guide is going to go to the doctor to get cleared to go home or if we're taking him home with us.”

Paulie's lips opened up to speak, and a tsunami of panic tumbled Eli up, down, and sideways. He blurted out a series of commands. “He's coming home with us. I'll drive his car, and you take ours. I'll carry Adrianna in when we get home, so she doesn't wake up before it's time for her nap to end, though. And toss me a rag or some napkins or something from the glove box, okay?”

He could nearly hear Sasha's shrug behind him. Turning, he caught the cloth she threw while speaking. “Eh, it's fine with me. You might want to check with Paulie there though. He's not used to your bossy ways, yet.”

CHAPTER FOUR

The deep, commanding tone of Eli's voice distracted Paulie from the actual gist of the conversation for a moment, but then the words the two beautiful near-strangers were exchanging penetrated his pain, lust, and general life confusion. No, he couldn't go home with them. Them and... somebody named Adrianna? A mini factoid jiggled loose in his brain. Sasha had a baby. He'd heard her talking about the little girl with a couple of the other nursing students one day while they were all waiting their turns to sign up for the next semester's classes. They shared a house or apartment; that was made clear by the way they both kept referring to home and saying "our place". Paulie needed to go home. He was working swing and the overnight tonight to make up for missing the day shift to take his exam.

"I have to go home. I need to get ready for work tonight."

Eli squatted down in front of him, those wicked, softly-aged looking pants cupping his balls and pulling taut over his impressively large cock. Paulie bit the inside of his bottom lip to hold back a whimper as the man leaned in, and he was suddenly enveloped in a faint cloud of Usher cologne. Eli handed him the ice pack as he reached for the bottle of water to wet the cloth he'd brought to clean Paulie's face.

"No. You're going to give me your phone, and I'll call in for you. Then, after we get Adrianna and Sasha settled at home, I'm taking you either to an ER, one of those urgent care places, or your primary care doctor so someone besides Mean-Ass-Killer-Ninja-Drill-Sergeant Barbie Nurse can assess you for concussion. Then I'm taking you home—to our house, not wherever you live alone—and you can get some sleep. I don't have a bed yet for the guest room, but if you don't want to share my bed I can sleep on the couch."

A wave of heat and need washed over Paulie. His mouth dropped open as he stared into Eli's light brown eyes. Sasha was right. The guy was a bossy bastard. And didn't Paulie's dick just want to stand up and wave hello to him? Sheesh.

"What? Dude, I'm not your girlfriend." He nodded his chin toward the direction of Sasha.

Eli just laughed, gesturing for him to put the ice pack to his face. “Well, thank God for that. The world cannot handle two Sasha McMillan’s, that’s for damn sure. We’re gonna have enough trouble when Adrianna gets old enough to start following in her mama’s fiery footsteps. God.”

He paused for a second, the minute flecks of green and blue buried in the rich amber of his eyes seeming to flare like tiny Christmas lights. Paulie stared, his train of thought shattered by the startling play of multiple colors where he thought there had been only brown just a moment before.

Eli continued speaking, though his face fell into purely serious lines that somehow seemed to highlight the strange tension created by his youthful authority. “I’m assuming you work in healthcare, like Sasha. Do you really think it’s a good idea to go to work where you might injure someone because you aren’t well enough to be there?”

A sledgehammer of emotion smashed against Paulie’s heart. Joseph, Mary and Moses on a pogo stick. This kid—because, beautiful as he was, there was no way he was a day over twenty-five. Paulie placed him somewhere closer to the lower end of his twenties based on the lack of lines around his eyes despite how much he seemed to smile and laugh. He had faint smudges of purple under his eyes too, and yet being obviously tired didn’t detract from his proud masculine beauty in the slightest. In Paulie’s experience, only the very young, the obscenely wealthy, and the genetic lottery winners got that kind of slack where rest and looking good were concerned.

“I—no, I don’t want that. I never want that. I-I’ll call my supervisor, and then my doctor. But I have to get my phone from inside the car. Um. My keys are still under the car.”

A low sound rolled over and through him as Eli tipped his head back, sun glinting off his sandy brown hair and the pretty white teeth that Paulie could so easily envision worrying at various bits of his anatomy. The man’s throat worked as he laughed, and the sight of those corded muscles moving did pull a groan from Paulie. Eli tilted his head back down, a smile still stretched across his mouth and those unbelievable chips of blue and green danced in the warm brown of his eyes.

“I’ll get your keys out from the other side, and then get your phone out for you to make those calls. Just keep the ice pack on your face, hmmm?”

Paulie swallowed thickly. “Um. Okay.”

Walking around the back of the car, Eli pulled the hair tie out of his shoulder length hair and ran a quick hand through it before pulling it back into a ponytail again. Squatting once he got to the midpoint of the passenger side of the car, he craned his head to peer under the car. Nada. Shaking his head, Eli put his hands down, flattening his body out into a pushup position while holding his long body a scant inch above an oily-looking patch of pavement. Crap, these might be work pants, but he liked them. Plus, it was Sasha’s turn to do laundry this week, and he really didn’t want to make extra work for her. He looked again. Aha. Shifting his weight to his right hand, Eli bent his elbow a fraction more and hooked the keys out with the tip of his pinky finger.

“Got them, Paulie. I’ll have your phone out for you in a sec.”

Bouncing up to his feet, Eli made quick work of unlocking the beat-to-shit yellow car’s door and snagging the older model cell resting in the little console down by the gearshift. As he walked around the back of the car, he started talking to Paulie.

“Hey, Paulie... this car would almost be cool if it were in slightly better shape. Are you gonna keep it and fix it up once you start getting paid those big nursing salary checks? ’Cause, seriously, if not? I’d love to talk to you about buying it.”

As he started up the side of the car where Paulie still sat on the ground, a thick hank of shiny brown hair falling across his forehead, Eli was struck again by the way the line of the man’s shoulders—nearly as broad as Eli’s—drooped just a little. The way Paulie’s neck arched to tilt his head just slightly toward the ground and the sweet, shy way he looked up at Eli through his long, silky black lashes sent a pang of want spearing through Eli’s guts. He caught his breath and continued to talk about the car.

“I never could resist a sexy muscle car, you know? So I kinda hope you opt for ditching the vehicle, because then I could probably buy it cheap. I really love working on cars.”

Paulie didn’t say anything, but the corner of his mouth was curving up and he just kept watching Eli with those eyes. God, he made Eli hard without even

trying. He tipped his head a little farther to the side, an inquisitive sort of hum coming from the back of his throat. Eli squatted next to him, handing the phone over. A jolt of electricity arched between them. Paulie's pupils flared, turning his dark eyes almost black. Eli swallowed thickly.

“The reason the car I share with Sasha looks so great is because we saved a ton on maintenance—I do all the upkeep on the Subaru—so we can afford to keep the paint job nice and put new or newer tires on whenever we need them.”

Paulie nodded, his eyes shining above the ice pack. Something about the way he watched Eli—the guy made him feel about ten feet tall, and like he had a superhero cape on or something. Eli kept on talking. Even when Sasha listened, she didn't make him feel like a hero just for fixing up the damn car.

“Don't get me wrong—I had fun learning the ins and outs of the Subaru, but man, was I ever glad I insisted on a way-old model. There was no way I'd have been able to do all the upkeep on one of the newer ones, not without buying a bunch of specialized equipment to deal with the things that are computerized.”

Paulie nodded as his gaze flickered to the mint condition Subaru and then back to Eli's battered boots. Eli followed the line of Paulie's gaze from the car back to his own thrashed boots. The side of his mouth turned up and he lifted one eyebrow.

“I bet you're wondering how a nursing student and guy straight out of high school working as a laborer could afford such a sweet car, aren't you?”

Paulie made another of those humming noises that went straight to Eli's cock, but this time the sound sort of lifted on the end like he was agreeing with the question. Eli grinned, settling his back against the side of the car for a second before pulling away from the hot metal with a hiss.

“Shit. That's hot. Um... well, Sasha's dad and mom helped us with the down payment on both the car and the duplex we share. Hey, a guy's gotta be close to his bestie and the most beautiful baby on the planet, right?”

Paulie made a muffled noise that Eli couldn't quite decipher. Since the other man wasn't yanking down the icepack to give him a ration of grief about

living right next door to Sasha he decided to view it as mildly approving and move on. He shrugged.

“I work a lot of hours to make the payments, but Sasha and I have a deal. She gets her nursing license while I work, and then she’ll support me while I go to school.”

Paulie finally pulled the icepack away from his face to speak. “Ah... you guys are really close, huh?”

Eli shrugged again. “Yeah, we always have been. I know it seems weird to some people, but Sasha’s my best friend in the world. Can you imagine how cool the world would be if everyone got to live right next door to their best friend?”

Paulie made another of those little sounds at the back of his throat, and suddenly Eli wasn’t thinking about raising the level of world happiness or how cool it was to live next door to his bestie. The world kind of shook around him, maybe the whole damn universe was trying to knock him into the rich brown depths of Paulie’s eyes. Reaching up to touch the car behind him, Eli ran the tips of his fingers over the side of the factory issue early seventies tail lights. Sweetly chunky and solid, they grounded him. Glancing back over, he locked eyes with Paulie again, and a vision of the two of them tangled in the soft green sheets currently on his bed swam hotly through Eli’s imagination. Paulie was so solid looking, with little lines at the corners of his eyes and mouth that told Eli he’d passed twenty-five a few miles back.

“Here’s your phone.”

Shit. He handed over the phone, well aware that his voice had gone all deep and growly. There was no way Paulie was gonna miss that. He was probably giving the poor guy, what Sasha called, his “fuck me” eyes, too. She claimed he’d never given them to her, not even the one time they actually did it, but that she’d seen him give those burning looks to a couple of his hook-ups as they stumbled away on morning after walks to wherever they came from. He didn’t do hook-ups anymore, not since Adrianna was born. Sasha still teased him about the few he’d been with while they lived in that crappy two bedroom apartment they had before her parents ponied up the down payment for the duplex they lived in now. Though the older couple had sworn they

would have nothing to do with Sasha's "mistake", they caved within two minutes of seeing Adrianna after she was born. In fact they begged to be forgiven for trying to pressure Sasha into an abortion when they found out she was pregnant.

Paulie's eyes widened above the ice pack, dropped to Eli's groin area and then flicked back up to his face with—oh, please let that be a flicker of heat from lust and not a flicker of anger at Eli's crass lusting after the injured guy. He lowered the ice pack, setting it on his lap as he reached out for the phone.

"Thanks. I'll just be a minute, okay?"

Eli nodded wordlessly, afraid to speak lest he scare Paulie away. Fuck, the smoky tenor sound of Paulie's voice was waking his dick up faster than a highly caffeinated double cappuccino with a sweet frothy layer of cream on top. Eli suppressed a groan at the thought. What he really wanted to do was just tell the sweet, hot double armful of caramel-coated man that he needed to get used to having Eli around, because Eli didn't do casual sex anymore, and he knew with an absolute certainty that he was going to have sex with Paulie. He could wait for a while if Paulie turned out to be a guy who needed romancing first. Eli licked his lips to wet them. He was going to have Paulie's softly bitable round ass in his bed as soon as possible. It was all he could do to not whip his dick out right now and piss in a circle around the man while shouting out, "Mine, mine, mine!"

"Sure. Take your time. I'll just go let Sasha know to take Adrianna home the long way, and we'll meet her there in about twenty minutes."

Then he turned, squaring his shoulders as he tried to figure out how the hell to tamp down his possessive streak. Sasha had never been bothered by his caveman attitudes—shit, Sasha laughed at him when he got all caveman on her. She said—repeatedly—that he could take that shit and stuff it back up his ass or flush it down the toilet. She wasn't going to deal with him getting his nuts in a knot every single time she went on a date, because being his best friend did not—and she usually repeated *not* four or five times to make sure he understood—make her his personal possession.

Well, that was Sasha, though. She didn't take shit from anyone, for any reason. Eli had a feeling Paulie might need a little bit of a softer touch than that. There was something—

“Oi. Spaceman. Time to allons-zee?”

Eli rolled his eyes at Sasha. She was beautiful, uber-smart, and utterly incapable of speaking French without slaughtering what might well be the most graceful language on the planet. He carefully avoided thinking about the way butchered Britglish, the Brit version of English, whenever he tried to speak it. Yep, so not addressing that... it was far more important to concentrate on how lucky Adrianna was that her maternal grandparents, Auntie Michele, and her daddy could both speak French semi-fluently.

“Oi. Earthgirl. Do not butcher the mother tongue of your people.”

Sasha tapped one sandal-clad foot against the blacktop, lifting a single brow like a scathing indictment of his intelligence. Eli suppressed a smirk, knowing now was not a good time to rile her. She was still biting the inside of her cheek and twirling her hair with her right hand—both sure signs she was as jittery as all get out.

“Okay, Sasha. He’s calling his job right now. We’ll follow you back to the duplex in his car, I’ll help you get the little princess settled, and then I’m going to run him to his doctor’s office to be checked out—and before you even go there, just don’t.”

Sasha pasted a patently false expression of innocence on her face. Eli knew the innocence was false, because it was on *Sasha’s* face, and she was the most diabolical soul this side of the river Styx’s bleak shores.

“Hey, that’s not nice. I don’t even know what you’re talking about.”

He slid a skeptical glance from the tips of her shell-pink toenails to the top of her gleaming red hair. “Liar. You were going to say you didn’t see why the doctor was necessary since I’d been checking him out ever since I pulled into the parking lot. That or something close was about to roll right out of those glittery pink lips of yours.”

Sasha wrinkled her nose at him. Then she held out her hand. “Okay, busted. Give me the keys so I can get this show on the road. You want me to take the long way home to keep perpetual motion baby asleep?”

Eli shook his head. “What makes you think I have the keys?”

She smirked, pointing to his left front pocket. “Because your ridiculous alpha streak demands you take control of the smallest detail of your

surroundings, up to and including pocketing the keys the second you take them out of the ignition—which, by the way, you always do as soon as you come to a stop anywhere that isn't a stop sign, stoplight or some sort of traffic thing. Plus there's an extra bulge in your pocket that has nothing to do with the pleasingly plump cutie over there with the ice pack on his nose."

Dammit, she was right. He did always take the keys. "Shi—shitake mushrooms. This not swearing crap is really hard. Here, but make sure—"

Sasha mouthed the words with him as he continued, which was another clear indicator that he did this controlling crap a lot more than he realized. "—make sure you leave them in the yellow and brown key dish in the front hall on my side of the duplex."

Eli pulled the Scunci he'd stolen from Sasha that morning out again, dragging his hand through his hair from forehead to the nape of his neck. "Geez, Sasha... I don't know how to turn it off. The alpha thing is like breathing to me. And I don't think he's gonna just tell me to fuck off like you do. I—did you ever meet somebody and know you wanted to see what being with them would be like? I—what if I scare him off?"

One corner of her mouth quirked up as her midnight-blue eyes twinkled at him. "I don't think you'll scare him. Maybe turn him on, but never scare. I saw his face when you were bossing him around just now, and I heard that little dip in his hot Italian drawl. Trust me Eli, you have nothing to worry about."

CHAPTER FIVE

Paulie would have thought he'd be irritated with some young guy bossing him around like his papa used to, but on Eli, the attitude was strangely hot. All through the brief exam by Doc Middleton—Paulie really loved the rotund black doctor who endlessly reminded him of a happy black Santa Claus—Eli had issued orders to him, until Doc Middleton had laughingly insisted he go sit out in the waiting room. Paulie had actually been really grateful, because keeping his dick from boning up when Eli talked to him all bossily in that deep, gravel filled tone was not something he could do. And having a stiffy while Doc Middleton checked him for a concussion was decidedly uncomfortable on about twelve different levels. His doctor had asked him several leading questions about Eli, and how he'd met the younger man. The point of all the probing questions became apparent when Kelly, his favorite nurse in the office, slipped him a discreetly sealed envelope when he checked out, murmuring that it contained the results of his latest blood test. She'd also murmured that Doc Middleton thought he might want a copy to take with him *just in case*. The whole thing turned his face burningly hot even an hour later. Geez. Doc Middleton knew he was going to gladly wave his ass in the air tonight for Eli if the hot younger man gave any indication of interest. If he didn't love the care he got from the old man, Paulie would so have to change primary doctors—today.

Eli's voice, still low and rumbly as he showed Paulie through his half of the little duplex broke into Paulie's thoughts.

“Hey. It will be easier if we both sleep in here, but I don't want you to feel uncomfortable, so take your time and let me know later, okay? For now, why don't you lie down while I get some soup ready for our dinner?”

Those freaky, hot flecks of color were back in his eyes again. Paulie cleared his throat. “I'm not hungry. I know—”

Eli moved a half step closer than the easy arm's length away he'd been standing, making the room they stood in seem to shrink around them. The dark

wood of the bed and dresser set, coupled with the way the large bed covered in forest green bedding dominated the space, had already made the room seem fairly small. Eli took another half step toward Paulie, raising one big hand to press a long finger against Paulie's lips. With his stomach jumping, Paulie drew in a quick breath. Oh, God. If Eli stepped any closer—Paulie's dick throbbed at the idea—he'd be able to feel just how hard Paulie was.

"I said wait until later. I want you to think about it while your cock isn't rock hard, and while I'm not in the same room with you, okay? I don't do casual sex, Paulie. Not anymore. When we fuck, you're gonna be mine. Sleeping in my bed doesn't mean we're gonna fuck. But right now you're thinking with your little head, and I want you thinking with the other one before you decide if you want me in that bed with you tonight. Because us both being there doesn't mean we have to fuck, but it sure as hell raises the level of possibility. I want to pound your pretty ass right through that king-sized mattress, and I'm pretty sure you want the same thing."

Paulie's breath stuttered in his chest. He tried to pull back to speak, but Eli's other hand came up to rest lightly against the back of his head, not pushing, but holding him firmly in place all the same.

"Shhh. This is what we're gonna do, Paulie. I'm gonna take a look at that clean bill of health the cute little nurse at your doctor's office slipped you at his insistence—I have excellent hearing by the way, and I don't think she realized how close I was standing to you—and once you know I've seen it, I'm going to help you take the edge off. Then you're going to lay down in my bed and take a little nap while I get dinner ready."

Paulie whimpered. Baby Jesus in a sidecar, he'd turned into the kind of guy who whimpered when somebody talked dirty to him.

"Shhh, honey, shhh. If you don't want me to help you, then I'll just go make dinner and you can jack-off before you decide. But one way or another, I want you to get off before you decide if I'm couch surfing tonight."

Finally, he pulled his fingers away. Paulie almost whimpered again, but instead he swallowed hard and then replied. "I want you to help. Please."

And he reached into the too tight pocket of what used to be his second best pants, pulling out the envelope Kelly had given him. Eli took the starkly white

envelope, slitting it open with a penknife he snagged from the top of his dresser. Extracting the info sheet from its cozy nest, he flicked a glance over the results. Pressing his lips together, he lifted hot eyes to Paulie's.

“You're clean across the board, Paulie—although we're going to have to talk about your low iron levels later, when you're feeling better.”

Stepping back, he raked Paulie with a look so hot and tangible Paulie felt as though his clothes had been burned from his body. Reaching past Paulie, he returned the penknife to the top of the dresser. Then he smiled, and the expression was wicked, smoldering, and suggestive—in short, everything Paulie could wish for when he stood in a handsome man's bedroom. He nodded toward a door on the far wall of the bedroom.

“There are clean towels on the shelves in the bathroom. Get cleaned up; I'll leave you some sweats and a tee on the bed. Shower without getting yourself off, then you get a stellar blowjob where you do get off, and finally we have dinner before you tell me where I'm sleeping tonight. I expect everything to happen in that order, okay?”

Paulie nodded mutely. With his tongue welded to the roof of his mouth, there really wasn't anything else he could do. Eli reached around him again, brushing their chests together as he pulled open a couple of drawers. He stepped back, placing a pair of sweats and a T-shirt Paulie knew would be too small for his thicker body. His face was going to cook right off if he kept blushing this much.

“I don't think your things will fit me.”

Eli raked him with another one of those burning glances. “Oh, I think they'll fit you just fine, Paulie. Don't worry about it if they're not as loose as you like. You'll look great.”

The younger man's voice dropped even lower on the last few words, like his whole mouth was making love to the sounds. Paulie shivered, nodded, and headed for the shower in the master bathroom, scooping up the clothes on the way. It did not escape his notice—despite the lack of adequate blood flow to his brain—that Eli neglected to give him underwear. His dick did a little happy dance over that, nearly strangling itself in his tighty-whiteys. Okay, the hot

younger man might have a point. That thought brought to mind the one thing he needed to know right now before they went even one suggestive comment farther down this path.

“Eli, how old are you?”

Eli chuckled, and the deep gravel of it made the sound somehow deliciously dirty. “I’m grown, Paulie. I’m twenty-two years old. Why don’t you tell me how much older you are so we can get the fact that I like you being older out of the way.”

Paulie gaped for a second, and then answered. “Thirty-one. I’m nine years older than you. Shit, I could have been—”

Eli closed the three steps between them in the blink of an eye. One long arm wrapped around Paulie’s waist and hauled him up against Eli’s long, lean form. The scent of his cologne closed in around Paulie, and he moaned. The younger man bent his head, brushing his lips lightly against Paulie’s once before whispering against them.

“You could have been my insanely hot babysitter. The one that I’d have beat off to images of as soon as I got old enough to figure out that my dick was for something besides pissing. The one whose smoky tenor voice would have gotten me hard every time he spoke. The one I’d have tried to seduce every chance I got once I was old enough for that.”

Then he stepped back, pointing imperiously at the bathroom door. “Go take your shower. I’ll be in the kitchen. When you get done, come get me in there.”

Eli’s heart pounded against his ribs like an over-eager paperboy on collection day. He got the crockpot out, setting the small sized slow-cooking device on the counter top with shaking hands. He’d nearly killed himself holding back in the bedroom, and his body was still reacting. He decided he’d get a light chicken soup going in the crockpot, and then pulled some premade rolls out of the freezer. They would thaw about twenty minutes before the homemade chicken soup was finished cooking, leaving him plenty of time to have them ready to go with dinner. As long as Paulie didn’t show any signs of concussion before dinner—roughly three hours since he’d hit his head

according to Eli's calculations—he was going to let the man have a decent, light dinner. Cutting the chicken breast he'd thawed yesterday into small bite sized bits, Eli added some of the soup stock he'd made last week, and then cut up the carrots and onions to add later. He finished, washing the cutting board, knives and other paraphernalia he'd used to prep everything just as the whine in the pipes gave away the fact that Paulie had finished his shower. He set the cutting board to sanitize in the bottom of the sink, spreading a capful of bleach over the top. He was looking for a good eco-friendly alternative to bleaching the board, but until he found one that satisfied him, he wasn't taking any chances with his family's health.

A throat cleared behind him, and Paulie's beautiful accent rolled over Eli.

“Hey. I, um, I finished my shower.”

Eli turned as slowly as he could, which probably meant he looked like a superhero in a phone booth. Damn it, he wanted to see if Paulie had followed his instructions. He let his gaze roam over every visible inch of the man, from his long, naked toes, up the long, beautifully thick legs to—oh, hell yeah, the rock hard cock perfectly outlined in the slightly too tight pants. If he could convince the man, Paulie would be wearing slightly too tight pants for the rest of his life. Eli's gaze lingered for a moment on the slight roundness right where the drawstring of the low-slung sweats was knotted. His mouth watered as he imagined planting dozens of open-mouthed kisses right there. Finally, he let his glance move over the other man's barrel chest and up to the round-cheeked adorableness of his face. Those cheeks filled with a flood of red color as Eli watched, making him want desperately to see them flushed with ecstasy. He shook his head, trying to clear it enough to maintain his control.

“I see you are. Done showering, that is. I've got everything set to take care of itself while I take care of you.”

Eli could hear the rough darkness to his voice getting thicker and darker. He didn't try to speak again, opting to simply hold out his hand as he walked past Paulie. The older man grasped his hand with one that shook slightly. Eli squeezed lightly, pulling a squeaky-clean Paulie along in his wake as he walked with firm strides back up the hall leading to his bedroom. He'd called Sasha as soon as he got to the kitchen, telling her not to come over for dinner

tonight, and he'd make it up to her with breakfast tomorrow morning. The rotten wench had laughed, telling him she'd already made alternate plans for both herself and Adrianna—evidently Adrianna was spending the night at his mother's house—and she'd take his guilt-breakfast with pleasure.

At the door to his bedroom, Paulie halted, his hand still shaking but his melodic tones firm. "I want you to sleep in here. I already know. You can make me tell you again later, but I already know."

Everything in Eli went still for a second, and the quiet rolled out, seeming to silence the whole house around him. Paulie held his breath, obviously waiting for a response. Eli lifted his free hand, cupping the side of the other man's face and pulled him close enough to whisper against his lips again.

"Okay. Just—tell me if you change your mind."

Then he pulled Paulie fully into his bedroom, shutting and locking the door behind them.

CHAPTER SIX

Paulie shivered, the sexy feel of words whispered against his lips running straight to his cock. Holy Moses, Mary, Joseph and at least one of the Disciples on a big-ass Harley with the Baby Jesus in a sidecar—this boy, barely a man, was turning Paulie inside out. His whole body felt hot, heavy and ready for absolutely anything Eli wanted from him. He moaned, the low, thready sound falling from tingling lips. Eli took the sound into his own mouth and then fed it back into Paulie's. In the process, he turned a filthy, gritty laugh into so much more than an invitation to join him on the wide green expanse of his big, big bed.

“I have something to show you.”

With that, Eli stepped away from him. The other man's warm hand stayed wrapped around one of Paulie's wrists, pulling him along like one of those little quacking duck toys with the flapping feet that little kids always seemed so fond of. The calluses on his palm and fingers abraded the thin skin at the inside of Paulie's wrist, sending a shot of electricity from the invisible hot button there, right to the tip of his hard dick.

Eli led Paulie right to the edge of the bed, turning to push him down on the bed with an almost rough, entirely playful shove.

“Well, actually I have a few things to show you, but let's start with this.”

He pulled open a drawer of the bedside table, pulling out a slightly tattered slip of paper that had clearly been folded and refolded many times, a bottle of Gun Oil, and a roll of condoms he'd stashed in there when Sasha told him about the VA Hospital job and his imminent return to the land of the socially alive. He set the lube and condoms on the edge of the table, in easy reaching distance from the head of the bed, and then set the paper in Paulie's hand, closing his fingers around Paulie's.

“I don't have a shiny new paper because I haven't been with anyone since Adrianna was born—there are a lot of reasons that aren't important right now that answer the question of why. All I need you to know is that this paper tells you I'm clean, and I haven't been with anyone since I got these results. The

lube is to make you feel good, and the condoms are for in case we get carried away. Not planning anything; just can't help hoping, though."

A tightly furled knot of sorrow eased, the frayed ends of endless guilt and self-recrimination falling free in a small room in his soul. He dropped his head forward to hide the moisture glistening on the surface of his brown eyes. No one but Jeff had ever talked to him like that—not the sex part, but like he was special. Of all the people in the whole world, only these two men had seen him, and taken pains to show him the way he shone in their eyes. A hot salt drop landed on his lap.

The room stilled. Listening, Paulie couldn't even hear the sound of Eli's breath. Oh, hell. He'd ruined everything. Raising his head, he met Eli's eyes, and what he saw there, slammed through his chest like a comet falling through the vapor and heat of the atmosphere. Eli's eyes were shimmering too.

When the drop of water fell from Paulie's eye, it cut free the thing in Eli that had been held in reserve. The day he and Sasha waited for a piss-covered piece of plastic to reveal the course of their future, he had learned in a fundamental way how life could turn on a dime. He'd also learned to listen to his heart and not give a flying fuck what the rest of the world thought. So when he saw that salt saturated liquid crystal proof of Paulie's vulnerability he took the sledge hammer he kept in the back of his heart's house and started knocking walls out.

Reaching with trembling fingers, he moved to tilt Paulie's face up, but the man surprised him by lifting his face on his own.

"Fuck. Looking at you steals my breath."

Abandoning his plans from earlier, he pushed Paulie flat, sliding his lush body up the bed until his dark brown hair rested against the pillows at the head of the bed. Slipping fingers under the edge of the tee he'd given Paulie to wear after his shower, the silky, resilient flesh under his hand made Eli's teeth ache with a need to bite, and made his dick point at the man like the needle of a compass pointing toward magnetic north.

Paulie drew in a ragged breath, speaking in those lilting tones that connected his vocal cords straight to Eli's cock. "It's—you see me."

Eli meant to answer, but the warm, rolling sound of the words hit him right in the gut. Anyway, just then his teeth made contact with the succulent, tender flesh that lay just above the waistline of the low cut sweats. Exhaling on a low moan, he gave himself over to the pure visceral pleasure of tasting the faintest trace of salt still on the man's flesh despite having showered less than half an hour ago. A hint of something else lingered on his skin, and after a moment of licking his way across the soft flesh, Eli identified it as the herbal cucumber and melon rinse he made for himself. Oh, ho. Someone had been peeking through the bathroom cupboards after his shower. That would be where the faint taste of salt came from as well. Eli used salt in the mix to keep the cucumber and melon from breaking down so quickly. He usually followed it with a special lotion as well, to keep his skin from getting irritated by the salt, but Paulie would have had no way to know of the high salt content unless he tasted the concoction.

“You taste like summer.”

Eli pushed the sweats down a fraction farther and bit at the pad of flesh over one hipbone. Paulie gave a high cry, arching up off the bed. He liked that—how very convenient. Eli licked the bite mark he'd left behind, and then sucked at the spot while Paulie writhed and gasped below him. Those sounds were driving him mad as Alice's Hatter, though he'd never been one to play with mercury. He pushed Paulie's shirt—his shirt and oh yeah, didn't his dick thump hard and heavy against the inside of his jeans at the thought of Paulie wearing his clothes—high enough to get his mouth on those rose-brown nipples. He laved them with the flat of his tongue, nibbling and sucking before he blew streams of cool air across them. Paulie sang for him, sweet high notes of want and need punctuated by single syllable words in that sexy fucking accent.

“More. Oh, God. Please.”

Reaching blindly to the table, Eli snagged the Gun Oil, dropping it on the bed next to Paulie's hip. He surged up to nip at those plump lips, sipping sighs and moans from them as his fingers danced over the new land he was discovering inch by silky inch. Paulie waxed his chest. Eli grunted.

“No more waxing.”

Paulie blinked at him, brown eyes held wide open with the pupils wide and unfocused. “Wh-what?”

Eli pulled back. “No more waxing. Your body is perfect like it is.”

“Oookay.” The agreement was enough, even though the raised brows and down-turned lips sang a symphony of disbelief.

Eli would work on the belief later. For now, he was busy teaching and learning the body language that was a blend of his own and Paulie’s. He pushed the soft cotton of the T-shirt up over Paulie’s head, letting it linger for a moment over the other man’s face. Later they’d have to play a bit with blindfolds, when Paulie felt safe enough with him. Once he had the shirt free of Paulie’s hands, he tossed it to the far side of the bed, missing getting it all the way over so it hung over the edge of the bed like a wrinkled red testament to his focus being wholly taken by Paulie. Working his way back down the too smooth chest, he made his way quickly to the barrier of cloth just at Paulie’s hips. With one hand, Eli pulled the string, untying the little bow Paulie had put it in. Cute. Once that was done, Eli shoved himself down to Paulie’s feet.

“Lift your hips.”

With one quick yank, the soft cotton of the pants was crumpled in Eli’s hands, and he was easing it over Paulie’s feet. Glancing up with a toothy smile, Eli pulled Paulie’s legs apart, bending the knees to press them up toward Paulie’s chest.

“Hold those for me.”

Paulie grasped his knees, gasping as Eli squirted a bit of Gun Oil in his hand and slicked it along Paulie’s thick, circumcised cock as he shoved his other hand underneath Paulie’s ass. Paulie’s low moan and little wiggle sent more blood thumping straight to Eli’s groin. Palming Paulie’s cushiony cheeks, Eli tilted Paulie’s hips higher. Then, flexing his fingers against the bouncy resilience of the man’s flesh, he spread Paulie’s ass cheeks far enough to get his first glimpse of the dusky pink rosette his mouth was watering to taste.

Paulie lurched as Eli practically did a high dive head-first into his ass. Oh. My. God. Beautiful, demi-god Eli was eating his ass. And by all that was holy, it felt—it felt like nothing in Paulie’s prior experience. Eli lapped at his hole, his tongue moving in endless circles around the tight muscle there. What did the man do to make his tongue have such strength and endurance? Were there some sort of calisthenics for tongues that none of Paulie’s previous lovers had ever heard of?

At Eli’s startled intake of breath and short burst of laughter, Paulie realized he’d actually spoken those thoughts aloud. Oh, God. What would Eli think? As if the man were reading his thoughts, Eli spoke at that exact moment.

“While it’s very flattering to be considered the best you’ve ever had, I’m doing something wrong if you can still think about other men in any context.”

Paulie blinked up at the ceiling, his fingers tightening on his knees in reflexive mortification. Then there was a sudden squirting sensation as something warm and slippery rolled against his ass and then, with a sting and a pop, one of Eli’s big fingers was in Paulie’s ass. The digit seemed to have a road map and an unerring sense of direction, for once inside his body it slid straight across his prostate.

“Holy Moses on a pogo stick!”

The finger stroked again, jiggling a little as Eli gave a full on belly laugh. Paulie didn’t care, because the jiggling in addition to the pressure against his prostate was sending sparks flying behind his eyes. With a wiggle and a twist, another finger slipped in next to the first and Paulie started pushing his ass down toward them. In and out they slid, again and again, until he began to whine and beg. Then a third came to join the first two, and Paulie was chanting the same thing over and over again.

“More. Now. Please, in me, more.”

But, the fingers left him instead, leaving him whining and writhing on the bed. Eyes squeezed tightly shut, he dropped the hold he had on his knees to grab for his dick. A bigger hand smacked his away.

“No. Wait. I’ll get you there, Paulie. You want more?”

Paulie opened his eyes. Eli hovered over him, face stark with need, eyes big, nearly black with wanting and those crazy green and blue flecks just

fucking glowing at him as the man moved to slowly strip off his clothing. Then he crawled back over Paulie, hanging tantalizingly above him again, his sandy brown hair hanging around his face and the muscles of his arms bunching and flexing as he lowered himself closer to Paulie. Shaking with need, Paulie drew in a shallow breath to speak.

“You. Want you. Please.”

Eli gave that nasty grin he'd given just before he started to eat Paulie's ass. Paulie surged up, wanting Eli's lips back, needing the other man's kiss like air in his lungs. He was desperate to taste himself on Eli's mouth. Their lips met, tongues tangled in a rush of heat and wet and musk. Eli pressed him back against the bed with one hand on his chest.

“Like this?”

Paulie nodded, listening to the snap and crackle of a condom wrapper tearing open. Eli's jaw clenched as he rolled the condom down. His eyes. Oh, sweet mercy, his eyes.

“Yes. Like this. Want. I want to see. Eyes.”

Eli grinned again, but this time softer at the edges, beads of sweat just starting to rise along the sides of his face.

“You want to see and be seen by these eyes, isn't that right, Paulie?”

As he spoke, something fucking huge and hard pressed against Paulie's hole. It hurt, but the hurt was good and felt like more. Paulie could feel his mouth stretching into an *O* of painful bliss. Eli gritted his teeth, and pressed forward slow and steady. Paulie breathed, locking his eyes on Eli's, losing himself in the wild flecks of green and blue that almost didn't seem real. The ring of muscle guarding the entrance to his hole gave way. Paulie breathed out hard, and Eli slid all the way in. A finger feathered down the side of his face, and Paulie opened the eyes he didn't realize he'd closed.

“There you are.”

Paulie's lashes fluttered down, so Eli bent to feather a kiss across his mouth, pulling back just enough to speak. “Keep your eyes open for me, Paulie. I want to watch your eyes when you come.”

Thrusting as he spoke those words wasn't strictly playing fair, but Eli didn't care. Something about Paulie pulled at him, and he was more than willing to play dirty, seeing as how he was playing for keeps. Paulie gasped, a flush of color running up his chest toward his neck and jawline. Eli picked up the pace, starting to slam his hips into the finely padded ass under him. He grasped one of Paulie's hands, pulling it down between them and wrapping the fingers around Paulie's cock.

"Yeah. Almost there, aren't you, Paulie? Come on. Stroke yourself. Push right over the edge, and let yourself fall."

And then he didn't have the breath to tease Paulie with his words any more, too busy pumping in and out of his slick channel, too busy drinking in the wordless cries tumbling helplessly from the older man's lips. Paulie's mouth opened wide, sounds dwindling into a perfect silence until the moment glistening strands of pearly cream shot from the tip of his cock and a tiny catching sound whispered out from the back of his throat. Eli let himself go, thrusting wildly through the contractions milking his mind right out through his dick, yelling loud enough for both of them. He had just a moment to be glad that Adrianna was at his mom's place because *this* would surely have woken her, and then he was lost in a haze of white and pleasure that bent his mind and squeezed his whole being through a pinprick in the fabric of the universe. Lunging up, he fastened his teeth in the meaty place where Paulie's neck met his shoulder, biting down hard. Some fragment of sense remained, because he stopped shy of breaking the skin, if only just. Paulie yelled then, but Eli felt his cock twitch too, so it was okay. Then he collapsed, shuddering every time Paulie's channel contracted around his too sensitive shaft, taking eons to realize the fucker was doing it on purpose. If Paulie hadn't laughed, he might have never caught on.

"Beautiful bastard. That's not sporting."

Paulie gaped at him, and Eli replayed what he'd said in his head. "Oh, shit. You're not, are you? I mean, technically, I am a bastard, but that's all to the good 'cause if that prick was still around I'd have to go to prison for killing my own father."

Paulie continued to gape. Eli slid to one side, shuddering again as his spent

cock slipped free of Paulie's body. "What did I say Paulie? You're looking at me like I grew another head or something."

A flush rushed over Paulie's face. "But... you—why did you call me beautiful?"

Now it was Eli's turn to gape. Lifting his brows nearly to his hairline, he rolled to his side. He grabbed a tissue from the box stashed in the headboard, sliding the used condom into it and tossing the whole mess into the bedside garbage. Girls had cans in the bathroom. Guys had them next to the bed. Eli shrugged. It made perfect sense to him. He threw his leg over Paulie's legs, and hauled him in until he was tucked right up against Eli's heart.

"I called you beautiful because you are. Now, if I've fucked all the sense out of you—as that question would indicate—I suggest you close your eyes and get some sleep. I'll be waking you up in a couple of hours to check that you don't have a concussion. How's the face?"

Paulie laughed and the bell-like tenor notes lit Eli's soul like sun through a stained glass window. Grinning, his sweet round cheeks creased with a smile, he touched one finger to his nose. "You ask now? It hurts. Still was worth it to kiss you though."

Eli grunted. "Good. Go the fuck to sleep. I'm going to feed you some soup in a few hours, and put you back to bed, and then in the morning I'm going to kiss you some more. If any part of that doesn't work, now's your chance to negotiate."

CHAPTER SEVEN

A hand roaming up his side woke Paulie in the morning. He jerked the covers, trying to pull them up to cover his little love handles. Eli smirked, pulling the crumpled green sheets down to place his hand directly over the wobbly bit Paulie had been trying to cover. Eli leaned forward. Paulie threw himself backward off the edge of the bed.

“Morning.”

Standing there with his hands clasped over his cock and balls, Paulie felt about twelve years old. This was fully as awful as the day he realized he had a crush on Louis Fenguli, except he'd had clothes on to hide his chub back then. Eli gave one of those Great White Shark smiles, throwing back the covers and crawling over the bed toward him like a big cat stalking prey. Paulie fled to the bathroom with a whimper. God. Eli was all lean, sinewy grace, like a tiger in the wild, while he was... like a damn overfed zoo penguin. He turned the shower on, muttering to himself. Eli turned the knob of the door Paulie could swear—

“I locked that door.”

Flashing those teeth Paulie could still feel against his flesh, Eli prowled closer. “Yes, you did. I just happen to know how to pick that lock.”

He wrapped both arms around Paulie, holding tight when he tried to wiggle away. “I was just going to take a good morning kiss, but if you keep wiggling like that I might get other ideas.”

Without waiting for permission, Eli swooped in, using that same curiously tender ferocity he'd displayed last night. He was probably just being careful of Paulie's nose. He didn't gag, or make noises like he's just been forced to lick the floor of a bathroom stall in some seedy bar's men's room. And he tasted—good. Real. Warm and a little funky, but that fled quickly. He bent Paulie back against the long bathroom counter, one hand holding the hip he'd bitten the night before and the other lightly framing Paulie's jaw with the tip of his pinky finger rubbing the soft spot behind Paulie's ear. Making little noises low in his throat, Paulie moved to tilt his head to the side, crying out in pain when his sore nose bumped Eli's.

“Ow, ow, Baby Jesus in a sidecar, that hurts.”

Eli snorted with laughter, dropping his head down to rest on Paulie’s shoulder while he shook with his repressed mirth. “I never heard anyone go to such lengths to avoid swearing. That’s it, I’m keeping you. You can teach me to talk in a child safe way.”

He snorted again, leaning back, fingers flexing against Paulie’s hip. “Good morning, Paulie. I’ll leave your clothes on the bed... I threw them in the wash last night after the second time I had to wake you. I’ll be in the kitchen making breakfast. You like pancakes? Bacon?”

Paulie’s stomach growled and heat rose in his cheeks. “Yeah. I love pancakes and bacon. Um, can we have scrambled eggs too?”

Eli brushed his lips against Paulie’s and did that sexy whisper-against-the-mouth thing again.

“Yeah. I’ll make you eggs, baby. You like ’em cheesy?”

Paulie flashed a look down at the little pooch of his belly, and then looked over at Eli’s flat, toned abs. “Um. No that’s okay. I’ll, ah... I can just have some toast and coffee.

Eli stepped back, eyes lit up with those flecks of blue and green again. A lopsided smile curved up one corner of his mouth. “Hah. Cheesy scramblers, pancakes with syrup and bacon for my baby it is. Don’t take too long in the shower, gorgeous. I want to have a moment with you to myself before that Killer-Ninja Barbie from next door descends on us.”

Then he was out the door before Paulie could find the right words to puzzle together a sentence that meant he really, really wanted a tiny slice of desert-dry toast and a cup of bitter black coffee to start his day. His stomach grumbled again, and he patted it absently.

“Yeah, he didn’t buy it either.”

Eli slammed a few pans around as he pulled out the big griddle to make pancakes, and a nice cast iron frying pan to scramble the cheesy eggs for Paulie. If he ever got his hands on whatever fucker had made that man think

there was something wrong with his body he'd kick the ever-loving shit out of them. He knew though, he knew what a lot of those damn bitchy gay boys were like, worshipping at the altar of youth and beauty without a single thought that maybe not everyone—

“Jesus, Eli, what did those frying pans ever do to you?”

Eli spun around, his startled gaze landing on Hal Matheson. What the fuck was a shirtless Hal Matheson doing scratching his damn stomach in Eli's kitchen—really his hands were almost in his damn pubes considering the fucker hadn't even done up the placket of his button-fly jeans properly. Eli had just opened his mouth to ask Hal that very question when a breathless, barely dressed and clearly well-fucked Sasha tumbled through the connecting door leading from his kitchen to hers. Eli set the frying pan on the front left burner with perhaps a touch more force than strictly necessary. Christ, they both reeked of sex. No, that was wrong. Hal and he reeked of sex. Sasha's hair was wet, so she'd likely just taken a shower, while—

“Hal, what the fuck are you doing half naked in my Goddamn kitchen? And for God's sake, button up your damn pants. I really hate to bust your bubble, but I have no desire to see your cock. Save that for Sasha's bedroom.”

Sasha narrowed her eyes at him, but didn't speak. Hal put a gentle hand on her shoulder, pulling her around to look at him. “Baby, I thought you said he'd be okay with this.”

Tearing her laser-like gaze away from trying to carve curse words in his forehead must have been tough, but Eli had to give Sasha credit for pulling the task off with more aplomb than he'd have expected from a hussy with big purple hickeys decorating her throat. She turned a limpid, mush-filled look at Hal, pushing a hank of loose red hair out of her face.

“Yes, he will be okay with it. But Hal, honey, you were supposed to wait and come over with me.”

Hal shrugged, pointing toward Eli. “It sounded like a flipping home invasion. I didn't want you to come over here to find your baby's daddy gutted in his kitchen or something.”

Sasha was starting to look pissed, and curiously, that made Eli like Hal a little better, but still—

“Oi, Earthgirl... Hal Matheson?”

“Oi, Spaceman, Paulie Bellizi? Really? At least Hal didn’t single handedly set in motion the accidental impregnation of half the nubile females in the greater Syracuse area, including myself!”

A shocked cry from the hallway leading to the bedrooms on Eli’s side of the house had the other three whipping their heads around. Paulie stood there, his face blanched bone white. It was a neat trick considering his normal olive complexion. A rough snort from Hal tore Eli’s attention away from Paulie to regard the man leaning against the black tiled island in the center of Eli’s kitchen. Hal wasn’t paying Eli any mind though. He was standing with his arms folded across his muscular chest as he turned his head to glower hotly at Sasha.

“Dammit Sasha, everyone knows he was sick. The poor guy was in the hospital for a week after that incident, with double pneumonia and a case of that flu that killed a bunch of people. Show a little compassion.”

Sasha bristled, clearly gearing up to light into Hal—who was obviously going to be a fixture if he had both the balls and the good sense to stand up to Sasha when she was being an idiot. Eli’s estimation of him rose. Eli’s Earthgirl had gone to a lot of trouble, having his mom watch Adrianna and—hold on, Adrianna had been going to see one set of grandparents or the other at least once a week for the past six—

“You’ve been dating her for over six months, haven’t you?”

Hal gave a curt nod and scrubbed a hand over his face before nodding toward something behind Eli.

“You better go get your man, bro. I think he might be heading for the hills.”

Eli turned to spot the curve of Paulie’s plush, sweatpants-covered bottom disappearing through his front door. He took off at a run, shouting back over his shoulder to Hal.

“Go argue with her in her house. We can do brunch another time.”

Then he was out the door, and he needn’t have run at all, because Paulie was on his knees next to his car, ass in the air and head down by the pavement.

Eli had learned something yesterday, so he walked around to the passenger side of the car, dropped down to lay full on the ground and snagged the car keys a second before Paulie managed to.

Big brown eyes blinked at him from under the opposite side of the car. “Give them back, please.”

Eli bounced up to his feet, almost like yesterday. “Nope. Come back inside.”

Paulie clambered to his feet, face still so pale Eli was terrified he would keel over at any second. He tried to sidle around the car to get close enough to catch Paulie if he went down, but every time he moved closer, Paulie moved further away.

“Oh come on, Paulie. Stop making me chase your sexy Italian ass around the car. Are you really going to blow me off because my best friend is a bitch when her feathers get ruffled?”

Paulie shrugged. Plucking at the edge of his shirt with one hand, he stepped toward Eli. Holding out his hand, he spoke. “Not Italian—I’m Sicilian. Um. Please. Can I have my keys?”

The shake in his lightly-accented voice nearly made Eli cave, but he couldn’t, not right now. If he gave in right now, Paulie would disappear. Eli just couldn’t help being convinced they could maybe have something great. Maybe. But not if Paulie vanished into thin air. Eli made his voice low and a little mean.

“No. Not unless you look me in the eye and tell me why you want to leave.”

Paulie shook his head, but Eli could tell he wasn’t refusing so much as working up his courage to say what he thought had to be said. Mrs. Cohen from across the street was pretending it took longer than two fucking seconds to pick her paper up off her front porch though, and the curtain on the Grasses’ front window kept twitching. Eli lost his patience.

“Come inside and talk to me, Paulie. I sent Sasha and her boyfriend, or whatever the hell Hal is, back over to her place. Come inside. I don’t want this conversation to be TiVo’d by my damn nosey neighbors, okay?”

Paulie dropped his head again, nodding with a heavy reluctance that made Eli's teeth ache, but he stood still and let Eli walk around the car to take his hand. Twining their fingers together, Eli pulled Paulie back in through the front door while winging prayers up, sideways, and in great big freaking curlicues to thank whomever was the patron saint in charge of gorgeous and klutzy gay Sicilian men.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Paulie knew eventually he was going to come face to face with someone whose life he had damaged that day, but dear God in Heaven, he'd never envisioned it happening like this. To have his ugly mistake rise up to smack his face this hard—especially the morning after such a wonderful night—was nearly unbearable. Eli—why wasn't he looking at Paulie like he was the scum of the earth? If Paulie understood things correctly, he'd been the cause of an unplanned pregnancy that had set Eli's best friend on a life path she never would have chosen otherwise.

“I don't understand why you want to say anything to me. I—”

Eli turned, pushing the front door closed behind them with a thump, and turning the deadbolt. Then the younger man continued into the house, dragging Paulie behind him again. When they reached the kitchen, he pushed Paulie down onto one of the tall, dark wooden barstools arranged on the far side of the kitchen island-slash-breakfast bar. Paulie's plump ass hit the thick red leather cushion with an audible smacking noise. Eli used their still linked fingers to draw first Paulie's arm, and then his whole torso forward. Bending his head, Eli brushed a kiss against Paulie's lips.

“What are you doin—”

“Shut up. Don't you move, not a single inch. I'm going to lock the connecting door so Sasha can't come swooping back in here in five minutes or so when she realizes what a nasty bitch she just was. She can grovel later, after I get a chance to chew her ass off in private—and not in the fun way I was chewing on your ass earlier.”

Paulie couldn't hold silent though, not when he knew full well the fault was his. “But I was the one who made all those faulty condoms... I-I bet she never planned to be a mom when she was what, seventeen? Eighteen, maybe?”

Eli leaned in close enough his lips brushed Paulie's, and the touch sent shivers racing up Paulie's spine. “We are not having this conversation until I lock that damn door. Wait here. Do not make me chase you around Syracuse. Understand?”

With that, he slapped Paulie's car keys down on the gleaming black tiles of the counter top. Stalking off toward the slightly ajar door on the far side of the kitchen he still held Paulie firmly in place with the masterful tone of his voice.

“Look at the refrigerator and tell me what you see, Paulie.”

Tearing his gaze away from the long line of Eli's body sent shards of glass tumbling to and fro in Paulie's stomach. Putting his attention anywhere else was so terrible and lovely when he knew full well he was never going to get to look at Eli like this again, not when Eli really understood what he'd done. The slope of Eli's naked shoulder was both balm and scourge to Paulie's eyes. He turned with more than a little relief to see what Eli demanded he observe. Nothing could hurt more than gazing on what Paulie wanted more than the svelte body he'd dreamed of having but never lived in, more than his next lungful of air. But he never really had Eli, either.

The gleaming silver of the fridge's surface was interrupted over and over. Too many badly drawn pictures to count, big, impossibly bright, magnetized letters and numbers holding them up. A cauldron of molten iron tipped, pouring itself through some crack in time and space to fill Paulie's entire gut with a burning the likes of which he'd never thought to feel this side of hell. He gasped and craned his stinging eyes back to Eli. Heart pounding as the pieces fell into place, he opened his mouth to speak but found his voice completely burned away.

Eli's pulse pounded in his head as he pushed the connecting door carefully closed. He knew the second Paulie put it all together from the stricken gasp. Turning the lock—of course Sasha had a key, but the fact he'd locked it at all would give her pause, and possibly give Hal time to catch up to her fractious ass and pull her away until Eli opened the door of his own accord. He turned back to Paulie. Shit. The man's face was even whiter than before. Scratch that, it was almost green. He looked like he was about to lose the breakfast he hadn't had, all over the the pain-in-the-ass-to-keep-clean black tile counter that had taken Eli nearly three months to get done to his satisfaction.

“Look again, Paulie. You're not really seeing what's there.”

Paulie turned huge, wounded looking brown eyes on him. “You’re the father—I—you’re bi?”

Eli shrugged, a painful heat starting to skitter over his skin. “Not the point. Sort of. I dunno, I guess I think it’s kind of a spectrum. I—geez, it’s embarrassing, okay? I wanted to have sex. Sasha wanted to have sex. But neither of us wanted the first time to be with some jerk who’d tell the whole school about it the next day. So it was supposed to be safe, right? We were best friends, and there was no chance of any weird confusion about that just ’cause we had sex. Even back then, I knew I liked guys. At eighteen my dick would stand up for a summer breeze though, so it wasn’t difficult to perform. We used a condom—as Sasha so eloquently informed you—but it broke at a critical moment and we ended up with Adrianna.”

Paulie’s face looked more stricken than before, but Eli thought he knew why, and what’s more, he was pretty sure he could show Paulie that he was wrong. He turned and stepped over to the fridge. Once there, Eli began to take down some of the things. Some of them were stuck there in haste over the past few years, some with tears and laughter, and some with careful precision and as wonderful surprises on special days. As he took them down, he described each one to Paulie. The picture from their first terrible Christmas after they found out Sasha was pregnant but before Adrianna came into their lives. They posed woodenly before a festive backdrop with his mum. Mum’s smile was wide and genuinely pleased while the lines of strain showed clearly on his and Sasha’s faces.

“My mum promised we’d want this stupid picture later. We were so scared, Paulie, you know? Nothing more than babies ourselves and there we were, about to have a baby of our own.”

He snorted out a laugh, raking a hand through his hair as he set the picture directly in front of Paulie.

“We didn’t have the money to get more than one big one printed. Mum has it up in her living room. She tells all her friends that even though Sasha and I look like a couple, we aren’t, and then she pats Sasha’s belly in the picture and starts talking about how beautiful her granddaughter is.”

Next, he pulled down the brown crayon scribble with a dizzying swirl of blue and green to one side. Adrianna had proudly declared the monstrosity da-da.

“Did you know there’s this really funny period of time when little kids call everything da-da? Well, at least that’s what Adrianna did. God, once she stepped in dog shit and called it da-da. I seriously think maybe she thought da-da was a color and not a person.”

Then he put the first Father’s Day card, the irreplaceable one with the tiny hand and footprints inside, in Paulie’s trembling hand. A smile tugged at the corner of his mouth as he remembered the stupid, worried look on Sasha’s face when she gave it to him.

“I thought Sasha was going to cry that day. We’d just moved in here, and everything was still such a damn mess. Her folks put up the down payment for this place and cosigned so we could get the loan, but we wouldn’t let them do anything else.”

Paulie held the little card in his shaking hand, face tipped down. Eli growled, reaching out to place a finger under the man’s chin and push up.

“We’ve got this big stupid album where we put stuff when the fridges get too crowded. At the very back are four pages we put in the day after Adrianna was born, the day we decided to keep her and try to make a family by our own standards.”

Paulie’s lips were trembling as hard as his hands, but he still wasn’t speaking. Eli’s heart was beating in long, slow thuds.

“One of those pages got filled up a month ago, on May seventeenth—”

Paulie’s eyes widened. “Our graduation day.”

Eli moved around the counter slowly, trailing one hand on the surface to cool his hot hands. When he reached Paulie, he pulled the stool out from the counter to wedge his body between the hard surface and the open spot he created by spreading Paulie’s legs.

“The last two pages are for us to put pictures of Adrianna’s other two daddies when we find them. I’m not saying your picture is going to go on that

page, Paulie. But I am saying it could, maybe, someday. If you want it to, and we give this thing a shot.”

Grasping both of Paulie’s hips, he sank his fingers into the sweet pad of flesh he found there, pulling the other man forward. “I have to warn you though—you don’t get to meet Adrianna for a while. And, Sasha is pretty much the definition of a redhead. She’s all flash, fire, and a lot of apologizing after the fact. You’ll get used to that part. Well, you could get used to it. I—God, Paulie. Say something. Tell me if you think you could give this a try.”

Paulie still didn’t speak, and now the trembling had spread to his whole body. Eli pulled him a fraction farther forward, to where his ass wasn’t all the way on the stool any more, right to where he had to lean into Eli or risk falling on the floor. Then he leaned down to whisper against the other man’s mouth. Dirty tactics, but again, Eli didn’t give a fuck.

“Please give us a shot, Paulie. I really think we could be great.”

Paulie’s arms moved, hands releasing the death grip they held on the sides of the barstool’s cushion to slide up around Eli’s neck. The rasp of skin sliding over skin made Eli draw in a fast, hard breath. Then Paulie whispered back to him, but Eli’s heart was beating so loudly in his ears he couldn’t tell what was said. This was too important to get wrong, so he crushed the protests of his pride and said what he thought Paulie might need to hear.

“I couldn’t hear you, Paulie. My heart was beating too loud. I’m scared as shit that you said something like ‘that’s nice’ which would actually be the nicest brushoff in the history of gay romance, but I’m gonna pretend you said yes, and maybe even gave me a rousing ‘yes, please, let’s try’.”

Paulie smiled then, thank fuck. He lifted his head a fraction, pressing his lips in a chaste, closed-mouth kiss against Eli’s. “I said, ‘Yes, I’d like that’—I don’t know if it’ll work—but I’d like to try.”

Eli’s fingers tightened on Paulie’s hips for a second to hide the way his knees wobbled at the sound of that smoke-filled tenor promising to try. Then he lifted Paulie completely off the stool, spinning around to seat himself on the stool with Paulie draped over his lap. Then he got down to the business of proving to Paulie that he’d made a very wise decision. A long time and a lot of

swapped spit later, he raised his head to holler at the annoyingly persistent scratching coming from the door connecting his place to the other half of the duplex.

“Oi! Earthgirl, you’ll have to apologize later. I’m busy playing Doctor.”

THE END

Author Bio

Butcher, baker, candlestick maker... ummm, eww, every chance I get, and I surely would if these damn characters would ever shut up. Born in West Palm Beach, Florida and raised... er, is all over the damn place a sufficiently descriptive term? No? Then how about this? Tinker, tailor, Indian chief... Ooooh, especially when smexy men are involved (!), only under duress, and did the cheek-bones give it away?

Seriously? I've lived in Washington D.C., Virginia, Upper Michigan, Texas, New York, California, and Alabama in the United States; Hessen in Germany, London in England, Masirah Island in Oman and... sometimes it was in a house, sometimes in a tent, and sometimes anyplace I could find to lay my head.

I've been in love with words since before I drew breath, and I don't see that ever changing. I write stories. Sometimes I write music with them, sometimes they're poems, and lately, to my great delight, M/M erotic romance. Yum. Smexy man to the second... or third power... now that's the kinda math I can get behind!!

The hair curls or frizzes as it will, the eyes are green and tend to look in two different directions—no, really—and the rest is subject to change. You know the guy who didn't know if he was a butterfly dreaming he was a man or a man dreaming he was a butterfly? Yeah, that's me, but substitute drag queen for butterfly and wacky, wild ex-Army chick for man.

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NEEDING YOU

By Alicia Nordwell

Photo Description

The slim sub's thumb was dipped inside his blue tie-dyed underwear, teasing his cock. He'd worn them to please his Dom, and the addition of his shiny motorcycle jacket, his only other piece of clothing, was the perfect naughty counterpoint to his sweet face. His high cheekbones, that soft blond hair sweeping just above his gray-blue eyes, and those plump, pink lips made him look innocent. The heat in his eyes was anything but.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

He watched as the loud, aggressive red-head approached the blond boy on the dance floor. 'Jake' shook his head. The boy was just his type, but he'd found through the grapevine that the blond also came with a ton of baggage. Evidently the boy's ex really did a number on him, enough that his friends held an intervention. But it didn't help, the boy just stopped talking to all of them. Why the kid stayed with his ex for so long 'Jake' couldn't understand, but now the boy was free and still making all the wrong choices. The boy put on a brave front as he laughed, flirted and seemed to revel in the hungry eyes on him. But when he thought no one was watching, the smile slipped away and sadness settled across his features. And each time the boy returned to the club after an encounter, he looked more broken than the time before. But why should 'Jake' care? The boy wasn't his problem. What the kid needed was a shrink. So why did 'Jake' keep thinking about him? Too much baggage he kept telling himself. But every time he looked at the lost boy he couldn't help thinking, "What if?"

Note: Hurt/comfort and emotional healing of both characters. I suppose in a way this story could contain PTSD. Don't make them perfect, I don't like perfect people. I love character growth. For example, 'Jake' (doesn't have to be Jake, I just chose a name), may also have some hidden need to rescue the boy. I'd prefer if he personally wasn't abused, but it could be anything that

compelled him to want to 'save' people or this particular person. Something that 'Jake' has buried inside and didn't want to face about himself. I'm curious about what happened with the old boyfriend and does he come back to 'claim' the boy once he's with the new man. I really want this in third person. Angst is great, but this must have a HEA. If there is a bit of an age gap I'd also like that, probably no more than ten years between them. It can be less. NO instant love! Instant lust okay, with love growing between them, but NO instant love. The other thing is I love BDSM, but I understand that not everyone does. If you can make this into BDSM I'd love it. Maybe the boy is looking to submit in the wrong way so that's why he keeps picking the wrong men. Or maybe 'Jake' is a Dom and he's watching the boy at a BDSM club. If it's BDSM I'd like it more about submission than pain, but pain can come in at the end of the story. But like I mentioned, it doesn't have to be BDSM if you don't want.

Sincerely,

Penumbra

Story Info

Genre: contemporary, paranormal

Tags: abuse, hurt/comfort, D/s, graphic sex, Greek mythology, mystical abilities, mind-numbing orgasms, light BDSM, sounding

Word count: 36,305

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NEEDING YOU

By Alicia Nordwell

CHAPTER ONE

Cason looked out on the sea of dancing people. He could see several people he knew from the scene and a lot of newbies out in the crowd. Strokes wasn't really a fetish bar; it was more of a place for like-minded people to gather and hang out. Still, there was plenty of eye candy, bare skin held in harnesses, mesh shirts, and better yet, nothing at all. His cock stirred as he watched two twinks dance with each other, their hips grinding back and forth to the throbbing beat of the music.

Taking a drink, Cason savored the bitter strength of the alcohol as it trickled down his throat. It had been a long week, and an even longer day making the wooden rocking chair Tiffany had ordered. He deserved the break to relax his aching body. The tiny woman had wanted something her size and carved along the back with moonflower vines, her favorite plant that had grown by the swing on her grandmother's porch when she was small.

Sentimental, but a lot of what Cason carved for people was. He liked listening to his customers and then carving something to meet their needs out of the responsive wood. It filled a driving force inside him. Rocking chairs, cradles, tables, spanking benches and even dildos had been carved, polished, then boxed up and shipped out of his shop.

It was a good hobby and the way it dovetailed into his other... life, was nice too.

Tonight his body craved a different force. He needed a sub; to control, to please, to drive his cock into until they both came.

There were plenty of options.

"Hey, man." A hand clamped down on his shoulder. Cason smiled and turned to see his best friend standing beside him with a smaller guy tucked against his side.

“Brandon.” Cason cocked his head toward Page. “Something come out of your mouth that shouldn’t have?” he asked.

Page rolled his eyes but said nothing. He couldn’t with his dark red lips stretched tight around a ball gag that was strapped behind his head. Brandon reached over and pinched one of Page’s nipples, the small nubs already swollen, and the poor guy went rigid.

“Mmph!”

“No rolling your eyes,” Brandon said in his slow, deep voice. Page nodded frantically and Brandon let up on his grip slowly, then rubbed the abused flesh softly, which would only increase the ache over time.

Cason’s cock plumped up more at the small display. He’d met Page a few months back at a munch. Even for one of those informal gatherings Page had pushed limits. They’d talked; Cason even liked him, but the sub’s bratty demeanor wasn’t what Cason preferred in his partners. A glimpse of Page’s inner spirit and he’d known from the tinge of colors in Page that the small man would be perfect for his best friend. All it had taken was an introduction and Page had been smitten with the giant man with a deep voice and very deliberate hands. Just like Cason had known he would. “So, Brandon, having fun?”

“Always.” Brandon ordered a beer for himself, ignoring the imploring look from beneath Page’s lashes that was being sent his way. “He’ll behave and be ready to put that tongue to good use when I finally take the gag out though. Then we’ll both be having fun, won’t we, babe?”

Page’s wink made both men laugh out loud.

The brat had a thing for gags. Cason had an order due in a few weeks from Brandon for Page’s birthday gift; he wanted a wood bit gag that would let Brandon restrain and control Page’s head movement. It had to be silky smooth wood, to protect his mouth, so of course Cason was the best man to order from. He’d made several toys for Brandon over the years.

“So, how is the counselor doing tonight? Found a new boy to fix and find a happy relationship for?”

Like he needed that reminder. Cason hadn’t taken anyone home in a while for just that reason. He’d been in the lifestyle for some time but his particular

ability made it difficult to want to play over the last year. One by one, the subs he'd guided through the scenes to their subspace and sent soaring to the bliss beyond had thanked him, usually on their knees with their cum still decorating their bodies... and then found someone else that fit the needs his ability allowed them to realize.

He always knew what they needed, but none of them ever needed him.

Cason scanned the dance floor again. Sometimes he couldn't resist; he needed that connection with them too, as fleeting as it was. He was a Dom and they were looking for something to fulfill them, personally, sexually... both of those intertwined for most of them. Creating their perfect scene and guiding them to it seemed to connect them to the submissive inside, whoever that person turned out to be.

None of the dancing singles on the floor captured his attention though, so he turned away, glancing at the door just as it opened. Maybe he'd order a second drink, if he wasn't going to play.

"I don't think there is anyone here that needs me, not tonight."

His balls ached at the thought. Pleasuring himself was fine from time to time, but he got tired of using his hands on his own cock. He wanted to knead malleable flesh, to stroke and smack it. He wanted hot lips wrapped around his cock while his hand was buried in sweaty blond hair as soft, gray-green eyes stared up at him.

Shit.

He knew better than to go there.

Vince, Page's roommate, had just entered the bar. Cason had been watching him for a few months, ever since he got to know Page. Vince sidled up to the edge of the bar and ordered. Cason hoped it would be a nice alcoholic beverage, something fruity maybe, or a rum and coke. Those would fit the way the young man seemed, flirty and fun or dark and smoldering when the eyes of interested men were on him. Cason frowned when the bartender smiled back at Vince as he handed Vince a bottle of water, saying something to the cheerful blond who slid his change in pants damn near too tight to get his hands in the pockets.

Someone else had come out to play tonight.

“Hey, Cason!” Brandon’s big elbow nudged him.

“What?” He rubbed at his ribs, then realized he’d lost Vince in the crowd when Brandon distracted him. He glared at Brandon. “Keep those damn things to yourself.” He tried looking around subtly for Vince. “Hey, a booth just opened up. Let’s go sit down, unless you’re going to dance?”

Page looked up at Brandon who shook his head. “Not yet.”

They headed over to the booth, putting their glasses down and sitting on the soft leather benches. Page snuggled up against Brandon’s side, his hands out of sight under the table. He was probably begging to go dance, in the only way he could with his mouth plugged.

Cason enjoyed the thick cushioned seat as he leaned back and sighed in relief. “Long day.”

Unfortunately, Brandon was more focused on him than his sub, and they wouldn’t be going dancing. Cason recognized the obstinate look on Brandon’s face; they’d sit there until he answered his friend’s questions. “What’s up with you?” Brandon asked. “You’ve been acting off for the last few weeks.”

How was Cason supposed to tell him about the stories he’d heard about Page’s little roommate? About how he wanted to snap the so-called Doms the poor man had been playing with in half?

His friend looked down at Page who had turned away and was staring out at the dance floor. Brandon shifted his gaze out at the sea of people, looking in the direction Page was staring. Cason turned in his seat and looked too. He knew what he’d see before he looked, but he did it anyway.

The dance floor was lit up. The song had changed but the beat stayed the same, calling for dancers to move and writhe together in a parody of a more intimate act.

Of course if this was a fetish club people probably would have been having sex on the dance floor, but Strokes was too mainstream for that. Cason saw a woman whose breasts were being fondled under her shirt by the man behind her. Swaying next to her were a couple of men grinding into each other’s

thighs. They were locked in tight together; the dancer's ass he could see looked like a tight handful and it was being squeezed happily by a grinning man that scooted into the pair's space and joined them.

But Page wasn't looking at any of that. His roommate was on the edge of the dance floor, his chin tucked to his chest as an arrogant redheaded man standing beside him stroked his hand down his stomach toward his belt before hooking a finger into it. The man hauled Vince up against his body. Vince tilted his head back and smiled, saying something before he looked down again. His smile disappeared when he looked down, though.

Cason narrowed his eyes at the pair. He resisted getting up and interfering, even though the sneering curl in the redhead's lip pissed him off. Something about the blond triggered a protective instinct in him, but the man's spirit wasn't touched in any way Cason could see. He needed guidance, obviously, but not the type that Cason could offer him.

Some days he cursed his daimon heritage. He could see the color of the spirits inside a submissive and know, based on that influence, what would drive them to reach their center. Inside each submissive lay their truth, and finding that brought them to find peace in their individual submission. His own ability lay in taking them on the journey, through the scenes he planned for the submissive he took under his protection.

The last few times he'd been with a sub he'd succeeded in breaking down their barriers, but after each scene ended and he'd soothed their shattered nerves, gave them water and praised them, they left. He'd been sated, in a way, but the longing grew for someone who needed more from him.

But Vince didn't need him.

And Cason needed someone to need him. He drained his drink. "I'm going for a refill, can I get you anything?"

Brandon shook his head. "No." He polished off his beer. "I think we are going to dance."

Instead of getting up and losing their table, Cason had held up his hand until a waiter noticed him. "I'll take a beer."

None of the hungry spirits in the room called to him; no one truly needed him. He wasn't in the mood to play, so instead he drank. He was on his second beer when Brandon led Page back over to the table. They were breathing hard;

Page's nipples were an angry red. Brandon had probably been teasing them the whole time they were gone.

"I got you some water."

The bottle sat unopened on the table on their side of the booth. Brandon cracked it open and drank, his head tipped back and his Adam's apple bobbing as he swallowed. Page whimpered. Brandon put the bottle down on the table and sat down. He pulled Page into his lap, staring down at his sub's face.

He traced his fingers around the lips stretched wide around the black ball gag. "You thirsty?" His voice was a low rumble. Page nodded. "If I take this out to give you a drink you won't move or make a sound, will you?"

The sub shook his head; folding both hands together and putting them in his lap. He rested against Brandon and waited.

"Remember, don't move." Brandon picked up the water bottle and took a drink. He slid a hand over Page's cropped hair and unbuckled the gag, holding the strap to the back of Page's head so it wouldn't fall when he slowly removed the ball from his sub's mouth. Page didn't move, leaving his mouth wide open.

Brandon traced those lips with his finger again. Page's lips trembled and he breathed out hard through his nose. He closed Page's mouth with one hand under his chin and then kissed him, slowly giving him his drink. Cason shook his head as Brandon's tongue followed the water as the two kissed. Brandon gave Page two more drinks the same way.

He used his thumb on Page's glistening lower lip to part his lips again, then fit the black ball back into his mouth and fastened the buckle tight at the back of his head. Instead of acting resentful, Page melted against Brandon's body with a whimper, hugging him.

"I'm impressed," Cason said to Brandon. "He is very sweet tonight. I didn't think he'd like being gagged in public so much."

Brandon smirked. "He likes it when I'm mean."

His sub stroked at Brandon's neck, his eyes half-shut. He slid those naughty hands down, over the hard chest and stomach to drop below the table.

Brandon's eyes flared open wide and he shuddered. "I think we're going to go home early tonight though."

It was evident in the slow squirm of his body that, if Page could have smiled around the gag, he would have.

“You good?” Brandon asked. “Need a ride home?”

Cason waved his hand. “No, I’ll be fine. I’ll grab a cab when I’m done.” He decided to have one more beer before heading home. That way he’d sleep really well. Just one more wouldn’t give him a hangover but would see him comfortably buzzed.

While he drank he watched. He observed the people swirling in front of the bar, watching as those destined to meet up did and those who were still lost to their way searched for what they were looking for. Here, the spirit Kydoimos had touched a man with confusion; his eyes clouded with a pale white shade, so he couldn’t see the way the young woman at the table beside his looked at him shyly through her lashes. He would remain oblivious, tonight at least.

Caerus exposed his influence, in a blue flash in another man’s eyes, as he took a sudden chance and seized the opportunity to ask the guy waiting for a drink at the bar in front of him if he wanted to dance instead. Oizys, green with tinges of red, had sunk heavily over a woman crying into her wine glass, her woes being soothed by the friend rubbing her shoulders and insisting that “the jerk didn’t deserve her.”

They were everywhere, the spirits his ancestors had venerated in ancient Greece. He’d scoffed at the stories his grandfather told until puberty struck. Then he knew the truth. Cason’s grandpa told him about using his ability to help people, but he had to learn focus so he could see the truth of the path for those in need of help. Pappous had suggested eastern meditation practices, but Cason had rejected the lessons as stupid and old-fashioned.

It was during his senior year when Cason learned how right his pappous was. One kiss and grope after class in the empty locker room had Billy, the oh-so-straight jock, seeing the light shine into his closet of denial. Somehow it also showed Billy that he really wanted Sam Drisver from his geography class to pin him against the lockers, not Cason.

The sting from that first encounter still lingered. Deciding to heed his grandpa’s advice on channeling his abilities through breath and focus, Cason

had turned to vispassana exercises. He never let his friends catch him doing it, but the breathing and meditations, and the weight of history he felt when he finally understood what it really meant to search for that inner peace, had allowed him to reach new levels of confidence in his ability. After nearly a year, he'd learned to invoke the necessary state of calm within the space of one deep breath. He often wondered if that was what subs felt when they reached that high many of them called subspace.

Evidence of the spirits' influence was easy for Cason to spot after that. Gradually he grew into his sexuality and learned how to know who was touched by the spirits, and how to help them... if they wanted help. His grandfather's gifts had been different; they certainly didn't revolve around sex like Cason's did, much less the BDSM kink he used, but Pappous had told Cason to remember that using his gift to help others would be rewarded one day.

His eyes returned again and again to Vince. He could see behind the bright smile and easy pliancy to Vince's anxiety as he molded his body to the redheaded man who'd claimed him, exposed by the tight clench of his fists and the expression in those eyes that no one else saw.

Fuck it. His ability might not be able to help Vince, but maybe he could. He knew a lot of Dominants in the city who would jump at the chance at the young sub. It needed to be soon too; with each scene he did the blond man seemed to break a little more.

He'd find the right man for the submissive, but first he'd have to find out more about him. That meant he'd need to talk to Page.

Tomorrow.

He was damn sure the sub's tongue was going to get a whole other type of workout that night.

CHAPTER TWO

“So what can you tell me about Vince’s interest in the lifestyle?” Cason barely waited until Page sat gingerly in the chair beside him before questioning him about Vince.

“Not a lot you don’t already know, unfortunately. He’s different now. We knew each other as kids, you know.” He shivered, blowing on his hands. “It’s cold outside today.” Snow was swirling around the sidewalk just outside the window they sat in front of.

“I ordered you a mocha.” He nodded at the cup on the small table between their chairs. His own preference was simpler; he enjoyed the rich bitter flavor of black coffee. His special blend of coffee at home was better, but he wasn’t going to meet with another man’s sub in his residence alone, even if it was his best friend’s sub. “Tell me what you do know, as soon as you warm up a little.”

“Thank you,” Page said as he pulled off his gloves and set them in his lap. “Ah, this is nice.” He held the cup curled between his hands.

Cason smiled. “Polite today, aren’t you?”

That made Page laugh. “Well, I don’t have anyone here who will gag me and paddle my ass if I’m not, now do I?” He winked as he took a sip. “They make the best mochas here. Sweet with a hint of dark roast coffee, like a rich hot cocoa for adults.” Page held his cup up and blew on it before taking another sip. .

“That’s Vince’s favorite drink, you know. Cocoa.” Page looked up at him. “I can tell you more about him, as a person, than I can tell you about him as a sub.”

Excellent. Cason already had one little tidbit of information to tuck away. He gestured for Page to continue.

“He doesn’t like caffeine, or sugar. He has a wicked way with cars. He knows how to get the broken ones purring in seconds. There’s no one better at restoration.”

“You live and work with him, right?” Cason asked.

Page shook his head. “We’re roommates, but I don’t work at the garage. I do custom work for him sometimes, leather seats for the cars he fixes up, or the motorcycles. I can’t program a coffee pot, much less fix a car.” He took another drink of his mocha, then sighed. “Growing up, most people would never have guessed we were friends. I met him when we were in high school. We were a pair of openly gay kids in a school that didn’t always keep an eye on the goings on between students.”

“Oh, nothing too horrible,” Page assured him when Cason frowned, “we weren’t jumped in the locker room and beaten or anything. But kids like to tease, and when you’re a social outcast, you tend to band together with other social outcasts. Vince hung out with these slacker guys in the shop. They all took this automotive class before the school decided to fire the teacher for selling parts from the shop’s teaching supplies.

“One day I got a bunch of food on me at lunch and I had an allergic reaction to the salad dressing. Vince drove me home to change and get some medicine, blowing off his plans with his other friends.” The small man’s voice was matter of fact about the incident. “Turns out the assholes who tripped me into the garbage can *accidentally* did him a big favor. The rest of the guys he hung out with spent the hour in the shop, after they stole the principal and vice principal’s cars and chop shopped them in protest, right there on school grounds. Idiot teenagers.”

“I’m assuming they got into major trouble.”

Page nodded. “Yeah, and the class was canceled anyway. After that Vince got a job working part time at Pearson’s. He sucked at school. He has ADHD, but cars just seem to focus him, you know? But he can do more than that, if he has a good reason. Pearson told him to go to college and learn how to run a business and when he retires, he’ll let Vince buy the place. It was the one thing that got him through and made him focus enough to graduate this year.”

The little walk down memory lane hadn’t told Cason much about Vince’s recent experience in the scene, but it did tell him a lot about the man himself. He tapped the side of his coffee mug.

“Is that what he’s looking for with all those men playing at being Doms? Focus?”

Page cocked his head to the side. “I don’t know. He won’t talk about the scenes he does with them. You can see it, though, right?”

“The hole inside that seems to be getting deeper each time he comes back into the club and tries a new guy? Yeah.” Cason didn’t like it. The younger man needed some help and he was going to make sure he got it so he’d stop looking so sad when he thought no one was looking.

“I tried talking about it with him. We staged this whole intervention with him. He had some friends from school and I got them all together at our apartment. Some of them were freaked by the lifestyle, but I got that part. But something was still wrong, and none of us knew what to do about it.

“He was with this guy, for like a year, just after we turned twenty-one. He met him at some club he went to alone and after the first night he told me the guy signed a contract with him. Normally Vince is bounce off the walls energetic, except for when he’s working on an engine, but he was depressed whenever he was home. He wouldn’t talk to us, or let us touch him at all.” Page was growing agitated and he had a harsh scowl on his face. Cason had never seen the normally smirking sub looking quite so angry.

“Turns out the bastard told him that when he was away from him, or not at work, that he wasn’t to touch, or even speak, to another man. This guy was supposed to be this great Dom, though I’d never seen him at any events or clubs. Whatever hold he had on Vince, the bastard used it to make him miserable, but he wouldn’t leave. After we confronted him, he completely shut everyone out.”

Some Doms believed in breaking submissive partners into slaves that lived to serve their every need. Page’s story sounded exactly like that was what had happened, but not every man was made to be a slave. Cason took a drink of his coffee and grimaced at the cold drink. He set it down and folded his hands together in his lap. He was getting tense just hearing about Vince’s experiences.

“So why did he leave his Dom then? He did leave him, right? Not the other

way around?" If he'd left, then Vince hadn't broken. But how he left him, and why, would say a lot about the young man.

Page pursed his lips. "He never said, but I'm pretty sure the contract expired. Vince isn't stupid, but we're both new to the lifestyle, you know? I stopped playing for a while after I saw what was happening with him. It scared me. But this submissive chick I know told me about the munches hosted by Master Pete at the restaurant. I thought that would be safer than going to clubs, and I could learn some stuff too."

Cason nodded. "You were smart."

Page snorted. "I was lucky. I met you. I thought that I wanted you, especially after I saw that paddling you demonstrated on the guy wearing those leather chaps? Man, his ass was so red afterward it was practically glowing. You barely had to touch him before he came all over the stage. But Brandon is perfect for me, and you knew that, didn't you?"

Shrugging one shoulder Cason said, "I guessed you two would be good together."

"Brandon says it's more than guessing. You're good with people. That's why you're a counselor, right?"

"I advise students on the right career path. I'm not a psychologist." Cason wanted to help people, but he'd never wanted to study psychology formally. The classes he'd taken had various approved methods that made relying on his ability a bad choice. Second guessing himself never helped, so he went in a slightly different direction. He got up before he could start doing it then. "Be right back, I need to get a refresh."

He took his coffee up to the counter, getting a refill from the smiling barista. When he sat down again, though, Page started the conversation right back up.

"Do you think Vince is in some sort of crisis, like he might need to talk to someone? Is that why you're so concerned?"

That had been Cason's first impression. He argued with himself that Vince needed more than just an ear, and knowing he had a diagnosed mental condition like ADHD meant he'd need a psychiatrist. Kink friendly ones

existed. Vince didn't need a daimon descendent whose ability was completely failing Cason just when he most wanted to use it to help someone... but knowing that wasn't going to stop Cason from helping Vince, not anymore.

“Do you know if he's on medication for the ADHD?”

Page shook his head. “Not for a few years. He calmed down a little bit, at least compared to when he was a teenager. I think he has other ways of dealing with it now.”

Maybe Cason could still help him. He didn't have to be their Dom to become friends with someone. “I'm guessing that he lost a lot of friends, even after that contract was up?” He tapped the arm of his chair.

“Yeah. I think he's more cautious now about letting people in, too.”

Casually Cason said, “But he's still in the lifestyle, so he's still looking for a Dom.”

Page's eyes got huge and his mouth dropped open.

Cason smirked. “Close your mouth.”

Page closed his mouth so fast his teeth clicked together. He carefully set his cup down. “Are you going to ask him to sub for you? I've heard—”

“A lot, I'm sure.” Cason shrugged his suddenly tense shoulders. “But no, I was thinking about approaching him at the munch next week and just talking to him. Maybe become his friend. Is he coming, do you think?”

“I'll drag him there myself, if I have to. Brandon wants to go. There's going to be a rope demonstration.”

“Ah yes, that's my friend Suzanne and her sub, Mark. She can truss him up in the most interesting positions.” He'd met the older Domme several years back and hit it off with them both. She'd taught him more than a few tricks about restraining people.

“If this is going to work, Vince can't know you told me all this. I really shouldn't have asked you, but what I'm hearing through the grapevine about the scenes he's done isn't good. Being safe is more than just making sure your partner will stop when you need them to, and it sounds like the direction he's been headed hasn't been very good for him mentally.”

After Cason had talked to Page when they first met he'd known exactly who to introduce him to in order for Page to be happy. He had this desire inside, now that he knew some of Vince's story, to Dom the younger man himself but knew it could end badly. He had to resist the temptation and figure out which Dom he knew would be able to reach the submissive before he broke completely under the hands of the wrong ones.

CHAPTER THREE

It wasn't until after the demonstration where Suzanne had shown her favorite way to immobilize a two hundred pound man in the best position for a spanking scene that Cason found Vince standing next to Page. Brandon was nowhere to be seen, at the moment, but he could tell both young men had enjoyed the demonstration.

“—looks amazing,” Vince said softly.

Cason broke into the conversation. “Mark is a very handsome man, and the white rope does show off his dark coloring well.”

“Hello, Cason!” Page said happily. “I was wondering if you were here.”

“I was wondering if you two were going to show up as well. I don't see Brandon here though. Don't tell me he passed up a chance to tease you while watching Suzanne tie up Mark.”

Page waved his hand. “Oh, he's around. I think he went to talk to her.”

That made sense. She was entertaining a lot of questions from various Doms and Dommes about her techniques. “Well, she is a master at bondage. You can be sure that anything he learns from her you will enjoy. Probably.” Cason laughed.

Vince had fallen silent and had yet to look up after Cason interrupted the conversation. Cason raised an eyebrow and looked at Page. “Why don't you introduce me to your friend?”

“Oh! Sorry, Cason. This is my friend Vince. Vince, this is Brandon's best friend, Cason.”

“Hello, sir.” Those gray-green eyes flicked up but never made it past Cason's chin. Cason held tight to his smile and didn't allow his expression to waver.

“Hello, Vince. I take it from your comment when I walked up that you appreciated the demonstration?”

Vince's voice was soft when he spoke. “Yes, sir.”

Cason corrected him. “Cason. Use my name. We’re not in a scene, we’re at a demonstration. There’s no need for formality, so relax.”

“Yes, Cason.” The obedience factor of being a submissive was clearly something that had been drilled into Vince. It seemed unnatural for the man though. He usually flirted and laughed, teasing the young Doms he had been choosing in the clubs.

“Suzanne is an old friend. If you’d like to get up closer to her and Mark, see his bindings up close, I could take the two of you to the stage. She’s probably going to unfasten him soon.”

Vince glanced at Page, who answered for both of them. “Sure! Thank you, Cason, we’d love to see it. I wanted to check out the knot work she did on his arms. It seemed really elaborate.”

Nodding, Cason stepped behind both of the smaller men and guided them forward with a hand on their shoulders. It was a struggle to speak normally and keep his hand light on Vince’s shoulder; he couldn’t stroke the young man’s neck even if the golden skin called to be touched.

“Well, they seem elaborate because they *are* elaborate. Technically, she could have just wound the rope around his forearms, tying them together, but where is the beauty in that? The purpose in rope bondage isn’t just to immobilize the submissive. Cuffs and spreader bars could do that. There is an artistry in the way the rope touches the skin, the knots used and the positions it bends the submissive to please their Dom.”

“To make them attractive,” Vince said suddenly.

Cason nodded. “More attractive. The contrast of the colors of the rope, the way the body is positioned and curved, the beauty of the trust such submission takes. The sub must work with them and hold still for it to work so it shows their desire to please their Dominant.”

“Bending to their will.”

“Yes.” Cason stopped them a few feet from Mark, having made their way through the small crowd. “Of course, with some like Page here, bondage is a way to make them pay attention.”

“Hey.” Page’s lips parted like he was going to stick out his tongue, but then he stopped. “I pay attention.”

Vince's laugh was light, but it seemed genuine, and it pleased Cason immensely to hear it. He chuckled himself.

Smirking, Vince said, "You realize you just kept yourself from sticking your tongue out at him because of the gag I saw Brandon make you wear at the club last week, right? You know, gags are a form of bondage too."

"That they are," Cason said. He proceeded to explain the Japanese harness and the intricate knots that formed a pattern with the coils going up and down Mark's arms.

"With his arms up like that, he's in a prime position to be spanked if he's laid stomach down, or to have his nipples tortured if he's chest up. His arms are immobilized, but comfortably secure up and out of the way."

Page shivered. "Oh." His eyes were staring at Mark but he wasn't seeing him. Cason just knew he was imagining himself tied up like Mark with Brandon's hands, mouth, and maybe some clamps making his nipples achingly sensitive.

He chuckled darkly. "I can see some rope in your future, Page." He turned to look at Vince. "What about you? Are you a fan of rope bondage?"

Vince licked his lips as he stared at Mike but said, "Not really."

That hesitant denial smacked of a bad experience, especially if Vince was aroused. If Cason wasn't wrong, and he rarely was, then Vince had a hard-on pressing against the zipper of his jeans.

"What about bondage in general?" he asked.

"I like it."

"Just not ropes."

Vince glanced at him. "Not certain kinds of ropes."

Cason smiled. "It's always good to be sure of your preferences. That's what these sorts of events are good for. There's no pressure and you talk about the lifestyle, even learn something new. It's good for newcomers to get together without worrying about protocols."

"I saw the demonstration you did." Vince looked at him fully instead of glancing at him from the corner of his eye. His not so subtle hint about not worrying about protocols worked, but this time Cason hid his smile.

“And what did you think?”

“You were very... controlled.” His voice was too enigmatic for Cason to decide if that was a good thing or not.

“Any Dom worth the title is always in control.”

Vince shivered. The room was comfortably warm; Mark showed no signs of discomfort, even though he was shirtless. Still, maybe Vince was cool. There was a fireplace at one end of the meeting room opposite the stage.

“Would you care to go sit down and continue talking?” Cason hoped Vince would say yes. “It looks like Suzanne is about to untie Mark. Brandon will be right over to get him, so we won’t be abandoning Page to his lonesome.”

The hesitation on Vince’s part disappeared when Page smiled and shoed them away. “Okay.” Cason led the way over to the armchairs, trusting that the younger man would follow him. It was warmer by the fire and Vince relaxed into the comfortable chair when they sat quietly for a few minutes.

Cason had a theory. Vince wasn’t nearly as reserved as he appeared. He had seen him laughing and enjoying the attention at the clubs, interacting normally with the other dancers. The flashes of sadness Cason saw were real, though. It was as if Vince played parts of whatever type of person he thought those around him wanted.

How was Cason going to get Vince to show him the real inside? Vince leaned to one side, propping his cheek up on his fist. It was so much easier when he knew what was going on with a person’s spirit. Of course then he’d feel the need to do a scene with Vince, and that was the last thing he wanted.

Well, he wanted the younger man. He had the softest looking lips, pale pink and wide. Would they turn dark pink with passion? Get puffy if he kissed them hard?

His breath stuttered when Vince licked the lips he was staring at. It took an act of iron will not to make a sound. A moment later he had his control back but it took a few minutes before Vince looked up at him finally.

“So...”

“So.” Cason was patient; he had to be.

“You said you wanted to talk some more.”

“Of course. I believe talking is invaluable. Without it, submissives don’t know what their Doms want and vice versa. Communication is at the core of what we do. A good scene always starts with a negotiation beforehand. I thought maybe I could answer your questions, if you had any.”

“You negotiate with your sub?” Vince cocked his head to one side, a slight frown marring his expression.

Cason nodded. “Always. How am I supposed to know their hard limits if they don’t tell me when I ask?”

“Most Doms do that? Ask what the sub wants, or doesn’t want, and listens to them?”

His question upset Cason, not that he let it show. Cason kept his forehead smooth, fighting the urge to scowl. What kind of idiots had he been playing with?

“A real one,” Cason answered after a minute. “Look, there are a lot of people who play in the lifestyle. They think that bossing a person around and controlling them is all that it takes to be a Dominant. That’s not how it should work between a couple who really believe in living the D/s lifestyle. One of the things we could never forget is that everyone is different and that’s okay.”

Vince shook his head. “I don’t want to live as a sub all the time.” His hands clenched on the arms of his chair.

“And not every D/s couple does. Some keep their scenes only to the bedroom while others incorporate the aspects that draw them to their roles into their daily lives. Neither are right or wrong. Just because a person likes to submit in bed doesn’t mean they have to give up control in their day-to-day life.”

“Really?”

Cason arched an eyebrow. “I do not lie.”

A flush spread across Vince’s face and he stared at his knees. “Sorry, sir.”

“Forgiven. And my name is Cason, remember? You don’t know me, and it seems like you haven’t been given too many chances to learn how our lifestyle really works.”

“I was in a relationship with a Dom once where he wanted me to let him be in charge all the time. Now I just do scenes. I don’t want... I don’t want to be submissive full time.”

Maybe Cason could give Vince some advice about how to protect himself. Maybe that was all he needed to do, which was why he didn’t see the spirits inside the attractive blond man. “As I said, you don’t have to. Even in a single scene, you should talk to your partner before anything starts. Things you like, what you absolutely will not do, what makes you nervous and might need to be helped into doing.” He leaned forward.

“That isn’t to say that you dictate what will happen in the scene, but we’re not mind readers. Doms rely on a sub’s honesty. That’s why I use a slow word.”

“Page mentioned that, but I’ve never had a Dom use one.”

“I’ve seen the types of guys you play with. I’m not surprised. I wouldn’t trust arrogant newbies like that with an experienced sub, much less one who had been mistreated.”

Vince jerked his head up and glared at Cason. “What are you talking about?” His nostrils flared and he spoke through clenched teeth.

Cason shook his head. Maybe no one had ever confronted Vince about his poor choices. “It’s pretty obvious to someone like me. I have made it my job, and my hobby, to read other people. Every time you come back and find someone new at a club you’re hiding more fear, more pain. You’re not finding the peace in submission you should be.”

“Obvious to someone who is what... an arrogant jerk? Where do you get off?” Vince stood up, his body rigid. His hands shook until he clenched them into fists. He glared down at Cason. “Try reading this,” he said before he walked out of the room completely.

“Fuck.” Cason slumped in his chair. He never would have guessed Vince would have snapped at him that way with how meek the man acted. He’d clearly struck a nerve.

What he’d said had been nothing less than the truth, but stating it so baldly was a mistake, in retrospect. Perhaps an apology would soothe his ruffled

feathers. He tapped his finger on the wood arm of the chair. Now he had to figure out how to get Vince to talk to him again.

CHAPTER FOUR

Page had once again been coerced into helping Cason with the bribe of a mocha.

“You sure he’ll come?” Cason was unaccountably nervous, turning his cup side to side.

Reveling in his mocha with extra whip cream, Page mumbled an answer.

“What?”

“I didn’t tell him you were going to be here,” Page finally said.

“Damn it, Page!” Cason couldn’t believe that Page would do that. “So he’s going to walk in the door, take one look at me, and walk back out again. How is that going to help me help him?”

Page didn’t even look embarrassed. Or sorry.

“He’ll stay. I think you intrigued him, after he got over being pissed. He was only mad because you were right, you know.”

“I know.” Cason didn’t drink any of his coffee, just stared at the dark black liquid rippling as he fidgeted with his cup. “I could have said it better though.”

Page shrugged. “He has issues, but I don’t want to see him hurt again like he was last week.”

Cason has been swamped with the influx of students coming back after winter holidays and had gone home each night exhausted. He hadn’t been out to the clubs in the last three weeks since the munch where things went so wrong with Vince.

“Who hurt him? How?” He stared at Page, his eyes narrowed. The handle on his cup was going to break off if he squeezed it any harder.

“Some guy. I think Vince found the guy on Craigslist or something.”

White hot anger lit up inside Cason. “Vince did what?” He didn’t know who he was more furious with, the asshole who hurt Vince or Vince for giving him the chance without knowing him at all.

“Yeah, I know. I gave him a piece of my mind. It’s one thing to meet a stranger at the clubs, but he didn’t tell any of us what he was doing until he

came stumbling home. He had bruises around his throat and was walking funny.”

“The guy beat him?”

“I think so.”

Cason’s lips curled in a snarl. He really hated the idea of anyone hurting Vince.

“What happened after that?”

“Well, he hasn’t been with anyone else since then, and he asked me about you. The night he went out to the club last weekend he didn’t go home with anyone, but I saw him talking to a few subs.” He winked at Cason. “Including the one that you were with right before I set my sights on you.”

Cason sank back in his chair. Was Vince staying away from new partners while he considered the way he’d been playing, or was he looking at Cason to play with? A large part of Cason wanted that, but he couldn’t help the drop dead gorgeous man and then watch him walk away, especially without the spirits involved.

He would though. He decided that the instant Vince walked in the door, shaking snow out of his dark blond locks, and they locked eyes.

Heat suffused his body. He *wanted* Vince under him, looking up with those smoky eyes shining with their green glints. His breath held, Cason waited to see what the submissive would do when he waved him over, pointing to the chair next to his.

Vince strolled over with an air of nonchalance, and shrugged out of his coat before he sat down. He raised an eyebrow while looking at Page. “You didn’t tell me we’d be seeing anyone else here, or is this just a coincidence?”

“Of course it isn’t,” Cason said before Page could open his mouth. “I wanted to see you.”

Vince’s lips looked chapped, which was really too bad because they usually looked soft. Vince started gnawing on his bottom one as he turned his eyes on Cason, who was staring at him. “Why?”

“To apologize, for starters. I shouldn’t have spoken that way.” Cason didn’t apologize for what he said, and he wouldn’t, but he did need to make

amends for how and where he'd said it. A perfect stranger telling him he'd been handling his sex life completely wrong would have pissed him off too. In fact, it had, back when his family had issues with the way he choose to use his daimon abilities.

"It's forgotten." Vince shrugged one shoulder. The white T-shirt set off the caramel tone of his skin. Cason didn't often mark his subs but he wanted to pull up a vivid purple mark right above Vince's collar on his neck so everyone could see it.

"Thank you." Cason said simply. "Can I get you a cocoa? Perhaps a peppermint flavor? I asked when I came in and they said they have it in sugar free syrup."

The look Vince sent Page was hard. "What the hell, Page? Have you been spilling all my secrets?"

Page shrugged. "Maybe." He tipped his head back and drained most of his mocha in one long drink.

"Maybe Brandon needs to know about your thirty minute shower this morning?" Vince's smirk was back. Cason had to hide his smile. The man definitely had a wicked streak, though he didn't seem as bratty as Page.

"Maybe Brandon told me to take that long shower." Page looked at his watch in an exaggerated movement. "In fact, maybe I need to be off to meet him right now. Have fun." He wiggled a single finger in goodbye at Vince as he left. Cason couldn't stop himself from laughing at the vulgar salute.

"He's such a brat."

Cason agreed. "That's why I thought he'd do so well with Brandon. He always needed a challenge. Now, cocoa?"

"I'd like a cinnamon cocoa, actually. I'm not a big fan of peppermint."

"Good to know. I'll be back." Exchanging his cold coffee for hot, he waited until Vince's cocoa was ready before he went back to their seats, carrying both mugs. He stopped in front of Vince's chair and held out the cup. "Careful, grab the handle. The mug is hot."

Their fingers brushed as he handed over the cup. Cason wanted to touch Vince more than that casual contact, but he restrained himself. He'd spent

weeks trying to think of how to help Vince with advice, maybe arranging a set up with a Dom... but he'd changed his mind. Or maybe he'd always wanted to be the one for Vince's awakening to what a real scene could be like.

Vince sipped his cocoa and pleasure spread across his face. He smiled at Cason. "It's very good. They have the best cocoa blend here."

"Good. I'm a big advocate of only accepting the best."

He didn't want anyone but him teaching Vince the truth of his submission and the peace that could come from a scene shared to the mutual satisfaction of both the Dom and the sub but him. He could see the need practically pouring out of the man for someone to show him why he felt the need to submit, and how to find the right way to satisfy that urge.

It would be him. Once he figured out how to get Vince to agree, of course.

Considering how the man had been questioning people about Cason, Vince might be interested in return. The difficulty lay in not seeing the path Vince's submission needed to go, but maybe it would be better this way. He would delve into Vince's desires in a whole new way from how he usually planned out scenes.

They sipped their drinks in silence; the chatter of other people who had come inside to avoid the snow and seek their daily dose of caffeine muted in the background as they studied each other. Cason set his cup down. He decided to be direct; it was, after all, what he'd told Vince Doms and subs should do.

"I heard you've been asking around about me."

Vince's face flushed a little, his cheeks turning pink. He shrugged one shoulder. "I was curious."

"And did you satisfy that curiosity?"

"I talked to three different subs, and Page and Brandon too. Every single sub said you were amazing and knew exactly what they needed, even if they didn't know themselves."

He couldn't really explain he had an ancient Greek daimon for an ancestor who had passed down the power to see the influence the spirits had on a sub.

He knew how to read those needs and reach through that to their inner spirits. Thankfully, his grandfather had been a daimon who sought to help people find the truth within that would bring them peace... not all daimons were good. Some sought to influence humans toward the darkness inside them, breaking them for their own purposes.

He compromised with the truth. "I'm usually very good at reading people. I'm not perfect. No one is. It helps that I insist on communication being a foundation to each and every scene I plan."

"So you plan out what you are going to do beforehand?" A bit of sugar free whipped topping from the garnish on his cocoa clung to Vince's lip.

Plans on how slowly he could lick that dollop of creamy white sweetness from the soft pink lips instantly struck Cason. Watching Vince lick it off sent more ideas of how he could have the man use his pointed tongue to lick other, now throbbing, areas.

Cason was glad he'd left his button up shirt casually untucked. "Each situation can be different, depending on where we meet and how well I know the sub. We always have a discussion beforehand, but sometimes I need a bit of time to set things up for us. Other times we can start playing as soon as we're done going over their limits."

"That sounds like a lot of work, not play."

"I enjoy it. Planning on how to blow a man's mind is very... stimulating." Cason gave Vince a wicked grin, making the other man laugh.

That look was amazing on Vince; curving up his lips and making his eyes shine. More than anything, Cason wanted to see that face sated and relaxed after an intense scene where the man let everything go under Cason's hands. "I'd like to do a scene with you," he said. He blinked. That was not how he'd planned to bring it up.

Vince's mouth dropped open and he stared at Cason, for once not seeming uncomfortable looking directly into his eyes. "Wh—what?"

Cason brazened it out, putting every ounce of his confidence into his voice. "I want to do a scene. With you." He leaned back and watched Vince's reaction.

The gorgeous blond wet his lips repeatedly and swallowed. All traces of levity had left him.

“Would you like that?”

Vince nodded.

“Talk to me,” Cason said. “Do you want to do a scene with me?”

“Yes, sir.” Vince’s voice was hesitant.

“Are you hesitant because you are nervous about doing a scene in general or because you aren’t sure you want to play with me, specifically?” Cason laced his hands together in his lap. All of his nerves had drained away and he was calm and steady. This is something he knew how to do. The importance of it just made him all that more serious.

“Nervous.” Vince’s Adam’s apple bobbed a few times. “Definitely nervous.” His fingers began to beat a rapid staccato beat on the arm of his chair.

“Good. It means you’re going to pay more attention.” Cason looked around the very public coffee shop. “Will you come with me?”

“Where? And can I call Page and tell him?”

Cason smiled. “Good. You should never just agree to go play with someone you don’t know, in a location you aren’t sure of. You can call Page and tell him you’re coming home with me. He’s been to my house before. That is, if you want to come now.” His voice dropped on the last line deliberately; Cason hid a smile as Vince shivered.

“Yeah. All right.” All five fingers were tapping now.

Leaning forward, Cason clamped his hand down on Vince’s wrist before he could reach for his phone. The tapping stopped. “I don’t need to be called Master by the subs I play with. I’m not looking for a slave. But you will pay attention when we’re talking, and remember how you speak to me at all times when we’re discussing playing together or actually doing a scene.”

Vince’s eyes were wide and his breathing was shallow. His pants did nothing to hide the thickening erection beginning to create a bulge as he tried to pull his arm back and couldn’t move. “Do you understand?”

“Yes, sir, I understand.” Vince didn’t look away from his eyes while Cason was speaking. “I’ll call Page now, if I can still come with you.”

Relaxing his grip, Cason caressed Vince’s wrist where he’d been pressing down. “Of course. One small mistake isn’t going to change my mind. Finish your cocoa and then call Page. I’m going to go the restroom.”

Cason stood up. He dropped his coffee cup in the tub on the way to the restroom. When he was washing his hands he stared in the mirror. Shaking off the excess water, he ran his clean hands through his black hair, taming some of the curls the snow had brought out as it melted. There was a lot racing through his mind.

Vince had a lot of issues. His difficulty focusing tied directly into the problems he would have had with his previous Dom, who tried to force him to live the lifestyle all the time. Vince’s mind just could not focus all the time.

Clearly the sub had learned discipline when he wanted something; he loved what he did and he was going to school so that he could succeed in his chosen career. Cason didn’t want to live the lifestyle all the time either. That was a lot of stress and responsibility. He knew people who could, and some elements might spill into regular life, but he never wanted to boss a man around every second of the day.

Vince needed to learn the lifestyle he wanted was still reachable after his bad experiences. Cason was determined to help him, despite how long he’d tried to ignore his own need to do so. He’d start tonight. They could sit in the living room and discuss Vince’s limits. His play toys were clean and ready for use, as he always kept them.

“No sex, Cason,” he murmured. There were a lot of things he wanted to do with Vince. He wasn’t sure he could take being that close to his golden man without a chance to do it more than once. If he lost control and they had sex it would be over before Cason had a chance to spend enough time with the sub.

So he wouldn’t.

Even if his cock was already aching. He could take a bit of pain in order to save himself a lot later. He would focus on Vince; the satisfaction in helping the younger man find confidence in his submission would be enough.

CHAPTER FIVE

Vince followed Cason back to his house. Vince drove a really nice car; its polished exterior was shining, even through the winter rain pounding down. At least it wasn't snowing anymore. If that was the quality of the work Vince did, Cason knew he'd have no trouble getting business... he could just park that beauty in front of the business.

"That's a Mustang, isn't it?" Cason had waved Vince into the spare bay in his garage.

"Yeah. A sixty-nine. My dad and I got it as a total junker when I was thirteen. That's when we discovered my ADHD seemed to disappear when I have a car project to work on. I've been fixing cars up ever since." He held the door open and Cason peeked inside. The inside was gorgeous; leather seats and sleek instruments.

"It's gorgeous." He stepped back and let Vince shut the door.

Vince rubbed his hand on the roof. "Thank you." Cason took in the quiet pride of Vince's expression as he stroked his car. That was the look he wanted to see when the man looked up at him from his knees. Vince needed to know that he could be just as successful submitting as he was fixing up cars.

"Come inside."

Cason led the way, stopping just inside to take off his shoes. He emptied his pockets into a carved bowl with a flaring lip set on the glass topped table set beside the door. Taking Vince's coat, he hung it up next to his on the coat rack. The small entry opened up in a large living room. There was a couch and an arm chair by a wall mounted flat screen opposite a lovely wood bar built into the left side of the room.

"Why don't you take a seat." Cason's tone wasn't an order, exactly, but he wasn't asking a question either. "Would you like a glass of water?"

"Yes, please." Vince sat down on the leather couch, his hands stroking the butter soft surface. "This is nice."

The kitchen was just on the other side of the bar, so Cason could hear

Vince easily. "I'm glad you like it. I'm not much for wearing leather, but I do like it for the feeling and smell."

"I love leather. I have a few toys and some cuffs."

Cason paused for a second, imagining Vince on his knees with his hands cuffed behind him, a leather half-hood over his head covering up his eyes. He breathed deeply for a minute before he grabbed two glasses and filled them with ice and water from the refrigerator. He walked back into the living room. "Here you go." He flipped two coasters out of the holder onto the wood table he'd carved. He sat down on the other end of the couch and took a drink before setting down his glass.

"So." Vince's hands were clenched around his glass and he was staring at his knees. "Is this where we negotiate?"

Nodding, Cason settled back into the cushions. "It is. I can ask you questions, or you can tell me what your limits are."

"I... you could ask me?"

"Okay. I remember you like bondage, but don't like rope." Vince nodded. "Are you willing to let me tie you up if I used something else, like silk? Or do you like cuffs?"

"I haven't let anyone tie me up in a while." His hesitance told Cason volumes.

"We don't have to incorporate that, if it's a hard limit for you. I don't want bad memories to pull you out of your headspace while we're playing." Cason could work around that, though he loved to see a man held immobile, quivering as he waited for whatever came next.

"Maybe you could tie me so that I could get out of it, if I really needed to?"

Cason tapped one finger on his knee. "I'll consider a few things. I have some options for bondage. What about pain? Not everyone feels the same about it."

"Spankings can be hot, if they start slow. I don't need it in every scene, though, and I don't like a lot of pain. Definitely no blood or permanent damage." Vince glanced up through his eyelashes in a look that was almost coy.

Cason felt a slow smile spread across his face. “Spanking could be fun, if used as foreplay.” With his hand. He could just imagine the taut curves of Vince’s ass slowly turning pink. His cock twitched with interest.

“What about toys?”

“Like?”

“Nipple clamps. Dildos. Cock rings. Though the last one might be considered bondage, there are different types like vibrating cock rings, ball spreaders, glans rings for guys who are uncircumcised... all sorts. I also have some ball straps which can take weights, cock cages. I own many things to play with.”

Vince swallowed. “Weights... that would hang from my balls?”

“It can stretch them beautifully and bring all of your focus to your balls.”

“Would it hurt?”

“I’d say it aches, but it isn’t a sharp pain. I never start a sub out with too much weight. The key is to build slowly.” That was going to be what Cason had to do with every scene; even the one he was already starting to plan. He would build things between them slowly; increasing the intensity bit by bit until he made Vince fly.

“Whatever you want.”

“So those are your limits? No blood or permanent damage? No severe pain? That’s it?” Cason wasn’t surprised that Vince seemed reluctant to speak up with the stories of how his past Dominants had treated him. “What about things like water sports?”

Vince’s nose wrinkled up. “Gross. No.”

Finally, a hard limit with no waffling. “Good. I’m not into that either. What about exhibitionism? Service?” Cason refused to suggest any humiliation play. He wasn’t into it and that would be the last thing that Vince needed. Breaking a sub down and pushing their boundaries didn’t mean breaking their spirit by degrading them.

“Service means what?”

Cason reached for his glass and took a drink, the ice clinking against his teeth. Vince was still holding his glass but he hadn’t taken a drink yet.

“Drink up,” Cason told him. “You need to stay hydrated.” He watched as Vince once again obeyed him immediately, taking a long drink. It pleased him, even if they weren’t playing yet. Clearly the man had a strong submissive streak, even if he didn’t want to live as a sub all the time.

“Service is just like how it sounds. You serve. It can mean taking care of the Dominant physically, or doing things like chores.”

“Doing chores can be a scene?” Vince sounded disbelieving.

Cason shrugged. “You’d be surprised what people get off on. For example, a sub could serve by washing my body in the shower before I let him suck me off. Or, a sub could bring me a drink while he fixed dinner for both of us, then sit blindfolded at my knees while we eat so I can feed him from my fingers. I’d consider that service, because he was taking care of my needs before I took him to my room and took care of his.”

Vince wiped at the droplets of water gathering on the side of his glass in short strokes with his thumbs. “I can’t cook,” he said bluntly. “But I’m not averse to being fed from your fingers.” He licked his lips as he looked down at Cason’s hands.

Cason chuckled. “That does remind me, you’re not allergic to anything, right?”

“No lubes or anything like that. I am allergic to shellfish, but nothing else.”

“Good.” He put his water down and then reached for Vince’s empty glass, setting it on the other coaster. “I think I have a pretty good idea of what you need. We’ve talked enough.”

“We have?” Vince bit his lip.

Standing up, Cason held out a hand to the nervous sub. “Yes. Come with me.” He normally didn’t have to guess what a sub needed. He could tell who needed to be hooded and whipped until they came screaming or who would respond better to being tied up and teased with a feather until they begged to come before their balls exploded.

But for Vince... it was harder. He couldn’t tell what path would lead to Vince’s center or where his submission truly lay. The challenge focused him in ways he hadn’t felt in a long time.

“Your house is beautiful. All this wood detail is so intricate,” Vince said as Cason led him past the kitchen to the stairs. His voice sounded shaky, as if he were nervous and trying to distract himself from his fear.

“Thank you. I did it myself.”

“Page said you did woodwork, I forgot though. This all looks amazing.”

“It’s a hobby.” He glanced back over his shoulder. “You’ll have to check out my collection of handmade dildos sometime.”

Vince’s eyes opened wide. “You make dildos?”

“Sure. I make all sorts of things to order. I have a day job at the college, but I like to make all sorts of things. I recently finished a crib for a friend having a baby. I have a whole website devoted to toys or bondage furniture for those in the lifestyle though. I’ve been talking with Page about offering some leather work on my website.”

“He’d be good at that.” Vince stopped when they walked into Cason’s room at the top of the stairs. “Oh my God. I think my room would fit in a corner of yours.”

Cason had a playroom to do scenes in with a swing, a cross, and a spanking bench, along with all sorts of toys. He kept his best toys in a chest in his bedroom, the ones he collected but rarely used. Cason didn’t use his bedroom for playing, but with what he was planning for Vince...

Besides, he wanted to see the sub in his bed. He planned for their time together to drive the man completely crazy. From everything he’d seen, there was a lot Vince could learn from their time together. Vince’s reaction to talking about pain, bondage, coupled with his inability to understand submission being voluntarily given and not demanded showed his lack of positive experience in the lifestyle.

Cason would show him.

“We’re going to start now.”

“In here?” Vince licked his lips. Cason stared hard at him until he lifted his eyes. “Sir.”

The addition pleased Cason. He stroked a hand down the post on the bed he’d made himself with some... special features. He wasn’t going to use them

tonight with Vince, but maybe one day, if he got the sub to stay with him he would get to use the hidden rings he'd built into posts on each corner. "Yes. We're going to play in here." He faced Vince, spreading his legs a little farther apart and straightening his spine so he stood erect, strong and balanced. "What is your safeword?"

"Finch."

"And your slow down word? This is what you will say if the intensity is getting to be too much for you or when you need to tell me something important."

Cason watched while Vince thought for a second. "Cardinal."

"You'll remember both of those?"

He nodded.

"And use them. It's important. We've never played together before, and I won't be pleased if you let me do something you cannot handle."

Vince took a deep breath. "I promise."

"Good. Finch and cardinal it is." Finch means stop, cardinal slow down. Cason repeated that several times in his mind so that the words would be ingrained and would trigger him if Vince needed to say either of them.

"Strip." The timbre of his voice lowered as he gave Vince his first order. He watched as a delicious flush spread across Vince's face. His hands went to the bottom of his white T-shirt and he slowly pulled it up and over his head.

His hands shook a little as they went to the top button on his jeans. His chest and stomach were lean, muscled, but not overly built like a gym bunny. Hints of a six pack creased his stomach as his forearms flexed and the button came undone.

His zipper opened slowly.

"Red underwear. Nice." They looked like silk. "I bet you'd look even better in blue." It was his favorite color and he loved to see it on his subs.

Vince didn't say anything, just hooked his trembling fingers into the top of his underwear and slowly slid them down his legs, taking a single step forward. His eyes stopped at Cason's chin as he stilled, standing naked before him.

Cason's breath caught. Vince wasn't fully aroused, but he wasn't limp either. He had a nicely shaped cock, circumcised, and the head was a pink almost the same shade as his lips. Cason licked his lips.

"Hands at your sides."

First step in his plan wasn't going to work if Vince wouldn't look at him. "Eyes on mine."

Vince grimaced but lifted his lashes, showing off those gorgeous gray-blue eyes as he looked right at Cason.

Feeling every inch the Dom in charge, Cason stalked forward. Vince quivered but didn't move as Cason stood right in front of him, stopping when they were inches apart. "You're tan all over." He ran a hand down Vince's side and rubbed a thumb in the hollow of his hip, careful not to touch the wakening cock.

"It's my natural color." Vince's voice was shaky.

"I like it," Cason told him.

"Thank you, sir."

Cason kept his hands on Vince as he moved around him, holding on to his hips to keep him still. He held in his moan but he couldn't keep his hands off Vince's ass. It was just as tight as it looked in jeans, smooth curves barely dusted with fine blond hair. The skin was smooth under Cason's calloused palms as he squeezed each cheek.

Vince's back arched as he pressed back into Cason's hands. A soft moan broke the silence. He seemed to be very sensitive; Cason would have to be careful. He let go reluctantly, his fingers tracing small paths as he stepped back.

"Go lay down on the bed on your back."

The chest lid was heavy as he pushed it up until it locked open. Vince was on his back on the deep blue comforter, watching his every move. Cason had made the chest deep on purpose. With the lid up, the man on the bed couldn't see what he was grabbing.

Looking into the neat compartments, Cason grabbed a small black leather case. From another area he grabbed the red silk cord he had coiled into a small

circle that would be perfect for Vince's wrists. A small crop with a furred end and a massage mitt joined the pile. The last thing Cason grabbed was his favorite black leather cock ring that would snap around the base of Vince's cock nice and tight, while a second attached ring would encircle his balls.

Then Cason went to a large wood armoire made of the same cherry wood as the bed. He folded back the doors of the upper area and exposed a flat screen TV. The first drawer slid open smoothly and Cason took a minute to run his fingers along the movies lined up in orderly rows before he decided on one.

Sometimes he liked his prep work done beforehand, but he'd taken extra pleasure in moving each item from his chest to the bed one by one, Vince's eyes locked on each toy as it was revealed to him. His cock pulsed when Cason unfurled the silk cord and let it pool on Vince's stomach just above his now rock hard erection. The movie was in the DVD player, his toys were lined up, and Cason was ready.

"Sit up."

Vince sat up, spilling the cord onto his groin. Cason got up on the bed and moved behind him.

"You're not getting naked, sir?" Vince asked.

Cason allowed himself to smirk since Vince couldn't see his face, but his voice didn't betray his expression. "How does that make you feel, with me dressed and you completely naked in my bed?"

His hands clenched into fists at his sides and Cason noted the tense lines of the muscles in Vince's back. "Vulnerable."

Cason leaned against the pillows, his legs spread wide around Vince. He urged the sub to lean back against him. "Good," he said in Vince's ear. That was exactly how Cason wanted him to feel.

For a minute Cason stroked Vince's arms, his touch feather-light, from his shoulders to his fingertips. They fit well together and gradually he relaxed into Cason's touch.

Reaching for the red cord, Cason spoke quietly in Vince's ear again, prompting the younger man to shiver as he used his breath to tickle his ear and neck. "I'm not going to tie you up but I am going to restrain you."

He separated the cord into the two halves. He lifted his knee and wound the cord just above it, then moved Vince's hand to the outside of his thigh where he twisted the red cord in a firm twist around his wrist and palm, before tucking the other end of the cord through the loops around his thigh. Just like that, Vince's right arm was tied to Cason's leg, leaving him vulnerable but not helpless if he really needed to get away.

Vince's breathing sped up as Cason repeated the same move on his left arm.

"There. All secure."

"Thank you, sir."

"Shh," Cason hushed him. "Unless you're using your safewords, or I ask you a question, I don't want you to speak. You can moan and cry out if you need to, but no words." He wanted the sub to focus on the sensations and what was happening during their actual scene.

Vince nodded.

"Good." Cason rewarded Vince with a small nip on his earlobe, then sucked away the light sting. The first touch of his lips on Vince's body made the responsive man gasp. Cason smiled. He was going to have such a good time coaxing every sensation possible from Vince.

His cock was a hard ridge in his pants. Cason ignored it, focusing on Vince instead. He reached for the cock ring and unsnapped it. "I think we're going to need this sooner rather than later."

He didn't palm Vince's balls immediately. His finger slid up and down the small treasure trail of soft blond hair. He splayed his fingers out wide and toyed with the slim hip bones.

Vince squirmed.

"Stay still and do not cum." There was no way Vince's cock was going to listen. It was throbbing, a pearly drop on the tip. Ready to ramp up the torture, and not wanting Vince to fail, Cason quickly put the tight leather ring around the smoothly shaven balls and excited cock. "Oh, that's pretty. Look at you." The head of Vince's prick was a deep red.

“Oh God,” Vince moaned.

“Naughty. I said no talking.”

Vince went rigid. “I—”

“If you want to keep playing, you will stop talking.” Cason put his hands on the bed and waited. Vince didn’t say anything. Incrementally, Vince relaxed back into the cradle of his body, squirming a little. Cason gritted his teeth when the man’s tight ass rubbed against his aching cock.

When Vince stopped moving, Cason picked up the remote from beside his pillow. Turning on the TV and DVD player, he started the movie he’d put in. On the screen a pale little sub with bright blue eyes and a long ponytail of dark hair was looking up at the camera. He was on the floor, a silver spreader bar separating his knees with a series of matching steel rings running up his cock, caging the slender prick.

A small gasp jolted Vince’s body when the camera panned around and showed the cuffed wrists at the small of the sub’s back and the glint of a toy stretching his ass just peeking out between his tight cheeks. The view from behind the sub also showed the Dom standing in front of him, leather pants doing little to hide a nice thick erection.

“You can just imagine what he’s going to do with that gag in his hand, can’t you?” Cason whispered in Vince’s ear. A silver ring gag matching the sub’s cock ring dangled from a leather strap in the Dom’s hand. “This is one of my favorite films. Submission can mean so much more than masochism. It’s about feeling and it’s about giving up something and getting so much in return.”

Cason was going to show Vince exactly what he meant. He used the tips of his fingers to trace the red cord trapping Vince’s wrists to his thighs, holding him still without tying him up. He moved up, tickling along his biceps and collarbones, down to the smooth chest that he’d been dying to touch since he’d made Vince strip. Those small nipples were begging to be teased.

He stroked, twisted and tweaked the small tips until they were hard and Vince was panting, his eyes locked on the now gagged sub. They both watched the Dom on the screen caress the sub’s mouth stretched around the

ring, before he untied his pants. An impressively long and thick cock popped out and the sub's eyes widened and his tongue darted out of his opened mouth.

Picking up the furred crop, Cason began with tickling strokes over those tight nipples to increase their aching sensitivity before moving to trail the soft fur up and down Vince's thighs and balls. His sub's hands clenched into fists against his legs and strained as he tried to move his hips and get more.

"Like that?"

He nodded.

"You want me to stroke your cock, don't you?"

"Yes, but—" Vince shut his mouth instantly when Cason stopped making small circles on his tight balls, lifting the crop away.

"Good. Very good," Cason said when Vince closed his mouth with a sharp snap. He rewarded his sub by trailing the crop up his leaking cock, knowing how intense the light caress would feel when every inch was tight and throbbing. Sliding the mitt onto his other hand, he used every touch to drive the man cradled against him higher and higher.

Every mindless moan took Cason's breath away. Vince was so fucking hot. He'd stopped thinking, stopped doing anything but feeling exactly what Cason wanted him to feel. If Cason's dick got any harder it was going to bust right through his pants and he couldn't help but rock against Vince.

"Watch," Cason told him after he'd been teasing for at least an hour, driving the sub deeper with each touch. Vince blinked and opened his eyes slowly and focused on the screen again.

The Dom was holding the back of his sub's head and fed him his cock through the ring gag. Slowly, he pressed forward until his pubes brushed against the stretched lips and then he stopped. The sub's throat worked as he gagged but he did not move, didn't fight, just stared up at the Dom with wide eyes and let himself be choked. "I love that," Cason said. "Love the trust in his eyes. The way he knows his Dom is going to take care of him even as he uses his throat, so he doesn't panic when he can't breathe. That is true submission."

That was what Cason wanted to see in his sub's eyes. If he ever found one that wanted to stay longer than one scene. For tonight, he wanted to show

Vince that he could trust like that, so that he'd know in the future it *was* possible to have someone take care of him. He'd teach the other man that he deserved that consideration from any Dom he chose.

Cason put down the crop and the mitt. "I want to do something to push you." He opened the black case, exposing the slender steel wands. "Do you know what these are for?"

"Yes, sir." Vince didn't tense; he stayed relaxed against him and watched as Cason pulled the three millimeter wand out of its slot by the smooth ball at its tip. The tiny rod glinted in the light.

"Have you ever played with sounds before?"

Vince shook his head.

"I'm going to show you how good it can feel to have your cock filled." He wasn't going to penetrate Vince with his cock but he needed to put something inside the gorgeous man. He dragged his mouth up Vince's shoulder, sucking and biting, until he reached his ear. "Are you ready for that?" he asked in a deep voice.

Vince shuddered. "Please." He writhed against Cason, thrusting his hips and his seeping cock into the air. "Sir. Please."

A sub begging him to be filled was the sweetest sound to Cason. His nostrils flared and he couldn't resist the urge. He nipped Vince's neck and then sucked hard, pulling up a mark right below his ear. His mark belonged on the outside of the sub's body, just like the one Cason was leaving on the inside. He could taste the salt on Vince's heated skin and he moaned.

Fuck, he wanted this more than once. He wanted to spend hours tasting every inch of Vince's body. He wanted to bite his ass, spread his cheeks and drive his cock into that tight hole. Cason pulled away and stared at the dark purple mark with pleasure for a full minute as he struggled for the control he was going to need.

He pulled the sterile Surgilube out its pocket. He slicked up the sound and then warned Vince. "You are not going to cum." His hand slid from the base of that angry erection to the tip for the first time. He let his callouses drag over the sensitive skin, knowing how much that drove subs crazy. He trailed his

fingers back down and found the snap under Vince's balls. He unsnapped the tight leather from that ring, but left the cock ring still snugly bound at the base of Vince's engorged erection.

Vince shuddered and moaned deep in his throat. His breath came fast as he panted. Vince bit his lip, tucking that soft pink bottom lip in between his white teeth as he struggled to follow Cason's orders. The way he fought to obey thrilled Cason.

"So good," Cason told him. "I'm going to make you feel so good." He squeezed more lube into his hand and began to lube up Vince's cock, using his hand to open his slit into a small hole and pushing lube in with his thumb.

Gasping, Vince pushed back hard against him, rubbing his ass back and forth against the steely ridge of Cason's cock. His voice was a deep growl when he spoke, "Oh yeah, you feel that, don't you?" Cason chuckled when Vince nodded.

He needed Vince to stay still and the way the sub's feet were shoving against the bed and his legs were writhing, he wasn't going to in that position.

"Put your feet over my legs." Vince didn't move. "Now, Vince."

Slowly, Vince put his legs over Cason's calves, opening his thighs and taking away the last ability he had to control his body's movement. He pushed more lube in Vince's slit and then took a firm grip around the head. "Deep breath now."

The slender metal rod was tiny but next to the hole in his cock, it must have looked huge to Vince, who took in a deep breath but didn't let it out. He stared down at what Cason was about to do to him, at the sound poised to slide inside his cock.

A guttural moan filled the air as Cason slid the tip into Vince's cock about an inch, then pulled it out before letting it slide in again, a little farther than the first time. Vince's groan seemed to go on forever.

Cason waited until Vince was forced to drag in a ragged breath and then he dropped the sound, burying it inches deep until the ball at the end stopped it from going any farther.

Vince cried out. His head thumped hard against Cason's shoulder as he went rigid. A deep red flush began to work its way up his neck. Knowing

Vince wasn't going to last, that he'd drawn out the scene almost to its peak, Cason moved one hand down and quickly unsnapped the cock ring as he used his thumb to set up a soft tap on the ball of the sound buried inside Vince.

"Cason!" Vince's back arched and Cason plucked the sound out and stroked as the slender man shot rope after rope of sticky white cum all over the rigid muscles of his stomach and chest. The smell of the sub's heat, his spicy scent coupled with the smell of his cum, was too much for Cason.

Lost in the moment, no longer a Dom with iron control but a man who needed that connection with the man coming apart in his hands, Cason grunted, his teeth clenched, and shuddered hard as he thrust twice against Vince's ass. He spilled inside his underwear for the first time since he'd been an oversexed youth and loved every second of the pleasure sending sharp shocks through his balls.

CHAPTER SIX

Cason unwound the red cords around his legs and Vince's wrists. He opened the drawer on his nightstand that held a small box and dropped the used toys in it for cleaning later. He had an unpleasantly sticky mess in his pants, but he wasn't ready to get up. With everything out of the way, he rolled the sub in his arms over so they were on their sides, still snuggled together. For long minutes he enjoyed the smooth muscles of Vince's back against his chest as they lay quiet, breathing together.

Vince let out the occasional shudder as he slowly came down. "Jesus." His voice was hoarse. "I have never come that hard. I think my balls turned inside out."

Chuckling, Cason nuzzled the smooth shoulder in front of him with the raspy stubble on his face. He was already addicted to making the sub in his arms feel good. Damn, he wished he got more than a single scene. He could feel the tension he'd seen and felt in the man in his arms had melted away.

"You were deep in your sub-space," Cason said. He yawned, exhausted himself from the intense feelings. He found himself stroking over Vince's hip. "You want to stay?"

Vince nodded, rubbing his face on Cason's bicep that was curled under his head. "Yeah," he said softly.

Not ready to let him go, Cason smiled, happy that Vince wanted to be with him a little longer. His thumb stroked back and forth. "Stay still, I'll be right back."

He rummaged around in the closet and pulled out two pairs of lounge pants. Going into the bathroom, he grabbed a washcloth and put it in the sink, turning the water on so it would get hot. He peeled off his pants and underwear, balling them up and throwing them in the hamper in the corner.

He cleaned up and then pulled on his pajamas. Rinsing out the washcloth he got it wet again, then grabbed the blue pair of pants he'd taken out for Vince. The slim man was stretched out on his back when Cason went back into the bedroom. His eyes were closed and a small smile turned his lips up at the corners.

Relaxed and sated. Cason loved that look on a sub. He climbed up on the bed beside Vince and proceeded to clean him up, using the soft cloth to wipe up all the cum off his chest and stomach, then gently washed his cock and balls to remove the lube.

“I got these pants for you to put on.” Cason handed the soft blue pajamas to Vince. “I’m going to go get some water.”

When he came back from the kitchen, Vince was under the covers, his blond hair spread across Cason’s favorite pillow. Crawling under the covers, he handed Vince the uncapped water. “Drink this. I don’t want you getting dehydrated.”

Vince drained the bottle, sighing when he finished. “Oh, that was good.”

Cason sat down on the edge of the bed, taking the empty bottle and tossing it in the garbage. He shut off the light and snuggled into the bed. He lay next to Vince on his side. He was surprised when the smaller man rolled over and buried his nose in his neck. “Hmm, you smell good,” Vince said.

“Thanks. How are you feeling?”

The smaller man insinuated one of his slim legs between Cason’s and then went limp. “So good, like I’m almost weightless, but I’m tired.”

It felt natural to wrap his arms around Vince and stroke his back. “I’m glad you feel good, you always should, when you come down from an intense scene.” What they’d done hadn’t been much, but he’d spent a long time teasing Vince and driving him crazy.

“Sleep.” He was tired too, but Cason’s mind was busy. He’d always taken care of his subs after a scene, but he’d never had one sleep over. There was always this sense of ending, a distinct finality when they were done that they *were* done. With Vince, he wasn’t feeling that.

There was so much he wasn’t sure of outside of his ability. He’d spent so many years knowing what he had to offer, and taking pleasure in helping the subs through the scenes they needed. He’d grown dissatisfied over the last year, restless in a way he’d never been before.

Maybe he shouldn’t have focused solely on the subs touched by the spirits that needed help. Though, thinking hard, he couldn’t pinpoint any other sub

he'd met whose center was hidden from him, even if they were happily paired with a Dom. His sex life had never been stale, but planning the scene for Vince and watching the man's face and body for the clues he needed had felt amazing. Instead of trusting his ability to tell him what to do, Cason had been completely focused on Vince; that urge to make sure he was filling the sub's needs had made it so much more immediate and stimulating.

He didn't want to give it up. Snuggling up to the man curled into his arms, he sighed. Morning was soon enough to talk with Vince. As much as he hated the power being out of his hands, he couldn't do more than ask Vince if he wanted to play again. Whatever the captivating sub answered, would be what they did.

Cason could enjoy the night though. Closing his eyes, he nuzzled his cheek against Vince's soft hair and sighed, content to hold the other man until he woke up.

The only problem with that was that when he woke up, Vince wasn't in the bed. Pushing up on his elbow and running his hand across the bed, Cason felt warmth. The toilet flushed and he slumped back onto his pillow. Vince hadn't left yet.

The lean young man sauntered back into the bedroom naked as the day he was born, rubbing his stomach and yawning. He must have left the pajama pants in the bathroom hamper.

Fuck, he was gorgeous. Cason's hard-on throbbed; he wanted that body under him, over him... any way he could get it. "Want to get some breakfast?" he asked before he could stop himself when he saw the other man pull on his bright red underwear. Vince froze mid-stretch for his pants.

He stood up slowly, turning to look at Cason. "Really?"

Sitting up, Cason nodded. "Yes. I liked talking with you before. Your roommate and my best friend are together. We're both in the lifestyle and we're going to be around each other. I thought... we could be friends."

"Just friends or friends with benefits? I mean," Vince looked down, "last night, you didn't even fuck me."

Cason stood up from the bed, the sheet slithering down his body to pool at the floor. Vince's eyes locked on to the erection jutting in front of him. "I do

want you, Vince.” There was no hiding how much, and he didn’t want to hide it anyway. “The scene last night was for you, because you needed to know that being a sub doesn’t mean pain, or not getting what you need even though I was in charge. You were too sunk into your sub-space to notice, but I came too. You’re fucking hot, you have to know that. Watching you do something that scared you, because I said we were going to do it, did it for me.

“I get off on being able to push sub’s boundaries by making them do things I want them to do. Things I know make them nervous. You didn’t need to get hurt, that’s not your kink. You got off on doing what I told you to do.” Cason smirked. “There’s a lot I still want to do to you.”

Vince’s cock responded to the command in Cason’s voice. His lips were parted and his eyes dilated, leaving just a small ring around the blown pupil. “Yes.” He stepped forward and shuddered as Cason reached out and pulled him close. “I’ve never felt like I did last night, all zoned out like that. But...?”

There was no but that Cason would allow to stop them. “What?” His hands crept down to the red underwear, slipping under them to squeeze Vince’s ass.

“You never do more than one scene with a sub.” Vince searched his face, his hands landing on Cason’s shoulders as he held on tight, digging his fingers in. “Do you want to sign a contract?”

That wasn’t where Cason wanted to go at all. Especially with Vince’s past experiences, but he did want the other man to know he was wanted. “That’s a bit more formal than I was thinking. I don’t want to own you or tie you down. I want to play with you, for as long as you want to play with me, at least until you are sure of what you need. I don’t do relationships,” Cason didn’t say it was because no one seemed to want one with him; he had some pride, and he didn’t want to scare Vince off, “actually, I don’t usually do more than a single scene with a sub.”

Vince searched his face. “Why me?”

Once again Cason wished he could tell Vince exactly why he fascinated him so much. He didn’t want the young man to think he was crazy, or scare him off, so he just shook his head. “I don’t know. You’re different. I want to get to know you better. Playing with you was fun. If we can do that too, so that

you learn what you need and how to protect yourself when you play with someone else, I'll be happy."

A pink flush spread across Vince's cheeks. "Page told you about that guy, didn't he?"

Cason nodded. "He did. That wasn't smart, and as bad as it sounded things went, you were lucky. If we do this... no Craigslist, no other Doms. Not until you know what you really need and who can give it to you."

"Is that an order?" Vince's cock was weeping against Cason's hip.

Cason pushed Vince's underwear down to his thighs and palmed his ass, pulling them together so their erections ground together, just enough precum between them to turn the rub into a slick glide. "Yes."

Licking his lips, Vince nodded. "Okay," he said. "Okay."

Cason lifted one hand and brought it down hard on one rounded cheek. His hand stung and Vince yelped. "Sir! Okay, sir."

With a firm grip on Vince's ass, not avoiding the spot that was probably stinging, Cason pushed his cock forward and ground against Vince. "You want this, you remember my rules." He pulled the smaller man against him, guiding their thrusts slow and steady, pausing to grind their cocks together. "No playing with other people. Remember your manners when we play."

Vince nodded several times, panting.

"And you talk to me. Communicate."

"Yes, sir!"

His own need ratcheting higher, Cason slid one hand between them and grabbed Vince's slender prick and his. He used a firm grip, giving them something to thrust into.

"Close," Vince panted.

Not quite there, Cason shook his head. "Not yet. Wait... wait."

A whine started in Vince's throat, but he didn't come. Cason drew it out as long as he could, enjoying the build, the sweat darkening Vince's blond hair, the way the sub's mouth was open wide as he struggled to drag in the air he needed.

Vince began to shake. Unable to hold on to the edge any longer, Cason let go. “Now!” he grunted.

The hot cum spilled over his hand as they both came hard. Cason’s toes curled against the bedroom rug under his feet. The smell of their spunk and the squelching slick sounds made him even hotter as he stroked them both hard to draw out every last burst until it was too much sensation and he had to stop.

“Fuck.” Vince leaned into him and Cason held him tight. Cason just laughed.

“Shower.”

They showered together but each washed themselves. Cason loved the smell of his shampoo and soap on Vince’s skin, though. The woody scent smelled even better on Vince than it did on him, when he was unable to resist and pulled the younger man into his arms for a quick kiss.

“Diner food okay? I know this great fifties nostalgic place a few miles away. They have horrible coffee, not that you drink it, but their omelets are delicious.”

“Sounds good to me. Want to take my car?”

Riding in that gorgeous vehicle? “Hell, yeah.”

Cason locked up behind Vince and then followed him out to his car. Vince opened his door and then closed it behind him. The car smelled of leather and a bit like axle grease.

“This is a really sweet ride. I can’t believe you restored this.”

Vince ran his hand along the dashboard. “Yeah. Definitely a labor of love. It makes me feel good, you know? And I can focus when I’m working on cars. The basic stuff is okay, but I like doing the classic restoration the most. I’ve been talking with my boss, he owns the Pearson Auto Shops, and he’s been talking about starting a custom shop in the empty storefront next door and letting me be a partner.”

Cason raised his eyebrow. “Really? That sounds like a great opportunity.”

“Yeah, it is, but I have to finish school first.” Vince grimaced. “It’s been a lot of fucking work, but I’m almost there. I’ve been taking part time classes for

business management. It's only an Associate's degree, but with that and my experience, I'm golden."

"When do you graduate?"

"Next month."

"Cool. That's the diner there." Cason pointed to the small red building on their right. The restaurant had black and white tiled floors and tons of chrome accents. There was a juke box playing oldies in one corner of the dining room area.

They took a booth with bright red benches that matched the paint job. "Wow," Vince said, looking around. "This place is pretty great. I love the nostalgia vibe."

"Yeah, I like it. They make an awesome Santa Fe omelet. They have these big biscuits instead of toast I always get too. I never need to eat lunch when I've had breakfast here."

They ordered, both of them getting juice. Once their food came, they focused on eating. "You're right, these biscuits are great."

"So, is your family going to come visit and celebrate your graduation?"

Vince shook his head, still chewing his last bite of biscuit.

"Why not?" Cason couldn't believe Vince's family wouldn't come celebrate his hard work. "You don't have to tell me, if it's a bad subject." Maybe Vince had a falling out with his family. A lot of gay men did.

Swallowing, Vince wiped his mouth with his napkin. "No, it's fine," he said. "My family's great. My parents are okay with me being gay. It was a little tense at first, my dad didn't really understand. He's sorta old school and I didn't fit his idea of a gay guy. Nothing like the horror stories you hear though. My younger brothers are only a few years younger than me, so they were young teens when I came out."

He shrugged. "They didn't care. They were going to come up but my little brother's graduation is the same weekend. Besides, airfare is expensive."

He took a drink of his orange juice. "What about you? I know you do the wood working, and you're friends with Brandon, and you have a day job."

“Well, I’m a counselor over at the college. I help kids pick career paths, advise them when they are having issues with their courses, professors, roommates... stuff like that.” Cason cut another bite of his omelet, enjoying the bite of the peppers and onions along with the smooth eggs. He reached for the Tabasco and put a bit more on the last few bites.

“My family is really close. They live in the city too. We’re Greek, so I have a big family with lots of cousins and stuff, though I’m literally the only boy and an only child. We all know everything about everyone, there’s no privacy. I am surprised my parents didn’t tell me I was gay before I told them.”

Vince laughed. “Really?”

“Yeah. My dad married outside the community though, so my mom and my grandma are Southerners, born and bred for generations back to the Civil War. I learned home cooking from Grandma, she made fried chicken that was to die for and the biscuit recipe I finally cajoled out of her is even better than the diner’s.”

“So if your family knows everything, do they know about,” Vince waved his hand between them, “this sort of thing?”

“That I’m a Dom?” Cason asked. Vince nodded. “Yeah. It’s not the subject of dinner conversation, but I’m not ashamed of what I do in my life, or my bedroom.”

Vince leaned back in his seat. “That’s really cool.”

Cason shrugged. “No one can make me feel bad about my desires unless I let them. I know what I like, and as long as my partner is enjoying himself too, it’s all good. Kink comes in all flavors.”

A slow smile crawled across Vince’s face. “You are definitely to my taste.”

That sent a shot of lust to Cason’s cock. He groaned. “I’m so not a teenager anymore.”

Vince burst out laughing. “Okay,” he said slowly. “I have no idea what you mean by that.”

Cason set his fork down, completely full, and wishing he did have the libido of a teenager. Vince was hot, but when he laughed... he was fucking

gorgeous. “You make me want to go right back home to play some more but I need a bit more time than that.”

Vince ducked his head a little, his cheeks pink. The mix of outgoing and shy turned Cason on. Ideas of things he could do to Vince next time rolled through his mind. Without his ability to guide him, Cason intended to plan out every aspect of their scenes together meticulously.

“I’d love to go back to your place but I have to do laundry today and study.”

Disappointment rolled through Cason but he had his own things to get done before he had to go back to work. Brandon’s order wasn’t the only one he had. As much as he wanted to spend all his time with Vince, he had to be realistic.

Coming on too strong could spook Vince. He’d had his life taken over by his last boyfriend; Cason didn’t want him to worry that he would do that to him too. They were not dating; they were friends. Getting attached would be bad for Cason when Vince moved on; he had to protect himself too.

He paid for breakfast. They stepped outside and ran for the car. It was pouring down rain and they were both soaked by the time they were inside.

“Damn.” Cason wiped at his face. “I hope we’re not damaging your seats.”

Vince reached into the backseat and grabbed a towel. “Here. The seats will be fine, they’re protected ’cause it rains too damn much not to have them sealed.”

They had to let the car run for a few minutes to de-fog the windows. “Do you have your phone?” Cason asked. “I need your number.”

“Yeah.” Vince pulled it out and they exchanged numbers. Cason leaned close to Vince when he stopped in front of Cason’s house, his thumb rubbing against Vince’s cheek. “Thank you,” Vince said when he looked up into Cason’s eyes. “I... I had a really good time.”

Cason smiled. “Me too. I’m really glad you agreed to spend more time with me.” He leaned forward the last few inches and finally took those lips with his own. Cason kept it simple, rubbing his lips side to side just a little to taste every inch, flicking lightly with the tip of his tongue.

Vince let him explore. Cason nipped him a little before he pulled back. Damn, just kissed was almost as good a look on the blond man as the blissed out expression he got post orgasm.

“I’ll talk to you later, okay?”

Vince licked his lip and Cason almost kissed him again. Almost. He put his hand on the door handle.

“Bye.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

Vince was a texter. Cason kept his phone on vibrate during office hours, but during breaks between appointments he'd text back and forth with the younger man. They talked about the newest junker motorcycle Vince had picked up, what Cason was cooking for dinner, their tastes in music, movies, and books among a ton of other things.

It was probably one of the strangest ways Cason had ever gotten to know a friend or a submissive. But it fit the young man who only seemed to sit still and focus when he was in the middle of a scene.

“What are you grinning about?” Tiffany asked. She was sitting on the couch he kept in the corner of his office while they ate their lunches. Her swollen ankles were propped up on the coffee table.

“Oh.” Cason dropped his phone in his lap and picked up his chopsticks. “Not much. Just made plans to have dinner with a new friend tomorrow night.”

Balancing her take out box on her rounded stomach, Tiffany gave him a look. “A friend... or a *boyfriend*?” She gave him a lecherous leer.

“Oh, Gods. Don't do that. That's too weird from a hugely pregnant woman.” Cason ducked when she threw her fortune cookie at him. “Ha! Missed me.”

“I want my cookie, give it back.” Wanting to avoid the chopsticks that would inevitably sail his way if he didn't, Cason got up and grabbed the cookie off the floor. He tossed it on the couch next to Tiffany and then sat back down.

“Right now we're just friends. Sort of. It's a little complicated.”

Tiffany laughed. “Okay. Enough said. Hey, I wanted to tell you my mother-in-law saw that gorgeous inlay work you did on the head of the crib and wants to order some tables from you.”

Cason perked up. He loved doing inlay, though it was meticulous work that demanded a lot of time and attention. “Really? That's great! Thanks.”

“Thank you for the gorgeous crib. Everyone at my shower loved it. My mother-in-law is the pickiest woman ever but she thought the shading you used was beautiful, so I gave her your card.” Tiffany closed up the take out box and stuck it in the bag next to her. She opened her cookie wrapper, then took out the tiny scrap of paper sticking out of one edge. “Confucius says...” she squinted at the writing, “you will get your greatest dream today.” Snorting, she rubbed her belly. “Yeah, right.”

“You shouldn’t scoff at your fortune,” Cason said. “Sometimes there is more to living than what everyone can see.” Cason smiled, remembering the first time his pappous had said that very same thing to him.

Tiffany started to struggle up off the couch, and Cason got up to help her. “Well, my greatest dream is to get this kid out of me. I’m due next week but I swear I should’ve popped a month ago.”

Cason gave her a hug. “Well, you never know. Keep your phone handy, you just might have to call the hubby to meet you at the hospital.”

Rolling her eyes, Tiffany shook her head. “Okay, weirdo. I’ll see you later, okay? And eventually I will find out about your *sort-of* friend.”

She’d try. Waddling slowly, Tiffany left for her office just down the hall. Cason cleaned up the stuff from their lunch and then sat down at his desk. He had a date to plan.

Tiffany didn’t have her baby that day, but she went into labor during the night. Cason found out when he went to work the next day from the gossips in the staff lounge at the administrative offices. He chipped in to send her some flowers and balloons, plus some sort of giant basket of diapers or something the women were excited about.

Maybe he’d make her a set of baby blocks.

All day, Cason put up with kids coming into his office to whine about the classes they’d thought they could take, or didn’t want to take any more. He did have one interesting kid. His center was a warm golden glow, like he’d been touched by Ananke, Goddess of Fate. He knew what he wanted to do, which was add classes. It would overload him, but he was so sure that Cason didn’t argue.

Sitting back in his chair after he left, Cason fiddled with a pen. Young Dante seemed to know exactly what path he was taking. Would another counselor, not having Cason's ability, have denied his request to help him get into the classes?

That subject kept Cason's mind busy the whole way home. He turned automatically, not really paying attention to where he was driving. It had been a long time since he questioned his abilities, and how his life, and the lives of everyone he'd helped, would be different if he didn't have a daimon ancestor. Cason was lucky; usually he knew exactly what to do and could be sure he was right. Having to make choices that affected both him and Vince without that safety net his ability gave him was an eye opener.

Cason pulled up to his house. He sat for a minute in the garage. He was going on a date. With Vince. He grinned and was out of the car and rushing inside. A quick once over with the electric razor took away the stubble, leaving his cheeks smooth and soft, and he splashed on some cologne. Nothing said boring like his work clothes, so he changed into a pair of black jeans but kept the blue pinstripe shirt. He rolled up his sleeves.

"Ready," he told his reflection.

Vince's apartment was chaotic when Cason pulled up. Page's hollering could be heard through the door and no one answered the first time he knocked. He gave the door a good pounding, and it was jerked open.

"What?"

Cason narrowed his eyes. The guy standing in front of him was dressed in a ragged pair of jeans, held up by an equally dubious belt and nothing else. He slouched against the door and scratched at his greasy looking hair.

"I'm here for Vince."

The guy turned around. "Vince!" he shouted over Page's continued bitching.

It was cold outside so Cason stepped in and shut the door, even though he hadn't been invited. Page appeared in the doorway to the kitchen, a towel in

his hands. “—can’t keep your part of the fucking deal you can goddamned move out already, Jay. I’m not putting up with this shit anymore.”

He stopped yelling when he saw Cason standing in the entry.

“Oh, hey Cason. Sorry about that, Jay’s being a disgusting pig. You looking for Vince?”

Cason nodded. “Yeah. He here?”

“Yeah. I think he disappeared into the shower about five minutes ago. He was late getting home.” He tossed the towel that had been folded over his shoulder into the kitchen. “Come on in and sit down.” Page led the way to an old couch that sagged in the middle. Cason carefully sat on a corner cushion. It actually was pretty comfortable, though getting up and out of it might be a challenge.

“So where are you guys going tonight?” Page sat cross legged on the couch facing him.

“Dinner. I was thinking of hitting Grillmaster for some steaks.”

Page grinned. “Good choice, red meat always goes over well.” He winked. “So, you bringing my roomie home after that, or are you keeping him out all night having *fun*?”

“Wouldn’t you like to know?” Cason laughed at Page’s exaggerated disappointment when he wouldn’t give him any information about his plans. The guy was a shameless pervert.

“You’re not fun. Brandon is spending the weekend at his sister’s watching her kids so I’m here, all alone, with no one to have fun with. You could at least give me something to entertain me!”

Cason folded his arms across his chest. “Nope.”

“Stop being such a nosy ass, Page,” Vince said as he opened the bathroom door. Steam poured out behind him as he stepped out in just a towel. Cason licked his lips. Damn. The man was hot, especially all shiny and wet just out of the shower, with his hair slicked back showing off the clean lines of his face and those amazing eyes.

“Hey.” He gave Cason a tight smile, his hand clenched on his towel. “Sorry, I got held up at the garage helping a friend.”

“Hey back,” Cason said. “Don’t worry about it. We didn’t have reservations so we have plenty of time.”

Vince relaxed at Cason’s casual tone. His shoulders dropped and his smile grew when Cason licked his lips again. He couldn’t help it; all that sleek skin made him want to mark it something fierce.

“Okay. I’ll be right out.”

Cason finally managed to look away after Vince shut his door. Page was smirking at him. “Oh man, you have it bad for our little Vince.”

Cason shrugged one shoulder. “Maybe.” He did and he knew it. He was not letting Page know it, though. He’d been watching the sexy blond for months. Every time they’d talked Cason had learned something new that made Vince even more appealing.

He had a lot of ideas about what they could do, if Vince was up for playing after dinner. Those soft, hairless balls hadn’t had much attention the first time they’d done a scene and then there was that little surprise behind them that Cason hadn’t even gotten to play with.

Dinner first though.

Vince came out dressed in jeans and a white T-shirt with a shiny black leather jacket.

“You look great,” Cason said. He struggled up out of the couch, or he tried to. Vince came over and gave him a hand up, tugging him out of the couch’s depths.

“Thanks. Sorry about the couch. It’s awesome to sit on but getting up... not so much.”

Cason used his grip on Vince’s wrist to reel the smaller man in. “C’mere.” He leaned down and captured those enticing lips, licking at them until Vince opened his mouth. Cason dipped his tongue in briefly, rubbing it against Vince’s in a slight tease. “Cinnamon toothpaste,” he said, “I like it.”

Vince grinned. “Want another taste?” His lips were parted and he was staring up at Cason.

“Maybe later,” Cason said when Page groaned. He looked over. “What, brat?”

“Why did Brandon have to go away this weekend?” He fanned himself with one hand. “You guys are too hot for your own good. Or my own good.”

Cason knew that Brandon didn't like his subs touching themselves so that slight bulge he could see under Page's sweats was probably going to drive him crazy but not get any attention at all. He snickered.

“You'll survive.”

“Yeah,” Vince said as he grabbed his wallet off the coffee table along with his keys. “Go check out the mess in the kitchen Jay left for you again. You'll be unhappy in an instant.”

Page scowled. “Thanks a lot. Just what I needed. If Jay's not here when you get home give yourself some plausible deniability, don't look in the dumpster out back.” He got up from the couch and stalked back toward the kitchen. “Have fun you guys.” He paused in the doorway and muttered under his breath, his hands clenching at his sides.

“Do I want to look in there?” Cason asked. Page actually appeared mad, which was strange for the happy, though bratty, man.

Shaking his head, Vince led him toward the door. “Nope. Not unless you're sure you have a stomach of steel or don't really plan on eating dinner tonight.”

Cason didn't turn his head, determinedly not looking into the kitchen as they walked out. He loved the steak at Grillmaster and wasn't going to risk it.

Dinner was great; they ate and chatted while they devoured thick steaks and crisp steamed vegetables.

“You look tired.” Cason had wanted to take the smaller man home to play, but Vince didn't really look up to it.

“Yeah, I'm sorry. I planned to get off early and take a nap before we went out. We've been swamped at the garage lately, plus I've been putting a lot of hours into this motorcycle restoration job. I'm supposed to have it done by Monday. Then Migg needed some help.”

Cason had ordered a cup of coffee once his meal was finished. He toyed with one of the peanuts from the bowl in the middle of the table. He wasn't

hungry, but he enjoyed the salt and the bitter flavor of the coffee combination. “Who’s Migg?” he asked.

Vince’s shoulders hunched up and he glanced down. “He’s just a friend,” he said slowly.

“Oh, I’ve never heard you mention him.” Cason cracked the shell and picked out one of the peanuts. “What was wrong? Nothing serious, I hope.”

“No.” Vince shook his head. His shoulders relaxed. “He works at the coffee shop across the street from the garage. He’s also a drummer in an indie band. He has a big kit, so he drives this van, but the damn thing is held together by two rubber bands and a whole mess of duct tape, I swear. It wouldn’t start and it took me a few hours of calling around to find the right part and get it installed so he could make his gig tonight.”

Cason smiled. “Sounds like he’s lucky to have you as a friend. Have you heard him play? If he’s any good, maybe we could go see his band together sometime. I like music, as long as it’s not country.”

Vince raised his eyebrows. “You want to meet him?”

“Well, he’s your friend, right? I already know Page and I like him. Can’t say as I really thought much of your other roommate, but I don’t know him, so I’m trying not to judge.” Cason hadn’t forgotten what Page had told him about his ex-boyfriend, or full time Dom, whatever he was.

“I’m not like the other assholes you’ve been around,” Cason said. He didn’t really want to bring up the bastard ex Vince had left behind, but he did want Vince to realize that not all Doms were like that. “A good Dom doesn’t use your relationship to isolate you from your friends and your life. You are not a slave, Vince, and you don’t want to be. I’d never ask that of you while we’re doing scenes, outside of them you’re still your own person. I don’t want to own you, I want to be your friend.”

“So, we’re not going back to your place tonight?” Vince slowly crushed one of the peanut shells Cason had left on the table between them. He didn’t look up. “I was surprised by dinner but I still thought...” He shrugged one shoulder. Damn. He’d been making progress during dinner, meeting Cason’s eyes and talking up a storm but now he was back to the self-effacing

techniques Cason really disliked. He fidgeted nearly constantly, but Cason was growing used to that.

“Look up, Vince,” Cason ordered. “Look at me.” He waited for Vince to lift his head and let him see those wide gray-blue eyes. Vince’s lower lip was red where he’d bitten it. “I want to take you home with me and drive you completely crazy. Never doubt that. But you are tired and it sounds like you have to work tomorrow.”

Vince swallowed, his Adam’s apple bobbing. “I want to go back to your place.”

The pleasure Cason got from that one statement was out of proportion for what they were doing and he knew it. He didn’t care. He pushed his cup away, stuck some cash to cover dinner for their bill in the black folder, and then stood up.

“Come on.” They weren’t going to waste another minute in public when being together in private would be so much more fun. He held out his hand and Vince took it, following him out of the restaurant and into the parking lot.

Unable to wait, Cason stopped beside his car. He didn’t let go of Vince’s hand, using his grip to pull it behind the slim back as he trapped Vince against the cold metal. He ran his other hand along Vince’s jaw, rubbing the smooth skin. Holding him by the back of the neck, he leaned down to the already parted lips, a cloud of warm breath between them.

So close, but he didn’t kiss him. Cason skimmed his lips just above Vince’s jaw to his ear. “When I get you home,” he whispered, “I’m going to strip you naked and tease your balls until you feel like they are going to explode.”

Vince shuddered.

“You want that? I was thinking we’d try out my weights this time.”

This time Vince whimpered. He rocked his hips forward against Cason’s thigh. The hard pressure of his erection made Cason fight back an answering thrust. “And this time I’m going to play with that sweet little ring you have hidden down there too.”

“Oh, fuck.” The breathless whine, the same noise Vince had made when he

was so close to coming each time Cason took him to the edge, made him back off.

“Not yet,” Cason said. He grinned at the pain on Vince’s face, the impatient frown. They were quiet on the way to Cason’s house, which was luckily only a few miles away from Grillmaster. The way Vince was practically simmering in the passenger seat had Cason feeling smug and *very* turned on.

He’d managed to keep their last scene about Vince but then he’d slept next to the man. They were getting to know each other, and Cason liked what he was finding out about the other man so far, but Vince wasn’t his to keep. Cason had a purpose in life, to help people, and he did it best through dominating subs. He had to try and keep some distance.

Their first scene had rocked the boundaries he’d managed to erect when he’d realized that subs needed him, but never more than one night. Cason loved the fact that Vince wanted more from him, but it wasn’t about him, not really. It was about Vince learning how he needed to submit so he would know the right type of Dom to choose in the future when they went back to just friends.

Cason could do that for Vince. He’d make sure he enjoyed every second of it, and deal with what came after when it happened.

CHAPTER EIGHT

When he pulled into the garage, Cason turned off the engine and closed the door. Vince was right on his heels as they walked inside. Cason studied him, loving the slightly dangerous edge the leather jacket gave him. He wanted to see Vince in just that jacket.

Vince's eyes widened. "What?" he asked.

Cason winked. "An idea came to me. You trust me, right?"

Vince nodded. Warmth curled in Cason's chest and he smiled at the nervous man, pleased that they'd made enough of a connection for Vince to have enough faith in him to make those first steps into trusting him fully. He'd been worried that not using his ability would affect their scenes together, but maybe he needed to trust himself more.

"You remember your safewords?"

"Cardinal to slow down. Finch to stop everything." Vince had been biting his bottom lip again, turning it puffy already.

"Good. Let's go to my playroom this time."

He led the way to the playroom, opening the door and then stepping aside so Vince could see everything. It wasn't big but held several exquisite pieces of furniture he'd made himself. A cross was against one wall, the wood stained dark. By contrast the spanking bench was light wood, almost white, with black leather buckles and pad on top.

"I want you here tonight." Cason had moved over by the bench, waiting for the sub's eyes to finish traveling across everything in the room and move back to him. He popped up the kneeling bench from its folded position. "I designed this myself and it'll be perfect for what I want to do." He paused, watching the smaller man, hoping he'd say yes. "I want to buckle you down tonight. Do you trust me enough to let me do that?"

Vince opened his mouth, then cleared his throat. "Yes... yes, sir."

That same pleasure went through Cason. He peeled off his jacket, already warming up. "Strip down to your underwear, but then put your jacket back on."

Grinning, Vince did as he was told. Cason wondered what the look was for, but he was too busy watching that smooth chest being exposed to wonder for long. When Vince dropped his jeans, Cason inhaled a deep breath.

“The blue does look very good on you.” His voice was deep as he struggled to control his desire.

Vince turned in a circle, then leaned back against the wall, one thumb tucked into the waistband and his jacket falling off one shoulder. “You like them? They’re new.” He’d gone out and bought new underwear, and then worn them hoping they’d be coming back to his house. Cason was surprised, but knowing Vince had picked them out and worn them, just for him, was a huge turn on.

He licked his lips slowly; Vince’s eyes locked on his face.

“They look great, especially with that jacket.” Fuck. Vince was one hot man as he posed, his briefs beginning to bulge, just for Cason. “Come here.” Too bad he had to take them off, but what he wanted was hidden behind the blue, black, and white dyed fabric.

Cason rubbed his hands lightly across Vince’s cock, then over his slim hips and back to his ass. The cotton was soft. “Hmm... they feel nice too. Another time we’ll play with these on,” he said. Hooking his fingers into the waistband, Cason squatted as he pulled them down so Vince could stand naked in just his jacket. That slim cock bobbed in front of his face, finally freed.

Vince’s eyes fluttered shut as Cason blew hot air across the tip. He stroked his hands up Vince’s thighs, then guided him to kneel on the bench. He considered leaving the jacket on, but he wanted to see the muscles in Vince’s back ripple and arch as Cason played with his body. Easing it off, he set it aside, then positioned Vince onto the top of the bench.

“Remember your words,” he said when Vince tugged at the thick black leather wrist cuffs once Cason buckled them, trying to lift his chest up off the table.

“Just... testing them, sir.” Vince settled against the soft pad on the pale wood. He took a deep breath. “Feels safe. I trust you,” he said the last bit in a breathy voice as Cason spread his knees farther apart, exposing his ass and

balls. That Vince had said he trusted Cason sent a warm thrill through him as he squeezed one tight cheek.

“Good.”

Cason had to step back and just look for a minute. All Vince’s soft bronze skin over sleek muscles was exposed to the air, pebbling slightly against a faint current of air moving around the room. The skin on his balls was darker than the surrounding skin, the same light brown as his nipples. Just behind those balls was a silver ring. He decided not to tease before he got started; Cason wanted to touch so badly.

Before leaving to pick up Vince, Cason had set out a few things. Picking up the ball stretcher, he showed Vince the rainbow colored metal ring.

“This is one of my favorite ball stretcher rings,” Cason said. “It’s so pretty, I bet it’s going to look amazing around your balls.”

Vince turned his head to see it, his eyes widening. He licked his lips.

“Do you like it?” Cason asked.

“Yes, sir. Just... worried about how it’s going to fit and how heavy it is.”

Cason opened the metal ring. “It weighs just enough. I’m going to put this around your balls, just above them, and then screw it shut. It won’t come off until I’m good and ready.” He traced a finger over extra loops on either side. “Then, from these, I’m going to put some weights.”

He loved the way Vince’s breathing picked up and his muscles flexed. He knew the idea was making the sub nervous, but he didn’t say his safe words. The ring looked thick, but he’d picked a hollow one, not one made from solid steel. Cason didn’t want to start too fast, with too much weight, or it would be too painful.

He didn’t tell Vince that, though.

Vince had closed his knees and Cason spread them farther apart again. “Don’t move your legs.” He trailed his fingers up and down Vince’s thighs, inching closer on each pass to his goal. Letting his pinkie graze the wrinkled sack on the next stroke upwards, Cason smirked when Vince groaned.

He was so responsive. Finally he began stroking Vince’s balls, pulling them down and then watching them flex upwards when he let them go.

Closing his hand around the loose sack, Cason tugged downward and then froze. Vince's back arched and his hands clenched in fists.

"You're going to like this so much," Cason promised him. He closed the beautifully colored metal around the stretched skin and then let go of Vince's balls. It took two hands to screw the rainbow ring closed. "Ready?"

Vince nodded.

"I want to hear you."

"Yes, I'm ready." Vince's body was tense but he was taking deep breaths and staying calm. Cason used one hand to stroke his lower back and waited just until Vince had let out all his air, then dropped the ring.

He wasn't the one with the stretcher on his balls, but still, Cason shuddered when Vince gasped in a huge breath and let it out in a shaky groan.

"Fuck yeah." He gave Vince a second to get used to the way the metal ring snuggled against his balls and pulled them low, stretching his sack. The skin wasn't very tight yet, but when he added the weights...

"This is going to look amazing."

The two tear drop shaped weights matched the ring, the metal colored with all the hues of the rainbow. They were tiny, just an ounce apiece, but he had others in the set that got bigger and heavier. He licked his lips. "I can't decide... should I put these on one at a time or at the same time?" He leaned over, heat already rising from the sub to warm his lips, as he kissed the slender neck from shoulder to ear.

He nipped at the soft lobe, then sucked the sting away. "What do you think, hmm? Do want me to prolong this and add the weights to your balls slowly, one at a time so you can feel them stretch gradually, or do you want it all at once?"

"Wh-Whatever you want, sir."

Stroking one hand down the stretched skin, Cason tugged on the ring. "Are you sure you want me to decide?"

"Yes! Please!"

He stood up straight. His hands were sure as he threaded the chains of the weights through both loops, holding the weighted tear drops in the palms of

his hands. Cason watched intently, his own cock hard in his jeans waiting for the right moment...

He dropped the weights and let them swing free.

“Fuck!” Vince cried out. He shuddered and strained at the cuffs holding him down, his back arching and making the weights sway back and forth. “Oh God!”

Cason stood back and watched. He took a mental picture, the perfect image of Vince, his head up, back arched, with his balls stretched tight by the beautiful rainbow metal decorating his sack. Then he began to make all those beautiful lean muscles dance.

He stroked up and down the stretched skin with his fingers, then inched up to Vince’s ass, squeezing and kneading the firm muscles. Vince would groan and move with him, then hiss and try to stay still. Cason enjoyed making him writhe under his hands.

The only way he managed to keep control over his cock was to keep his pants on. He could feel the front of his pants getting wet as his cock leaked into his boxer briefs. Watching Vince’s hole flex, Cason couldn’t resist getting inside him somehow. He toyed with the piercing, tugging on it, while he decided what he was going to do.

Stopping to get the lube would ruin the momentum as he drove Vince toward his orgasm. He squatted down instead. A brief bite of pain hit him as his cock twisted in his underwear. He used one hand, palming his stiff erection and shoving it into a better position.

Cason leaned in and blew air against Vince’s balls, then used his tongue to draw wet circles over them, pulling and nipping at the tight skin.

“Oh. Oh, fuck.” Vince grunted and his thighs trembled. The weights shivered and began to swing. Cason chuckled and let the vibration tickle the sensitive orbs. He swept the flat of his tongue up and over the weighted ball ring and along Vince’s perineum to the sweet little ring piercing decorating the smooth flesh. He stuck his tongue through the silver ring and tugged gently.

He took the small chain he hadn’t shown Vince and fed it through the hoop with small clinking noises. Vince’s head popped up and he tried to look back. Sweat trickled down his sides. To increase the sensations, he clipped the chain

to the weights. He tapped them, making them sway and pull on the chain through the ring in Vince's guiche.

"Cason! Oh..." Vince shuddered. "Please!" Deciding to take mercy on him, Cason leaned forward, watching that dark pucker flexing like it was begging to be tortured.

Vince's voice rose as he descended into incoherent noises, no longer able to talk as Cason began to rim him with all the skill he possessed. He licked, sucked, and thrust with his tongue until the muscles loosened. The weights danced as Vince moved constantly, unable to stay still. Wetting one finger, Cason probed the slick circle and then sank in to his first knuckle.

Soft, hot flesh surrounded his finger and then he pulled back, circling and then sinking back in again, this time all the way down. He did that over and over until Vince was rocking against him, clearly lost in the sensations Cason was giving him. Cason sucked on the back of Vince's balls, drawing up a mark on the stretched flesh.

"Please," Vince cried when Cason began tapping on his prostate, just barely nudging the sensitive bundle of nerves. Teasingly, he slowed his thrusts, pushing the sub under his hands beyond sensation into pure need to come.

The next time he thrust in, Cason pegged his prostate firmly. Instead of letting up and sliding his finger back out, he thrust hard in small circles against the smooth bundle of nerves. Vince shoved back as far as his bonds would let him, slamming against Cason's hand and shuddering as he spilled hot cum all over the bench under him.

Cason drew his orgasm out, massaging Vince's prostate until the muscles stopped clenching and clinging to his finger with every pulse of cum. He pulled out slowly, but Vince groaned anyway. His hole winked and flexed as he slumped in his bonds.

Jerkily, Cason undid his pants and shoved them and his underwear down his thighs, pulling out his cock and balls. The shaft was rigid, thick and hard, throbbing and aching for release. With one hand Cason tugged on his balls and he stroked from base to tip, twisting his wrist as he roughly massaged the head

of his cock. His hips flexed, driving hard against Vince's thighs, until the heat building inside exploded, sending shot after shot of Cason's thick cum splattering against Vince's ass and lower back.

Falling forward, Cason caught himself on one hand, his chest against Vince's bare back. They lay there for a few minutes, recovering together. Forcing himself up, Cason gathered the dangling weights into his hand before he unhooked all the chains.

Vince groaned as the weight on his balls eased. Using the wrench he'd set close by, Cason unscrewed the ball ring and took it off. He didn't let Vince out of the restraints yet. He used a soft hand towel to clean up the mess he'd made, then ran his hands along the slim back, massaging his shoulders and arms.

"Just let your arms dangle when I unbuckle them."

"Hmm... okay." Vince was a limp puddle. Cason smiled softly.

Cason slowly undid the wrist cuffs, rubbing at the slightly red flesh where Vince had pulled against them. The wide black leather straps, butter soft on the inside, wouldn't leave marks for very long. He appreciated the leftover marks of what Vince had allowed him to do while they lasted, stroking the heated flesh.

Slowly, he eased Vince up off the bench until he was standing. Loose limbed, with shaking legs, Vince leaned back against Cason. He could tell Vince was just about blissed out of his mind and his own orgasm had left him tired.

"Come to bed with me?" Before he'd have asked if the sub wanted him to call him a cab, after they eased down from the high of the scene on the couch in the living room. Cason wanted to sleep next to Vince again; he wanted the slim man in his arms, safe and warm the whole night.

Vince nodded.

Cason tucked him into bed, then grabbed a bottle of water. He made Vince drink some of the cool fluid to ease his throat and keep him from getting dehydrated and then finished off the bottle. He stuck it on the nightstand, quickly stripped and left his clothes on the floor beside the bed.

Sliding beneath the covers, Cason grabbed his clock. "What time do you

have to get up?” Cason didn’t want to set the alarm, knowing that Vince would be leaving his bed when it went off, but he knew the other man had to work.

“Five. Five-thirty if you’ll drive me.”

Cason punched in the time and turned on the switch on the side of his clock. “Five-thirty it is.” He lay down and Vince wormed across the sheets until he was tucked against Cason’s chest. His cheek pressed against Cason’s heart.

Wrapping one arm around Vince’s back, Cason moved until their legs were tangled together and they couldn’t get any closer. He sighed and relaxed into sleep.

CHAPTER NINE

Cason dropped Vince off and then went home. He sat in his chair in the living room with a cup of coffee and watched the news. His mind wasn't really on the forecast for the next week but it provided some badly needed noise outside of his own head.

His thoughts were swirling so fast, so many things running through his mind, that Cason could barely figure out what was bothering him. Finally, he narrowed it down to a single issue; he was disturbed by his continued inability to see inside Vince, even though the man was a sub who so clearly was seeking his center.

Maybe his grandpa would know what was going on with his abilities. Cason was close to his family, but his grandparents most of all. His father had more of the daimon blood than Cason did, but he'd never really accepted it. The family's affinity to connect with other people and precipitate that singular crisis of conscience people who came across their path needed made him uncomfortable

But Cason had spent long summers with his grandparents, working in the kitchen with his grandma on his mom's side. He'd learned southern cooking, and how to woo a man with the faint hint of an accent and manners that weren't seen all that often in the present era.

When visiting his father's parents, Cason learned how to make authentic Greek food... and how to use his ability that grew after he finally hit puberty. He'd never asked his grandpa why he accepted Cason's unique route to helping others, but he often wondered if his grandpa could see his center and was helping him find his path his own way.

Glancing at the clock, Cason picked up the phone. Early risers, he knew his grandparents would be up, even if they weren't running the restaurant anymore.

"Hello?"

"Hi, Gigia. How are you?"

“Oh, these old bones are still moving.” Cason tucked the phone against his shoulder. “Never mind that. It’s been so long since you called.” Two weeks. He’d called them just two weeks before. “How are you doing, Casonaki mou?”

He smiled at being called her little Cason, even though he was nearly thirty. “I’m good, Gigia. Busy helping all the indecisive college students figure out what curriculum best fits their career path. What’s been going on in the family?”

That question sent her off in a long ramble on the current status of his cousin Nikki’s pregnancy, Rhea’s latest boyfriend, and the shameful grades Nikita had brought home in English. Cason only listened superficially; he’d already heard a lot of this when he spoke with his parents.

“—which is ridiculous because she speaks English every day. That girl needs to learn how to apply herself.”

Cason braced himself as the litany ran down. If he told his grandma he’d met someone, everyone in his family would know about Vince by the end of the day. But they weren’t really more than friends, even if Cason knew he wanted more, that didn’t mean Vince did, or would in the future.

“And when are you coming over for dinner?”

“Oh. Soon, I hope. Things have been a little busy lately.”

“Too busy to come see your gigia and pappous? We all have a finite time on this earth and yet you can’t take an evening to visit your family?”

Cason took the guilt bullet with a wince. “I’m sorry.”

“Come to dinner and I’ll forgive you.” She knew she had him, and Cason knew she knew it too. “How about this Sunday?”

Cason turned his mug on his knee. “Okay, Gigia. I’ll be there for dinner with the family. Speaking of Pappous, is he there?” he asked casually.

He waited while she called his grandpa to the phone. “All right, here he is. Be here early next week and we’ll have time to chat.” He knew that meant she knew he had a specific reason to speak with his grandpa, and she’d drag it out of him if she had to. His grandma was fierce about protecting her family.

“Hey there Cason.” His grandpa’s voice was warm and it loosened the knot in Cason’s stomach just hearing it.

“Hi Pappous. I was hoping we could talk, if you have a few minutes.”

Cason took a sip of his coffee and made a face at the cold bitterness. He set it on the coffee table.

“Of course, Cason. Just let me go into the office.” There was a lot that other members of their family didn’t understand. Cason’s grandpa had more of the ability passed down through their family line than Cason did. Whenever he had a problem, he knew his grandpa could help him understand his ability; he hoped he still could.

“I’m assuming this has something to do with a man who you cannot help?”

“How did you know, Pappous?” Cason sank back in his chair.

His grandpa laughed. “Oh, I recognize the signs. You have been quite restless lately.”

“What? Am I on my path to my center?” Feeling incomplete had always bothered Cason. He knew what he wanted, but he’d never been able to find it. The lack of balance in himself was probably what drove him to help others, but now... he was tired of being left alone. Humans were meant to connect with each other and he’d never felt more disconnected.

“You know I cannot tell you that. Why don’t you tell me what’s going on?”

Cason explained everything he’d been through. He started with seeing Vince for the first time and learning about the younger man’s ex, Vince’s unhappiness after every scene growing every time Cason saw him. He ended with his need to be close to Vince, even though he couldn’t see the spirits’ influence on him, or how to help him reach his center through the paths shown to him.

“Hmm, you know...” Cason heard the loud thud of a book hit the desk, “your situation reminds me of something I once read in my pappous’ journal. Give me a few minutes, this book is pretty big.” Cason could hear him turning the thick homemade pages in the leather-bound volume. Cason couldn’t read Greek, so he’d never been able to read it himself, but during his teen years they’d spend several hours each week going through the information passed down by Procopio men from the very first daimon of their line, Cason’s great-great-grandpa, and down to them.

“Yes... yes. Just as I thought.”

“What did you find out?” Cason found himself leaning forward in his chair. He needed to know something, anything, that would help him decide what to do. He was getting too close to Vince to survive letting him go, and they’d only had two full scenes together.

“I believe this boy’s ex you spoke of is either a daimon, or the descendant of one.”

Cason almost dropped the phone. “What?”

“I would guess it is a descendant. A full daimon would not have let him go before he completely destroyed him. It sounds like your boy has some deep scars from the man he was with. That could be what is obscuring your ability to see his center. That and...”

“And what, Pappous?” Cason asked through clenched teeth when he didn’t finish his sentence. This entire conversation had him on edge; sitting in his chair was going to drive him crazy.

Cason got up and paced the living room. He knew about the existence of other daimons, theoretically at least, but that one of them had used his abilities to try and break Vince, on purpose, sent rage flashing through him. If he ever came across the asshole...

His grandpa sighed. “I’m not sure, and I don’t want to speak out of turn and disrupt your path. I will say one thing. It is impossible to escape from what is destined.”

Cason frowned. “What does that mean? Vince is destined not be able to find his center because of the damage already done to him, which is why I can’t see the influences of the spirits on him? Or, if I’m able to help him even though I can’t see the spirits’ influences, I’m destined to lose him when he walks away from me like every other man I’ve been with?”

“I... can’t say. I’m sorry I can’t help you more, Casonaki. I really am.”

Cason rubbed his forehead. He leaned against the chilly glass of the front window, trying to cool his anger. “No, don’t feel bad, Pappous. I know more than I did before. It helps to know why my ability was suddenly defective. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

Cason turned around and looked at the clock. “I should let you go. I know you have your golf game at ten. I’ll see you Sunday for dinner. Bye, Pappous, give Gigia a kiss for me.”

“Bye, Cason.”

It was a struggle, but he kept his mind busy and on something other than Vince as he sanded a set of dildos. He liked to do the work at a slow pace, by hand, to make sure the wood would be perfectly smooth without a single rough spot. He balanced on his tall stool at the workbench, letting his mind turn over his grandpa’s words as his hands stroked back and forth along the grain of the wood with fine grit paper. The rasp of the wood was the only sound in the quiet room.

His phone rang; the loud trilling startled him. Cason jerked and dropped the dildo; it rolled and knocked his phone off the edge of the workbench. He got down on his knees and reached under the edge, grabbing the phone and answering just before his voicemail picked up.

“Hello,” he said abruptly, wiping fine sawdust off the knees of his pants.

“Hi, Cason.”

Cason’s frustration evaporated and he leaned against the bench. “Oh! Hey, Vince. You actually called instead of texting me. To what do I owe this honor?” He grinned as Vince laughed.

“Dork.”

“Guilty as charged. That doesn’t mean this dork won’t smack your ass for calling me names the next time.”

Cason heard Vince suck in a deep breath. “Not fair! I’m at work.”

“You earned it.” Cason didn’t have to try hard to come up with plans for their scenes together, even if he felt like he was stumbling around in the dark without his ability to guide him. There were so many things he wanted to do to and with Vince.

“Well it’s a good thing I’m wearing loose coveralls. I actually just got back from lunch and Migg told me that he’s playing at a gay bar tonight with his full band. You said you wanted to hear him and I thought, if you meant it—”

Vince was asking him out on a date!

Cason interrupted Vince as he began to babble. “Of course I meant it. I’d like to meet your friends since you’ve met Brandon and Suzanne. Page told me you met Luke and Sean too during sub’s night at the club. The only one of your friends I know is Page, and I’m not going to count your other roommate.”

Vince laughed. “Yeah, I wouldn’t consider him a friend either, but we need his rent money, so we put up with him.”

Cason swept some more sawdust off the counter into a metal bin. “So, what time tonight?”

“Nine.”

Cason checked the clock. Noon. Damn, he’d been working for a while. If he got moving he could finish the eight inch dildo he was working on, clean up, go get some groceries, and start some dinner.

“What time do you think you’ll be off tonight?”

“Five, hopefully. Six at the latest.”

Just enough time. “How about coming over here for dinner before we go to the bar? I have a cookbook full of recipes my Nana left me. It’s full of excellent down home Southern cooking recipes. Care to give my culinary skills a try?”

“So you’re going to feed me?”

Cason felt his cock stir. “I could,” he said throatily.

“Six-thirty okay?” Vince’s voice was breathy.

“Perfect. I’ll see you then.” Cason ended his call and turned his attention back to the dildo in front of him. He ran his hand up and down along the rings he’d carved down the shaft, testing the edges. He found a few rough spots with this fingertips and set about smoothing them.

Once he finally got it as smooth as he wanted, he set it aside on the felt lined shelf above his work bench. Cleaning didn’t take long, but the store was surprisingly crowded. Finding the ingredients he needed to make dinner took longer than he wanted, but he still made it home by four-thirty.

Flaky salmon, hush puppies, some fried okra and mushrooms. He couldn't wait to feed slivers of the succulent pink meat to Vince. It was almost six by the time he had everything ready and Cason rushed off to shower. The warm water pounded on his neck as he washed with his back to the showerhead. The slippery soft suds tickled his cock and balls as they slid down his body.

Unable to resist, Cason slid his bare hand down his body, gathering more suds in his palm. He leaned one hand against the wall, closing his eyes. He imagined Vince kneeling on the floor in front of him, tickling his balls as he tongued them before sucking them into his mouth separately and then together.

Cason moaned and started stroking slowly. Vince's hair would be slicked back but a few strands would hang wet and long over his eyes as he stared up at him. Closing his fist created a slick tunnel Cason could imagine was Vince's mouth closing over the head of his cock and then sinking down to the base. He started a smooth glide back up, squeezing hard on the head.

“Fuck!”

Pleasure had his balls lifting before he knew it. He hovered on the edge, trying to hold out, prolonging the almost painful edge just before orgasm, gasping for breath in the moist steamy shower. He wanted Vince there in front of him for real. He wanted inside, his mouth, his ass, however he could get him. The need he'd felt to touch Vince, to possess him, was driving him crazy. Marking Vince with his cum wasn't enough anymore.

Cason needed Vince.

That moment of realization sent him over the precipice and Cason came in shuddering spurts, his hips jerking, deep grunts punctuating each volley of cum as he shot all over the floor and wall of the shower. His hand dropped to his side when his cock became too sensitive to touch and he collapsed against the cool tiles.

CHAPTER TEN

Vince's mouth closed over the tips of his fingers. If Cason hadn't jerked off in the shower he would have been instantly rigid just from seeing Vince walk in the door dressed in his leather jacket over a skin-tight T-shirt, jeans that hugged his round ass, and boots. Cason's cock hadn't stayed quiescent for long, nor was his control enough to keep his underwear from being soaked with excitement as the smaller man sat on the pillow at his knees with a silk blindfold over his eyes.

They were both quiet for the most part as soft music played in the background while they ate the dinner Cason made. Their connection was humming between them. Cason's focus was on the sub at his feet but he still enjoyed the flavors of the herb crust on the soft salmon, the crispy outsides and fluffy center of the bite sized hush puppies and the vegetables. Vince took each bite he was given carefully, those lips too tempting for Cason to resist touching and tracing as he chewed.

"I'm full, sir," Vince said in a husky voice when he let go of Cason's fingers and swallowed his last bite.

"I see that." His jeans were tight, and probably uncomfortable on the welt he had to have from the slap on his ass Cason had given him, but Vince had been remarkably focused the entire time he knelt at Cason's feet. Cason wiped his fingers on his napkin before running them along Vince's cheek just under the blindfold. Vince pressed into his hand and smiled, those soft pink lips turning up.

"You look amazing. Quiet, happy."

Vince's face turned up toward him, even though he couldn't see. "I am. It's amazing, because my mind is always moving. It's always hard to focus, except for when I'm working, but with you... I always know when we're together that I have your entire attention, and I want to give that back to you. The way you make me feel, even for something like this, is what is really amazing."

"Come up here." Cason tugged Vince up and over his lap in the chair. He reached up with both hands and pushed the blindfold off. He needed to see the

man's eyes. Blinking, Vince looked straight at him with those gorgeous gray-blue eyes that reminded Cason of a stormy sky.

“You make it easy, Cason,” he said softly. “No one else has ever made me feel it's okay to want what I want. I don't have to fight my feelings when we're playing because you never treat me as anything less than an equal. We've only done a few scenes, but you treat my submission like a gift to be valued.”

Cason refused to think about Vince's ex right then, and the way he'd messed Vince up. There was a new confidence in the submissive on his lap that came out as a stillness and focus that Cason hadn't witnessed in him before. “That's exactly how you should be treated. No matter what route you take to offer your submission, it's a gift a Dom should respect. Trust between a Dom and sub grows from mutual respect. You've always deserved to be treated this way. There are Doms out there that know how to take care of a sub, you just weren't finding them.”

Smiling, Vince leaned forward. “Well I'm glad you found me. Maybe I should thank you.” His eyes were hooded and he licked his lips. Cason's hands caressed his hips.

The loud blasting ring of his phone made Vince jerk almost completely off Cason's lap. “Sorry!” He dug it out to answer it; his pants were so tight Cason was amazed he could even get his hand into the shallow pocket.

“Migg? Hey...”

Vince mouthed sorry at him and stood up. Damn it. Cason wanted to growl in frustration. He knew they didn't really have time to do anything too intense if they were going to get to the bar where Vince had said his friend was going to be playing tonight, but still, the interruption had disrupted the intimacy between them and that irritated Cason.

“Okay, okay, we're on our way.” Vince tapped his phone on his thigh with a frown. “I'm really sorry, but Migg's rig isn't working right *again*, and he needs the van to haul his kit.”

Cason stood up. He knew how important it was to not let his irritation show; Vince had been cut off from his friends before by the daimon that had been trying to destroy him. As much as Cason wanted to pull that sleek body

against his and not let go, he would always do the best thing for Vince. Hard as it was right then, being willing to leave early to help Migg was what Vince needed. “No, I understand. Let’s grab our jackets and head out now.”

“Not quite yet. You made me such a nice dinner and everything has been so great with you. There’s something I was about to do.” Vince walked up and nestled against him, fitting his body into Cason’s with a slow wiggle that brought back some of the urgency that had been lost. Cason knew how that lithe body felt naked against his, and he found himself craving the touch of all that smooth skin against him.

He didn’t wait for Vince to kiss him. Capturing the shorter man with one hand on his lower back and the other cupping the back of his neck, Cason lowered his head toward those barely parted pink lips just begging to be devoured.

By the time he let Vince go they were both breathing hard. Vince blinked slowly. “That was... yeah.” He shook his head.

Cason smiled nice and slow. “We should go.” It took a lot of willpower to step back but he did it.

They headed out to pick up Vince’s tools and then went over to Migg’s. Cason was really surprised when Vince introduced him to his friend. He’d heard the words band and drummer and the image of a long haired rocker had come to mind. Vince had also mentioned that the guy worked at coffee shop, though, so he could have been one of the emo kid types too.

A muscular, smooth shaven bald guy stood outside by a dirty van, blowing on his hands. He looked like he was Cason’s age too, not the young musician Cason had been imagining. Migg was definitely not what Cason expected.

“Hey man, thanks for coming. You’re really saving me, it would take forever to move my kit to the bar with Aiden’s tiny car.”

“Yes, it would. Stand back and let me work my magic so we can get you on your throne on time tonight.” Vince was soon up on a stepstool with half his body inside the engine of the old, dinged up van in Migg’s driveway.

“So, you are?”

“A friend of Vince’s. My name is Cason.” He offered his hand and Migg shook it, squeezing a little hard. Cason barely kept from rolling his eyes when

the larger man let go. “He told me you work at the coffee shop next to the garage where he works.”

“Yep. He doesn’t drink coffee, of course, but he loves our sugar free coffee cake and cocoa. He caught me cussing out my van one day after work and offered to take a look. Don’t ask me how he does it, but he always gets her going again. Now I give him free cocoa whenever he comes in, and he keeps my baby from the scrapyard.”

Cason watched Vince’s ass wiggle back and forth as he muttered and then cursed over the broken down pile of Migg’s baby. Metal clanged as he tossed a wrench over his shoulder. “He is very good when he can focus,” Cason agreed. The image running through his head wasn’t the one in front of him, as enticing as Vince’s ass was. He kept imagining the soft smile and heavy lidded eyes he’d gotten after their dinner when Vince was snuggled on his lap, sated and horny.

“Nothing he can’t do.” Migg gestured toward the brick wall next to the sidewalk. Cason followed him over and rested his hip against the edge. He crossed his arms over his chest, even though he knew it would make him look defensive. Next time he wouldn’t forget his gloves.

“So. I’ve never seen you in the coffee shop before but my friend Carrie said you’ve been in a few times with Page.”

Cason nodded. “I met Page a while back; he’s involved with my best friend. We do get together from time to time to talk.”

Migg raised one eyebrow. “Page told me some of what they’re into, you know, submissives and the clubs and stuff. So you’re not... playing with him?”

“With Page or Vince?” Cason laughed at the idea of playing with Page. The bratty man would’ve found himself gagged and shoved into a closet in about two minutes if Cason tried to be his Dom. “No, Page is not my style, at all.”

“But you are with Vince.”

The urge to laugh disappeared and Cason’s voice was downright curt. “It’s not a game with Vince.” He dropped his arms and stood up straight. The sun had gone down and the wind that picked up felt downright arctic, but he barely

felt it as anger at his motives being questioned swamped him. Cason hated it when people outside the lifestyle judged.

“Look, I’m sorry if you feel I’m overstepping,” Migg said slowly. “I don’t really understand the lifestyle, but I don’t want my friend to get hurt.”

Cason took a deep breath to calm himself down. He looked the intimidating man straight in the eye. “I wouldn’t hurt Vince. Ever.”

They stared at each other for a minute then Migg nodded once. “Good enough.”

“That’s it?” Cason asked.

“You mean what you say. I can tell. If you’re both happy, and I know Vince is, then I’m not going to judge.” Migg stood up, close to Cason, but that was a technique he knew; he didn’t budge. “As long as he stays that way.”

Migg was trying to protect Vince. Cason had to respect his loyalty, but he refused to be intimidated. “I like that Vince has friends willing to try to protect him. He needs it, but don’t think you have any say in our relationship. Vince is an adult and he won’t let anyone make his choices for him. I already know that much.”

“Aha! Figured you out, didn’t I?” Vince’s triumphant crow was accompanied by the slamming of the van’s hood. “Hey guys, quit trying to intimidate each other over there. I’m freezing my ass off. Let’s go!”

Vince ran inside Migg’s place and washed his hands before they left. “We’ll see you later.” Vince waved and they walked over to Vince’s car. “Hey.”

Cason unlocked the passenger door but Vince stopped him with a hand on his wrist before he opened it. “Thanks for putting up with Migg’s overprotective side. Outside, he can look kinda scary, but inside he’s a big softie. He worries about everyone.”

“Like I told him, I appreciate your friends trying to protect you.” He leaned down and kissed Vince. “Now, can we go? You’re not the only one freezing body parts off.”

The wait outside the bar wasn’t as bad because Cason pulled Vince’s back against his chest and held him close. He liked how the smaller man reached behind them and tucked his hands into Cason’s back pockets. “Man, Migg’s

band is really getting a following,” Vince said as they slowly made their way up to the door and paid their cover charge.

Inside there were tons of people. The dance floor was crowded, but around the edges of the bar the music from the sound system wasn't too loud.

Vince asked, “How about a beer while we wait?”

Cason nodded and leaned down to speak in Vince's ear. “Sure.” He smirked when the smaller man shivered. They waited for a space to open up at the bar and then ordered their drinks. Cason slid money across the bar and picked up their beers, and then followed Vince over to a table that had a few empty seats.

“Hey guys!” Vince took his beer and pecked Cason on the cheek, then slipped his arm around his waist. “This is Cason.” He pointed his beer bottle at the four people sitting down in turn. “Cason, this is Mel, Tiffany, Dash and Donovan, some of my friends.”

“Hey,” Cason said. He hadn't expected to meet more of Vince's friends, but they weren't all young, hot, young twenty-year-olds. Mel looked about twenty-five and if Cason wasn't wrong, Tiffany was his sister. She was tucked up against Dash's side. Donovan seemed to be the odd one out; he looked really young, which wasn't helped by the Goth face paint he had going on. Cason wondered if he was even legal to be in the bar.

“Mind if we sit with you guys? We were going to come later when the band was playing but Migg had van trouble again, so I had to perform my magic.”

“Go ahead,” Mel said. “We're not expecting anyone else tonight.”

Cason expected Vince to sit down next to him but the younger man plopped right in his lap. Cason was surprised, but he liked how casually affectionate Vince was, even in front of his friends, so he wrapped an arm around his waist and pulled him close. Having that tight ass up against his cock, swaying slightly as Vince moved with the music was damn distracting. Cason didn't say much but he tried to pay attention as Vince chatted with his friends.

“So you work at the college?” Donovan played with the straw in his glass, stirring around the dregs of the melting ice. “I've never seen you.”

“I’m a counselor, not a professor.” Cason slipped one hand under Vince’s shirt and traced the skin just above his pants. He traced the dip in the muscle ridges back and forth. “You go to college?”

Donovan laughed. “I get that a lot. Yes, I do. I’m legal to order another one of these too.” He stood up. “Anybody else want anything?” A chorus of orders later, Donovan was on his way up to the bar.

Vince leaned back against Cason’s shoulder, his soft hair brushed against Cason and caught in the stubble pebbling his cheeks. Damn, Cason loved his hair.

“Want to dance?”

“Dancing isn’t something I’m really good at.” Besides, the tent in his pants would be truly embarrassing if he were to stand up. “Why don’t you go? I’ll get our beers and wait here for you.” He spoke in Vince’s ear. “I want to watch you.” His voice was husky, low, and he felt Vince shiver.

“Yes, sir,” he said under breath.

Cason let his hand slide down Vince’s side to his hip as the lithe young man stood up. “I’m going to dance,” Vince told his friends.

Mel hopped up. “I’ll come.”

The pair headed for the dance floor and the crowd of people moving rhythmically to the music. Mel was absorbed into the crowd, led in by a young, blond woman with hair flowing down her nearly bare back to her ass.

The guy she had been dancing with slid up next to Vince and began to mirror the way his hips were swaying. Vince let him dance close, but put an arm on his shoulder when he would have moved closer.

Vince turned and moved away, staying on the edge, letting men and women close but always keeping a little bit of space between his body and theirs. He used them to put on a show for Cason who couldn’t look away. Watching Vince move... he’d done it for months from a distance, but now Vince wasn’t trying to attract someone else; he was trying to attract Cason, and *that* made all the difference.

Cason gripped the water he’d switched to, taking a deep drink. The icy cold liquid did nothing to cool his arousal.

Crimson lights flashed and strobed over the dance floor before a spotlight lit up the stage. Tables rapidly emptied as damn near everyone surged toward the stage, cheers breaking out as the band came on stage.

Migg's thick arms beat out a rapid tattoo across the drums and then picked up a deep rhythmic thump. Cason watched with fascination as the rest of the band joined in and the crowd began to move, throbbing with the same beat as the band.

It was like a heartbeat. Cason couldn't understand all the words being shouted into the microphone very well, thanks to the crowd screaming along, but the energy was amazing.

Vince slid an arm over his shoulders. Cason jerked in surprise. He couldn't believe he'd lost sight of Vince, but the band was good enough to distract him. No wonder they were getting a following.

"Great, right?" Vince shouted in his ear.

He nodded. "I didn't know what to expect, but wow." Cason was happy he'd met some more of Vince's friends. He didn't have many, but those he did have seemed to be pretty close knit. He was glad; Cason had to hope that when the inevitable happened and Vince walked away to find someone new he'd still have them, and they'd be just as dedicated to keeping an eye on him as they checked out the next man.

He offered his bottle of water and watched Vince down it, his chest still heaving from dancing, sweat beaded on his forehead and darkened his blond hair where it swept down to his eyes. Vince's nipples were hard and poking through his damp shirt.

"I know you don't dance but..."

Cason took the empty water bottle from Vince and set it down on the table. Everyone else had gotten up when the music started. "Let's go."

They didn't go inside the tightly packed crowd close to the stage but stayed near the edges. People were absorbed in the music. Cason stepped up behind Vince, pulling him back until their bodies were pressed together. Bending over his shoulder, Cason ran his nose along his shirt to his neck.

"You smell good." Spicy, sweaty, like a man who had been using his body until his natural musky odor was at its strongest. The irresistible beat was

picked up by their hips and Cason let go as they moved together like they were fucking right there on the dance floor. He no longer cared who saw what was going on in his pants.

Vince's ass pressed against his cock again and again. The tempo set him on fire, each song building on the last until Cason felt as if they were ablaze with lust and need. Cason was grinding against Vince. He'd already yanked off Vince's shirt so that his hands could roam the muscular pecs and tight nipples.

His sub's hands were locked behind his neck, holding on like Cason was the only solid thing in the universe. His moans were so loud the only thing keeping him from making a complete spectacle out of them were the wailing guitars and screaming vocals from the lead singer.

The agony of his jeans pressing against his cock was intense. His need was overwhelming and for once, Cason wasn't going to hold back.

"Come home with me," he said directly into Vince's ear. His hand cupped and rubbed hard against the bulge in Vince's jeans. "Now."

His lips were on Vince's neck, sucking up a dark mark as the sweet sub agreed frantically.

Icy wind outside slapped against his overheated skin as they rushed outside. Vince laced their fingers together and dragged him to the car. He shivered but it wasn't cold enough to completely cool his ardor. Cason caged the smaller man against his car by placing his palms flat on the roof. He went in for a kiss, dominating Vince's mouth as surely as ever.

His tongue thrust in and out until Vince went limp against him. He sucked Vince's bottom lip into his mouth and then bit down. Cason laved the swollen flesh with his tongue gently, leaving the reddened flesh slick when he let go.

"Please." Vince thrust his hips forward, shuddering and moaning.

"Home," Cason murmured against his lips.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Their coats fell to the floor in the tiled entryway. Cason squeezed Vince's ass when he bent over to pull off his boots. He toed off his own shoes, not wanting to give up his grip.

"I love your ass," he groaned.

Vince got caught up in his shirt. It tore with a loud rip as Cason yanked it over his head and tossed it on the couch as they rushed past the living room. Cason backed up the stairs, his hands undoing Vince's belt and unbuttoning his pants. As soon as they reached the top of the stairs he pushed them down Vince's hips. Cason got a very good surprise when Vince's cock sprang out unrestrained.

"Commando." He approved. His hand stroked Vince's shaft once, squeezing the slick head hard. Vince's hands fumbled with the button and zipper on Cason's jeans. Vince dropped to his knees right there in the hall.

Cason paused for a minute to let Vince get Cason's pants the rest of the way off, pushing down his underwear at the same time. Stepping out of his pants, Cason slid a hand into Vince's hair. He pulled him slowly toward his cock. Vince's lips parted and his pink tongue came out, slipping and sliding in small circles around the crown on Cason's cock before he pushed forward into the warmth to bury over half his length at once.

Vince sucked eagerly when Cason pulled back and the next time he thrust back in, Cason went all the way to the back of Vince's throat.

Nothing had ever felt as good as that tight vice gagging around the tip of his cock. No sub had ever looked so supremely blissed out as Vince did staring up at him with his gray-blue eyes nearly obscured by his lust-blown pupils.

Cason pulled out before he lost control. Vince tried to capture his cock again but Cason fisted his hand tight in the soft blond strands of his hair and held him still. "Not tonight. Tonight I want everything."

Vince gasped in a quick breath as his eyes squeezed shut. "Yes."

Unwilling to get the beautiful man up from his knees, Cason led him into his room slowly. Vince followed, never complaining, his expression eager.

“Up.”

That pert ass up in the air on the bed was like waving a red flag in front of the bull. Cason crawled after him, massaging and spreading Vince’s cheeks. He trailed his fingers down the crack to circle that pink hole, making the sweet sub squirm.

Cason leaned forward, blanketing Vince’s back with his chest. “You want me in here?” He tapped on the wrinkled flesh, barely touching the sensitive ring in small circles. “Are you ready to let me inside?”

“God, yes, please.” Vince was already panting. He arched his back and thrust back toward Cason’s fingers.

Cason reached higher and pulled open the drawer in the nightstand. He fumbled blindly before getting what he needed. Sitting back, he dropped the condom in front of Vince but kept the lube. He didn’t speak; he didn’t need Vince to either. Every tremble and thrust of Vince’s hips as he sought more sensation guided Cason and told him what the younger man needed from him.

Every scrap of Cason’s focus was on his slippery finger as he slid it inside Vince’s body. He’d penetrated that tight ring before but this time he wasn’t going to stop there. This time he’d get to feel that tight muscle clamping down on his cock and then sucking him in to the root.

Vince groaned. He tried to push back but Cason smacked him hard on one cheek. “Stay still. No restraints but your desire to do what I demand.”

His desperate sub stilled, though his thighs quivered, exposing exactly how hard it was for him to do what Cason wanted. To reward him, Cason thrust his finger the rest of the way inside.

“Ahh!” Vince’s toes curled but he didn’t move.

Smiling, Cason bent his finger down and pulled it back, grazing Vince’s prostate. He was pleased when Vince dropped his head to the bed but kept his hips still and didn’t attempt to get more sensation when he pulled his finger out.

The lube was cold on his fingers, so Cason took a moment to warm it before returning to preparing Vince. Every hot, slick inch surrounding his

fingers made his cock harder, his balls achier. Cason shuddered as he slid his fingers in and out until Vince was moaning continuously.

With his fingers still gliding in and out, Cason leaned forward and licked a path up Vince's spine. He reached one of those smooth shoulders, a few hidden freckles distracting him. He tongued the marks, then closed his mouth over the smooth skin and bit down, sucking fiercely while probing the depths of the man under him.

Vince cried out. "Please!"

Cason picked up the condom and tore the package open with his teeth. He had to think of unsexy thoughts and struggle for control as he slid the thin latex down his cock; his own hand was almost too much sensation for him to endure. Pulling his fingers out brought a wordless sound of protest from Vince, but he wouldn't leave him empty for long.

More lube, then Cason was watching as the round head of his cock was squeezed between the tight, round cheeks of that perfect ass. He used his thumbs to spread Vince further, then pressed forward, barely breaching Vince's hole. A deep grunt was forced out of Vince as he slid in just to the flared rim around the head of his cock.

He pulled back. Vince's hands clenched on the sheets, but he didn't lose control. Cason could see how hard he struggled not to move his hips. This time, Cason stretched Vince with his thumbs in his hole, then stuck the head of his cock in between them. It was so tight; he watched a bead of sweat on Vince's temple slide down his caramel skin.

Cason's entire body was tense. He was poised, his control held by the tips of his fingers... literally. He was poised on the edge; he knew what this would mean, but he couldn't hold back. He needed to be inside Vince as far as he could go. Nothing short of total possession would satisfy him, even if it was only for one night.

He wanted Vince to be his and when he slid inside, he knew he wouldn't last long. It was a fight between two desires; his need to drive them fast and hard to orgasm or take it slow and deep to make it an experience they would never forget, one that would last forever in his memory. He slid out and then back in again, pausing at the brink once more.

Vince's body was done with the teasing. He had been tense, trembling, fighting his needs but he suddenly relaxed his entire body. Cason's cock slid inside him, sucked in deep. He had to pull his thumbs out and catch himself, unable to stop until he bottomed out. The urge to pull his cock out and thrust back in until his balls slapped against those hairy thighs was almost too much for Cason.

Pressing his forehead against Vince's shoulder just below his mark, Cason shuddered, feeling his balls drawing up already. He held on, putting one arm around Vince's stomach, pulling him up on his arms and stroking his smooth skin. His hand slid down and grazed the leaking head of Vince's cock, erect and rubbing against his lower belly. It was hard enough to resist being pulled down, but Cason wanted to feel those muscles flex around his cock again, to have the vice grip of Vince's pleasure milk him as he began to come.

He could easily come that way. It let him gain a measure of control, the rhythmic pulses slowly building in intensity as he drove Vince crazy with small rolling circles of his hips.

"Cason, please..." Vince begged finally.

That was what he wanted; his name on Vince's lips was so sweet. He braced his arm next to Vince's and lost all control. He gripped Vince's cock tight and let the motion of his hips pounding hard against Vince's ass drive that dripping shaft through his fist.

Sweat dripped down his face. His thighs ached but he was approaching a moment of bliss he knew would be unlike any other. Nothing had ever felt as good as the ass he was pounding into. Cason relished the sounds he was forcing from the sensual man as he shifted his aim and nailed Vince's prostate.

"Fuck." His gasps became a moaning wail as Vince began shuddering in his arms. Cason suddenly had to see it. He jerked out and flipped Vince over, picking up his legs and separating them so he could drive back into that slack hole and watch the feelings roll over that expressive face.

Those lust darkened eyes stared up at him. Cason felt their connection as he stared back down into the gray pools as Vince locked their gazes together. "Stroke your cock," Cason demanded through clenched teeth. He lifted

Vince's legs higher and pushed him back. He could feel the firm lump of Vince's prostate as he used short strokes to drive the exquisitely sensitive head of his cock against it.

Vince's hand stroked up and down fast, turning that dusky pink head beet red. Vince tensed, his ass squeezing Cason's cock so tight he could barely move, and then his entire body went stiff.

Pulse after pulse of thick cum spurted from the slit of Vince's cock. Cason pulled back and slammed in hard without a rhythm, desperate to follow as Vince's muscles rippled around him. He gave a huge grunt, and then felt his cock swell slightly as his balls shot hot cum to fill the condom.

Cason ground down hard, moaning and grunting. The pleasure forced him to shut his eyes as it overwhelmed him. Each shot of cum sent a wave of pleasure shuddering up his spine. He collapsed sideways, not wanting to crush Vince under him. Struggling for breath, Cason left one hand on Vince's chest. He could feel the man's heart pounding against his palm, racing like his own.

He wanted to say something, to do his usual aftercare for the sub he'd just enjoyed, but he couldn't. Cason was wrecked, unable to do more than struggle to breathe and move one hand in short strokes on Vince's chest. Cason blinked, staring up at the ceiling. Maybe he didn't want to move and throw away the cooling spunk filled condom, or get a warm washcloth to clean them up, because that would mean admitting it was over.

How could he face that the end had come, just as it always did?

Tears pricked at the corners of his eyes and Cason closed them. His voice was rough when he said, "Give me a minute and I'll get up, I promise."

"Shh." Vince rolled over and kissed his shoulder. "Let me take care of you. I want to."

Objections rolled through him, but then Vince was already pulling off the condom and tying it off. He slid off the bed, staggering a little as he walked over to the bathroom.

It had been a long time since a lover had taken the time to clean him up; even when Cason wasn't being a Dom he did not give up control to his partners. He was always the one that took care of them. He didn't move as

Vince used a warm washcloth on his cock and balls, stroking them slowly and carefully until he was clean.

Vince stood beside the bed after he tossed the washcloth into the hamper. “I can stay the night, right?”

“Yes. Please.” Tonight would be the last time Cason was able to hold Vince in his arms as they slept; he ached to savor it.

They pulled up the blankets from the foot of the bed and curled up together. Cason’s chest hurt and his eyes burned. He fought to remain quiet as tears leaked out of the corner of his eyes. Vince began a quiet snore against his throat, the air tickling him.

Cason stroked his cheek against that soft hair and then he began to let go and move back. He couldn’t do it; he had to get up. Vince’s arm tightened around his back and he threw one leg over Cason’s thigh, muttering against his skin. A bittersweet smile spread across Cason’s lips. He could taste the salt of his tears as he dropped another kiss on Vince’s head and nuzzled that soft hair.

He’d be going to his grandparents’ for dinner and maybe his pappous could help him figure out how to turn the ache in his heart into acceptance for the path of the one man Cason couldn’t see inside. He wouldn’t even get that small comfort of knowing he’d helped Vince find who he was really meant to be with, since it wasn’t him.

Exhaustion dragged his swollen eyes shut in the end and Cason slept.

Vince crawling out of bed woke up Cason. He went from loose limbed sleep to rigid tension. He opened his eyes, just a small slit, and watched Vince through his dark lashes. It was agony to wait silently for him to come back out of the bathroom. Cason knew he’d leave then and he had no idea how he was going to watch Vince walk away without making a fool of himself.

Cason jerked back in shock when the shivering man climbed into the bed and burrowed under the covers. “Cold,” Vince complained as he invaded the small pocket of warm air around Cason and tucked his chilly body against him.

“What...? You’re not leaving?” Cason frowned. “I don’t...”

Vince tilted his head back. "Leave? Why would I leave? It's freaking snowing outside and I don't have to work today." He shifted back a little. "I thought we could spend the day together, just hanging out."

"I have dinner with my family tonight."

Very carefully, Vince asked, "What does that mean?"

"It means I'm having dinner at my grandparents' tonight." Unable to stay still, Cason shook his head, threw back the covers, and got up. Vince sat up with his knees tucked up to his chin, pulling the blankets up to cover his body.

"I don't understand this." Cason grabbed a pair of underwear off his dresser and pulled the striped blue and red boxer briefs on. "Why are you still here? No one stays." He was muttering and not making much sense; he knew that, but he was so confused. None of the subs he'd ever done a scene with had wanted more from him before Vince, it didn't make sense.

Even before Cason had learned how to be a Dom or when he'd explored partners outside the lifestyle, he'd never had a man want to stay in bed with him beyond that... much less spend the day with him. Not after they'd had sex and whatever epiphany they experienced led them out his door and to the men that could fulfill their needs.

He spun around and faced Vince. "You want to hang out... just as friends? Is that it?" He'd shown Vince what it meant to submit to a Dom that knew how to respect a sub's limits, while still pushing them into new experiences that expanded their boundaries. From the beginning, Cason had known this would be how it ended. He'd buried the fact that more than anyone else he'd ever been with, the sight of Vince walking away would seal his fate to be lonely and alone.

There was no one else he wanted. Vince had been the only one for whom he'd be willing to risk the utter agony he'd faced, the near certainty that the sub would walk away, and take Cason's heart with him.

"What the hell are you talking about, Cason? You're not making any sense."

"We had sex, but you're still here. I don't know why." Cason ran a hand through his hair and tugged, trying to figure out exactly what Vince wanted from him now that their chance to be together was over.

Vince's jaw clenched and his lips pressed together. He pushed the covers away and sat silently for a minute, breathing hard. Cason could see the curve of his back, smooth skin rippling over the sleek muscles, as Vince sat facing away from him, his head hanging low.

"I get it," he said in a strained voice.

He pushed away, getting out of bed. Vince walked out of Cason's bedroom without saying another word. There was a pause in the angry steps, and then he heard loud stomping as Vince must have shoved his feet into his boots. Cason collapsed on the floor next to his bed when he heard the front door slam. What was he going to do?

CHAPTER TWELVE

He called his grandma and begged off from dinner that night. He'd gotten a horrible guilt trip, but Cason couldn't stand the idea of facing his family when he was so completely lost. Instead, he curled up in bed all day, hugging the pillow Vince had used that held a faint echo of his spicy cologne.

All week Cason went to work each day, barely paying attention to the students that came to him for help. He was so tired of giving out advice to make everyone else happy when he was so unhappy. It was lucky for him that Tiffany was out on maternity leave, because no one else was willing to brave his surly attitude to question him about what was wrong, preferring to avoid him instead.

Brandon called on Monday, Tuesday, and twice on Thursday. Cason deleted the messages without listening to them. Page had probably told him about his weekend with Vince, and Brandon was calling to check on him. He didn't want to hear the pity in his best friend's voice when he'd realized that Vince hadn't been just another sub for Cason.

Friday night Cason came home, exhausted and ready to open another six pack for a night in front of the TV, but Brandon's car was in his driveway. Worse yet, his friend was already inside.

"Damn it. I knew I shouldn't have given him a key." Cason considered just driving away but the front door opened and Brandon stared at him until he shut off the engine.

Gathering up his briefcase, Cason got out of the car. He trudged through the path he'd made in the snow from the freak storm last weekend and went inside. The warmth was welcome and Brandon had even lit a fire.

"Hey man, what's up?" Brandon looked concerned. Cason shrugged.

The kitchen was spotless when Cason walked in to get a drink. Brandon followed him, already drinking a beer. The top rack of the fridge was empty except for an old take out box and a shriveled pepper in a produce bag. Cason looked over his shoulder at Brandon. His friend took a long drink and then set the empty bottle on the counter.

“I had a six pack in there,” Cason said. He glared at Brandon and then grabbed a bottle of water.

“No, you didn’t. That was your last beer. You had about four empty six packs on the counter and in the sink, though. I recycled them for you.”

Cason went over to the cupboard and grabbed an energy bar out of the box. “So?”

“So, care to tell me what has you drinking like a fish, ignoring my phone calls, and looking like a bear with a thorn in its paw?”

“Not particularly.” Cason walked out of the kitchen and into the living room; on his way through, avoiding looking into the dining room where they’d had that last meal. If he was really lucky, Brandon would get sick of him refusing to answer his questions and being an ass, and leave.

Nope. Not that lucky.

Brandon flopped down on the couch beside him. “I know what Vince has told Page, which isn’t a whole lot, but he’s pretty surly too. Page is being driven crazy ’cause apparently Vince is bouncing around like a bunny on crack. You’re depressed and not talking to anyone. I’ve never seen you like this. What is going on?”

Cason let his head fall back against the couch, tossing the energy bar on the end table. “You’re really not going to go away?”

“Nope.” Brandon’s rumbling negative was firm.

What could Cason really expect from the man he knew would have the patience to deal with a brat like Page?

“Life goes on, okay? Nothing unusual. I found a sub. I showed him how a scene with a Dom that cares about his sub should be. He went home. The end. Drama not included.”

Brandon snorted. “Liar.”

Cason jerked to his feet. “What do you want me to say, Brandon? That I felt something for Vince? That being friends with him, without getting to touch him again, is more than I can deal with right now? Even worse, what if he finds someone new? I couldn’t handle that.

“Every time I try to sleep in my bed I remember having him in it, spread out for me. My room feels empty when the man only slept over three times. That’s all it took, Brandon, and I’m hooked.” Cason paced in front of the fire, running his hand along the smooth wood of the mantle. “I’m giving myself time to get over the dream of the future I wanted with him so I can face reality.”

He glared at his best friend. “There, happy now? Is telling you how much of a mess I am going to make this better in any way?”

“It might,” Brandon said placidly. He sat forward, resting his elbows on his thighs. “Why do you automatically assume that he doesn’t want the same thing with you?”

Cason exhaled noisily. “I just know, all right?” He gripped the mantle, needing it to keep him upright as he said, “Vince was never going to be mine, I knew that from the beginning.”

“You don’t know shit!”

Cason froze, then turned around slowly. Vince was standing in the entry to the dining room. His hands were clenched into fists against his thighs, thumping against his legs as he glared at Cason.

“No one makes my decisions for me, Cason. Not even you!”

Cason looked from Vince to Brandon. His best friend was standing up. “Page and I decided you guys should talk, even if neither one of you thinks so. He’s waiting at my house and I’ve wasted enough time on you stubborn asses. I’m going to leave, but if after I go, you guys don’t find some way to work this out, we’ll make you pay.”

Brandon’s size and the threatening rumble of his voice had never bothered Cason before, but he’d never seen his friend look quite so intimidating. He knew, and had seen first-hand, how creative he could be with his punishments too.

His shoulders slumped. “We’ll talk.” He didn’t promise they’d work it out, though.

“You’ll listen. This time I’m going to talk first.” Vince’s hands were still drumming.

Brandon clapped Cason on the shoulder as he walked by. "Good luck."

Meeting Vince's angry gaze was more than Cason could do. His chest hurt and every breath was a struggle he tried to hide in vain.

"Why don't you sit down?" he asked.

"Why don't you?" countered Vince.

Cason gave a short laugh. "I don't think either of us can stand to be still for this."

"What is this? Can you tell me that, huh?" Vince stepped inside the living room, coming up behind the sofa. He gripped the thick leather cushion, his knuckles white. Cason stared at his hands. "Why did you want me to leave on Sunday?"

"I didn't want you to go, I just knew that you would."

"Bullshit!" The spat out word made Cason look up. He'd never heard Vince speak or seen him glare at him like that; not even when Cason had pissed him off at the munch the first time they spoke. "I never once thought of leaving. I thought that we were building something. You said in the beginning that you wanted to do those scenes to show me what a true Dom was really like. But it was more than that from the start. You may have tried to deny that to yourself, but it was never just about doing scenes. All those conversations? Dinners? Damn it, we're good together." He shoved his hair out of his face. "Why wouldn't you give us a chance?"

"There are things about me you don't know. Things that have meant every man I've ever been with has walked away without looking back." Cason stopped talking. He couldn't believe he was about to tell Vince about his ability. He'd never believe Cason; not in a million years.

"Would you stop being so damn cryptic? Something about you. What? That you snore? I know that already. Do you floss your teeth in the kitchen? Drink milk out of the carton? Seriously, Cason, you're the single most desired man around. All the subs I know either rave about how amazing you are or want you and all the Doms respect you. No one has any horror stories, so whatever you seem to think is so awful can't be that bad."

Vince looked down at the couch. "This is about me, isn't it?" When he looked up some of his anger had drained away and he was left looking sad and

vulnerable. “No matter who I pick, I always choose the wrong guy. No one ever wants me like I want them.”

Cason couldn't stand that look on Vince's face. He'd have to tell him. “You'll want to sit down for this.”

Vince hesitated. “Cason, I think—”

“Please.” That one word stopped Vince's objections. He stared at Cason for a minute, then moved around the couch and sat down. His hand stroked the arm of the couch nervously in short strokes.

“Okay, I'm sitting. Talk.”

Telling people about their abilities wasn't something done outside the family, so Cason had no idea how to start. Finally, he decided to begin where his grandpa had, back when he first told Cason about what was happening to him.

“I need you to listen, from start to finish. No matter how unbelievable it sounds. Do you understand?” Cason asked.

“A long time ago a woman captured the interest of a man, but he wasn't really a man. He was a daimon, not a red-skinned devil from hell, but a magical being with very special abilities. Greek daimons have the ability to see inside the center of a human, to the very essence of their psyche. How they use it depends on them. It can be used to help or hurt men.

“Some daimons fall in love with humans from time to time and they have children. Their abilities pass down the same gender lineage from that original daimon. Those descendants have abilities that they can harness in much the same ways as the original daimon, though to a lesser extent.”

Cason cleared his throat. “I'm descended from a daimon.”

Vince shook his head. “Really? This is your big secret? You expect me to believe that you have some magical power that makes men leave you after you fuck them?”

Of course he didn't believe him. Cason sighed and said, “No, that's not what happens. I can see the spirits' influences on men. I see their touches like stains of color, each spirit has their own shade. I can tell who has touched a man, and how that touch has changed them. Using that knowledge, I can help

them reach their center. I know who they are inside and my ability to give them what they need leads them to discovering that for themselves. I don't have to plan a scene and hope it's what the sub needs. I know."

Vince's eyes widened.

"But when the scenes end, not a single sub has ever needed me."

"The subs I talked to," Vince said slowly, "all those men who said you were the perfect Dom."

Cason held his breath as he watched the wheels spin in Vince's mind, from zero to a hundred just like that.

"Is that how you seemed to know exactly what I needed? Were you doing that to me?" He sounded strangely disappointed. His eyes widened. "Did you make me want you somehow?"

"No!" Cason shook his head. "No! With you, my ability doesn't work at all. I wanted you before I knew that, though. I saw you, night after night, with the wrong men. Those wannabe Doms were ruining you."

"Swear it. Look me in the eyes and swear," Vince said intensely.

Cason went over to the couch, sitting down on the coffee table in front of Vince so they were face to face, just a foot apart. "I would never try to influence you against your will, even if I could. That's not how my ability works. I can't make men do things, only help them to see the truth of what they need to be truly happy. I wouldn't want that. I want a partner, not a slave."

Vince took a deep breath. "Okay." He reached forward and laced his fingers together with Cason's. "So, if I believe you, that means you expect me to leave because what? We slept together and I was supposed to miraculously figure out that some Joe Blow down at the club was my Prince Charming? Even though you couldn't see inside me like the other men you've... guided?"

Cason felt heat spread across his cheeks as he blushed. "It sounds stupid when you say it like that."

Snorting, Vince said, "It is stupid. It's all insane. But," he shook his head, "and I can't believe I'm saying this, but I believe you. You know, we never talked about the subject but I have a ton of books on the different ancient religions. They've always fascinated me, and I wondered how so many

different geographical regions could have similar stories if there wasn't some basic truth to them. I guess I was right."

"You really believe me?" Cason stared at him with his mouth open.

"What? You didn't expect me to? Why tell me if you didn't think I would?"

"I hoped you wouldn't run out of here, but I didn't believe this shit when my grandpa first sat me down and explained what was happening to me when I hit puberty. I was raised with a pretty strong Greek belief in the mysteries of the world beyond what we can understand. By the way, don't be upset if my Grandma spits in your hair when you meet her. Gigia always did things traditional."

A smirk spread across Vince's face, lighting up his eyes. "And what is spitting on me supposed to accomplish? Wash away the dirty non-Greek germs?"

Cason laughed. "No. Nothing like that. It wards away bad spirits."

That reminded him. His amusement faded and his smile disappeared. "There is something you should know. I can't see any spirits influencing you which is very unusual. For some reason I can't use my ability on you at all but I have a theory on why that is." This was something Cason wished he didn't have to admit. "Daimons are not solely good.

"There are some that, for whatever reason, choose to use their ability to misdirect humans. They lead them down paths that create internal conflict and confusion. In the end, their victims are completely lost and unable to find a moment of happiness ever again. Many kill themselves."

Cason took a breath. "I asked my grandpa about you. I've never met anyone that I couldn't help before, until you, and I wanted so badly to help you be happy, even if it meant that you wouldn't be with me. He told me that you had probably been with a daimon that works to destroy humanity."

"Derrick." Vince scowled. "That son of a bitch. He was a daimon?"

"I think so. I don't know for certain, though."

Vince stood up and started pacing. "That sorry son of a bitch. I just thought he was a sadistic asshole, but you're telling me that he actually was trying to make me crazy? I can't believe this!"

“I’m sorry.”

“Why? It’s not your fault. You didn’t treat me like that, even though you’re a daimon too.” Vince’s laugh was bitter this time, harsh and short. “And in the end, it was my choice to be with him.” He hunched his shoulders, wrapping his arms around his chest.

Cason stood up and turned Vince around to face him. He said softly, “It was your choice to leave him too, remember? You kept trying; you didn’t give up. He didn’t manage to break you.”

Vince looked up at him through his hair. “But you still wanted to put me back together.”

“I wanted you, broken, whole it didn’t matter. Even though I knew I shouldn’t, I did.” Cason reached up and pushed the hair back out of Vince’s eyes. “For *me*, not just for you.”

“You have me, though. I’m not walking away from you. You’re my choice too; I need you just as much as you need me” Vince said in a fierce voice.

Something tight inside Cason unclenched when Vince said that. That was the one thing he’d always wanted to hear from a man, but never had.

“So if I asked you to come to dinner tonight and meet my family, you’d come?”

Vince bit his full bottom lip. “As what? Your sub? Friend? Boyfriend?”

“As mine.”

He was asking for commitment from Vince, and Cason held his breath as Vince stared deep in his eyes. Then he had a slim body on top of him and a very demanding man kissing him. Cason kissed back, tongue thrusting, his arms surrounding Vince and pulling him as close as possible. The heat of Vince’s body was like a sun burning him from the merest brush of skin on skin. But none of the intensity he was feeling touched the joy that flashed through him when Vince pulled away and gasped out one word.

“Yes.”

THE END

Author Bio

Alicia Nordwell is one of those not so rare creatures, a reader turned writer. Striving to find something interesting to read one day, she decided to write what she wanted instead. Then the voices started... Yep, not only does she talk about herself in the third person for bios, she has voices in her head constantly clamoring to get out.

Fortunately for readers, with the encouragement of her family and friends, she decided for her own sanity to keep writing. Now you can find her stories both free and e-published! She can be found quite often at her blog where she has a lot of free fiction for readers to enjoy and working hard, or maybe hardly working, as an admin on GayAuthors.org under her online nickname, Cia.

Oh yeah, she's a wife, mom of two, and lives in the dreary, yet ideal for her redhead complexion, Pacific Northwest. Except for when she disappears into one of the many worlds in her head, of course!

Contact & Media Info

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WHEN I SAW YOU

By Alicia Nordwell

Photo Description

He stands there, sleek, muscles rounded with that perfect, pale ass shining like a beacon, rubbing his hands together. I love his tan, taut body but especially those curves that can't be hidden. Not when he's wearing shorts or pants and certainly not when he's wearing that tiny Speedo. Best of all is when he's not wearing anything at all, and he's eager for everything I plan to do to him.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

Fuck! I can't take my eyes off his butt.

And I can't put into words what I'd do with it, given a chance.

Can you?

Sincerely,

Justin

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: photography, college, athletes, diver, new lovers, ass man

Word count: 13,648

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WHEN I SAW YOU

By Alicia Nordwell

Who wouldn't enjoy taking pictures of handsome men with their clothes on... and off? Well, maybe a straight man. Of course, I make a good living because I love what I do. Balian Alexander is not a household name by any means, but for those who enjoy a special type of photography, I'm quite well known. The human body can be very beautiful when captured through a lens, and in my mind, there's nothing more breathtaking than a hot man stripped down to his skin.

After finishing my last project overseas, I'd gotten an invitation to a gallery back home doing a show highlighting movement. The idea of a college sports shoot struck me as the perfect vehicle to expose the bodies of active young men in motion.

Mental images of capturing a shirtless soccer player midkick, or a swimmer surging out of the pool, had me speaking very sternly to my dick. There were a few students around the quad still, enjoying the balmy late afternoon, and playing Frisbee. Their lean bodies were shining with sweat and one in particular caught my eye when he dove to the ground and rolled, his arm outstretched as he reached and snagged the fluorescent-green disk out of the air by his fingertips. His arms were ripped, but not bulging with muscle, and he was laughing as he came up and flung the Frisbee in a smooth arc back to his friend.

I couldn't take my eyes off him. He was facing away from me when he stood up, and his shorts pulled tight around his ass as he brushed some grass off his knees. My fingers curved at my sides in a subconscious desire to touch. I caught my breath when he stood up and turned around. He had a phenomenal body topped off by a chiseled jaw, strong nose, and wide eyes. Perfect.

Damn, I was going to have to be more careful with my ogling. Most college guys wouldn't want to know the photographer was looking at them with anything less than professionalism when they were posing with their clothes half off. This college had way more hot guys per capita than mine had.

Seeing that kind of arousal from a man looking at them could scare some of the skittish ones off, but with a certain sort... it could lead to all sorts of other shoots.

“Hey, Balian! Long time no see.” I finally caught sight of the hulking behemoth hidden among the college students milling around. “You made it on time for once.” Cort, my best friend and once roommate in college, rushed over and pulled me into a hug. He squeezed my ribs and pounded on my shoulder. I winced at the hearty buffeting.

Ouch. “Damn man, you should lay off the weight room.” I rotated my shoulder, making an exaggerated expression of pain. “How am I supposed to carry photo equipment if you cripple me?”

Cort laughed. “Oh give it up. I can see that you’re not letting yourself go either.”

I shrugged. I’d admit to a certain level of vanity. Beauty caught my eye; masculine or feminine, I enjoyed seeing people who took care of their bodies. Working out was a pain in the ass, literally on cardio days when I jogged, but my own appearance was a source of pride.

“I never understood why you weren’t in front of the camera instead of behind it,” Cort said. “I bet you could sell thousands of books if you put yourself on the cover like you did that muscle guy in your last one.”

I smiled. “Enrique was perfect for the service men and women edition I did. I don’t think that guy had an ounce of fat on him anywhere.” Except for his fat cock. He’d posed for me in his dog tags and a tight pair of boxer briefs and that thick ridge had thrown an impressive shadow when he’d leaned back against the camo Humvee I’d managed to score for the shoot. He’d belonged on the cover.

“Besides, I never wanted to model. I like to look, not be looked at.” I dug my elbow into Cort’s side. “And you told me that you had several guys interested in working with me on this project, right?”

Cort nodded. “Yeah, let’s go to my office.” I glanced back one last time as we headed across the long grassy lawn toward a brick building next to a huge gym. The word pool was emblazoned in white on the side with an arrow. I

barely managed to keep from licking my lips. Swimmers were my eye candy du jour. I had a definite thing for jocks, but those guys ran around in tiny little Speedos with their bodies all shaved. Smooth skin, lots of it, with water running down in thin streams...

“Tell me you talked to the swim team and I got at least one taker.”

“You still got a thing for them, huh?”

“Maybe.”

Cort smirked. “Uh huh, just maybe?”

“Maybe a little.”

He raised an eyebrow. “A little?”

I blew out a breath, jerking my hand through my hair, which was already starting to curl. It was humid in the offices this close to the pool and I could smell the chlorine in the air. Giving each other a hard time was our customary routine. It was nice it hadn't changed.

“What's with the inquisition? Damn! Okay, fine, a big thing for them.” Dropping a hand down to my jeans, I cupped my package and winked at him. “You should know; we did share a dorm room. You teased me enough about that poster of Finchum.”

“Like I was looking at your cock when you were staring at it. I'm not gay, man... the only thing I noticed was how much you were drooling after me.”

“Wow, your mind must be going then 'cause that sure as shit never happened.” We both laughed. Cort was a great friend, and we'd roomed together junior and senior years of college. He'd gotten his sports education degree while I'd gone for photo journalism. He'd played football, being a giant bruiser of a man, and now he was a defensive coordinator. While I loved to see muscles ripple when I was with a man, I had a definite taste for young and slim.

Not those tiny twinks, their bodies waifish with eyeliner and scarves, though I had nothing against them. No, my type was the solid, muscular type. Swimmers and gymnasts especially turned my crank. Male beach volleyball players were awfully hot too, but they tended to be a bit tall for my liking.

“Okay, okay, enough revisiting our cocky college personas. It’s good to see you, Balian. It’s been too long since you’ve stuck around for any length of time. You’re always off photographing the world.”

“I missed you too. It’s been what, a year and a half since you got married?” Cort nodded. “How is Amanda anyway?”

“She’s good. We’re uh,” Cort rubbed his neck but he was grinning again, a wide, proud smile, “We’re gonna have a baby.”

“Oh wow, man! When did you find out?” That required more hugs and more back pounding.

“The doctor said Amanda is due in October.” We dropped back down in our chairs. Cort was grinning like a maniac, his cheeks a bit flushed. I was really happy for Cort. He’d met an awesome woman and now they were starting a family. Somewhere in the last few years, we’d become real adults.

It was hard to picture Cort as a daddy though. Too many drunken parties during off seasons and sorority girls leaving his room in our suite had colored my impressions of him.

“Well congratulations.”

“What about you? Any special man in your life?” Cort had always known I was gay. It hadn’t been a secret from the first day I set foot on campus. I was too big to bully and I didn’t care about what any bigots thought. I’d heard a lot of crap from people, but eventually the idiots running their mouths learned the lesson that the world wasn’t the tiny little microcosm they’d known in high school and grew up. I’d had plenty of dates myself in college. Senior year I’d had a boyfriend for nearly nine months before graduation came and we’d parted ways as friends.

“I’m too busy to worry about dating.”

“And too busy fucking any guy you can get to strip down and pose for you, in and out of bed, right?”

Cort and I had kept in touch via Facebook, and granted, some of the pictures on there were suggestive. “Hey, I can’t help that I’m such a stud.” I hadn’t actually slept with any of my subjects in a long time. Things had changed. I was twenty-six, a lot of my friends were married and apparently

starting families. Settling down had begun to hold more appeal, but I'd created this image of the perfect guy for me and I'd yet to meet him. He probably didn't exist, but I wanted—I needed—*him*.

I might have been more of a romantic than I let on too. Just because I was gay didn't mean I hadn't fallen into the stereotype of having to be seen as the macho man. Apparently being around Cort had brought some of my bluster back.

“Well, stud, you promised me this wouldn't be that kind of shoot, right? I can't have any of my athletes volunteering if they're going to lose their place at school due to the morality clause. No nude photos, especially in any environment on school grounds.”

“I understand. I do more than erotic photography, you know. I told you, the gallery is doing a mixed media show featuring men in sports and they wanted to use some of my work in their photography exhibit. I need some guys to pose. I'm thinking swimmers in their Speedos would be as risqué as it got, all right?”

“Coach says whatever the attire and setting the guys are comfortable with, within that limit, is fine by the college then. He checked with the general counsel, just to make sure.”

I relaxed into my chair. “Great. I can't say how much I appreciate your help with this. Do you mind if I use your office to interview the guys who volunteered?” I needed to meet all of them and it helped to put them at ease if our first meeting didn't happen when they were expected to pose for me. I'd found it took a lot of tension out of the situation, plus I planned better when I saw my models in person.

“Sure. I need to go to a doctor's appointment with Amanda tomorrow, so my office is your office.” Cort stood up and rubbed his hands together. “Now, she told me to bring you home for dinner or else. She's making lasagna.”

“Homemade?” My mouth watered. I loved homemade lasagna, but I couldn't cook for shit. “I'm so there.”

I put my camera down on the desk along with a portfolio of some of my work. I'd already finished my coffee, having desperately needed the caffeine to wake me up, and I chucked the empty cup in the garbage. The locker room smelled like chlorine plus a musk of dirty towels, dripping faucets, and sweaty men. I'd played sports through high school but wasn't good enough to earn a spot on a college team. Every gym had locker rooms though, and I'd spent a lot of time working out to keep my body in shape, enough that my polo shirt was tight around the muscles of my shoulders and biceps and loose around my trim waist.

Amanda had fed me well the night before and sent me home with leftovers. Her lasagna was probably going to require at least two hours of running, but I'd do it later. A knock at the door made me look up.

"Oh nice," I said under my breath. It must not have been quiet enough because the guy leaned against the metal doorway, posing casually.

"You like?" He slid a hand through his strawberry-blond hair that hung in loose curls down over his eyes, pushing it back. He had blue eyes and pale skin, with just a dusting of freckles over the bridge of his upturned nose. He had a solid torso with thick thighs not hidden at all by his jeans and tank top, all boy next door. I could see him now, partially crouched, the bat a long extension of his hands as he swung. I definitely liked.

"Come on in." He had a bit of a farmer's tan going on around his neck that exposed a large part of his neck and shoulders. I gestured toward a chair. "Baseball player, right?"

"Yeah, how'd you guess?" He came and sprawled into one of the two chairs in front of Cort's desk. "By the way, I'm Sammy Mocone, Mr. Alexander."

"Nice to meet you. You can call me Balian. I'm not into formalities. And I know athletes, I guess. It's all in the details." I waved a hand at his chest. "Your tan line gave you away. Lacrosse guys wear pads, so even though their uniforms have a V-neck, they don't have so much skin exposed. Track guys usually wear tank tops and swimmers wear next to nothing at all. You don't look like a golf or tennis player."

“Wow, I never really thought of something as small as a tan from a uniform telling someone so much. You learn all that from being a photographer?”

I grabbed my portfolio. I sat in the chair next to his so I could point out different elements of the pictures as he flicked through the leather binder. “Photography is about seeing the subject. It’s not always about the perfect shot, but it is about finding the right perspective to share what makes the subject stand out.”

Sammy looked up at me. “So how would you take my picture? Coach Stivens said you wanted action shots, right?”

“Exactly. I’m looking to photograph college athletes but I want movement shots, not portraits.” This was where it could get a bit more than some of the guys could handle. “Though you wouldn’t necessarily be dressed like you would to actually play. I want to show the musculature of your bodies as you move.”

Sammy listened when I talked to him about showing off his chest and stomach and didn’t seem to be put off by the idea. “Would I wear my school uniform?”

“No,” I shook my head, “I don’t want the school colors. I plan to get some uniforms after we finish the interviews for the athletes who agree to pose. I think white pants and a blue jersey for you.” Dark blue would set off his ice blue eyes and pale skin. That rust orange and dull gray of the school uniform was not going to be in my shoot, not a chance in hell. “So what do you think? You in?”

“We get paid?”

“Two hundred, at the conclusion of the shoot, and I’ll make a copy of the prints for you.”

“Sweet.” Sammy’s eyes lit up.

My next two interviews were just as productive. I had a baseball player, a field hockey guy, and a runner all agree to pose for me. The runner had dark skin that gleamed under the indoor lights. I couldn’t wait to see how the pictures I got would look on the screen; under natural light his skin would look

like mahogany silk. My growling stomach heralded lunch. The sub I'd picked up at the store was in Cort's small refrigerator in the corner of his cluttered office. It was the same one he'd had in his dorm room when we were still in college. I snorted when I saw the sticker of the naked chick's silhouette on the side partially torn off.

I could use a little fresh air, so I went outside. The lawn was a lot busier during the middle of the day with college kids everywhere.

I sat under the shade of a large elm tree to beat the heat creating shimmering waves in the air so I could people watch in comfort. These guys weren't that much younger than me, at least the seniors weren't, but it felt like being dropped back into a whole different world when seen with the eyes of an outsider. Instead of making me feel younger, I felt older. I sat there picking at my spinach, pulling off leaves and eating them plain as I watched everyone bustle about. There were a few study groups leaning over books, some people eating lunch like I was, and a few couples snuggling together on the soft grass.

The guy who'd made that impressive Frisbee catch the day before was back. Today they were playing shirtless. Those strong arms were attached to a nice chest, with rounded pecs and small brown nipples, tapering down to a lean waist. The muscles on his sides pointed straight down into his loose athletic shorts that couldn't hide a taut ass that swelled round and firm. He was gorgeous, and the way he moved... it was smooth, like he was gliding through the air. He could have been a statue brought to life with that bronze skin.

All through the evening before, flashes of him moving had distracted me from my visit with Cort and Amanda. It'd been ages since I'd wanted someone like I wanted him. I'd regretted not taking the time to go talk to him. The need to touch him had not gone away, and now that I saw him again I was just as drawn to him. He looked happy, and there was something about him that made me want to be the one making him that happy. I'd dreamed of kneeling between his thighs as he sprawled out on my bed, caressing and touching those round cheeks, turning the younger man into a ball of need.

I would turn that dream into reality, if there was any possible way and he showed even a glimmer of interest. I'd settle for him in my portfolio, if I couldn't get him any other way.

Crumpling up the paper from my sandwich, I jogged over to the garbage. A glance at my watch showed I had twenty minutes left before I needed to head back to Cort's office. I pulled out my wallet and grabbed a business card.

"Hey, can I borrow your pen?" The girl looked up at me in surprise, but when I smiled at her, she blushed and held up the blue ballpoint she was using to doodle with.

"Sure."

I scribbled on the back of the card and then handed it back. I turned around and then stopped. Looking back over my shoulder, I caught her frowning. "Thanks for letting me use your pen."

"You're welcome," she said slowly.

I headed over toward the Frisbee guys. Patience wasn't my strong suit, but I managed to wait until the tanned temptation flubbed a throw and sent his partner jogging off, chasing the disk as it rolled away. "Hey!" I called out to him. "Can I talk to you a second?"

The guy looked up from where he was grabbing a bottle of water out of the side pocket of his backpack. "Uh..."

"My name is Balian Alexander. I'm doing a photo shoot here with athletes from the school, and I was wondering if you would be interested. I didn't think about showing off a Frisbee player before, but with that physique," I let my eyes drift up and down his body, "and your coloring, I couldn't pass up at least asking you if you'd be willing to be a subject."

He cocked his head to one side as he looked up at me. His hair was barely more than a soft fuzz on his head but the blond locks were streaked nearly white. He must spend a lot of time in the sun.

"You want to take my picture?"

I nodded. "I do. I've permission from the college and the coaches to ask the athletes who are interested. I'll be paying for your time. I'm offering two hundred dollars plus copies of the prints." Leaning closer to him, I held out my card. My nostrils flared, picking up the spicy scent of his cologne, but I also smelled chlorine. It was warm enough, maybe he'd been swimming earlier.

Oh, now I'd have a new fantasy with him. I made a mental note to make sure there was a spare set of sheets in the linen closet. "You can ask the coaches if you like, so you know I'm not some random weirdo. Or some of the athletes. I've already met with three who agreed to be a part of my show."

Long fingers took the card from me. He studied my information on the front then flipped the card over and read the back. "Five o'clock?"

"That's when I'm done with my scheduled interviews. I'm working out of Coach Stivens's office today to meet with the athletes interested in modeling. I'd love to have you stop by so I can take some test shots and talk to you more." I held my breath, hoping he'd say yes. The more I looked at him, the more I saw how perfect he was. My dreams of him hadn't done him justice.

"Okay."

I let out my trapped breath with a whoosh, grinning at him. "Great. Okay. So, I'll see you at five." My phone beeped. Damn, lunch was over already. "I have to go. I'm expecting a swimmer, a thrower, and a wrestler this afternoon."

"Thanks for coming over, I guess." He smiled at me and my dick stirred. He had a gorgeous smile; his nice plump lips pulling back to frame even white teeth. They weren't pink; he was shades of bronze and brown all over, even his eyes looked like toffee. "Oh, my name is Paul." He held out one of those hands with their long, lean fingers. I didn't feel sparks when we touched for the first time but if crap like that was real, I would have.

"Balian."

"You already said that."

My face heated up. Damn, it had been a while since a guy made me blush, much less one younger than me. "Right. Sorry." My phone beeped again. "I don't want to be late. Appointments." I let his hand go.

"See ya later."

I sincerely hoped so. Joking about my ideal type with Cort was easy enough to do, but actually acting on it with a guy I found attractive was a little different. I played the smooth photographer, but a hot guy could turn me inside

out faster with a simple “Hey, how’s it going?” than I was comfortable admitting.

My afternoon interviews went all right, but I was distracted through them. Luckily, they were all fit, attractive, and willing to be photographed. The wrestler’s ears, thick and somewhat misshapen, caught my interest.

“Cauliflower ear happens when the cartilage breaks,” Sammy said, lightly tapping the swollen bulge on the outside of his ear. “Even with our protective gear, though that helps. Mine isn’t as bad as some wrestlers I’ve competed against; Coach is pretty insistent we wear head gear even while practicing. It’s not that bad, right?”

“No.” It brought interest to an otherwise rather average, if thickly muscled, young man. That and the curls that peeked through the unbuttoned collar of his polo would provide an interesting contrast to the shiny fabric of the black singlet I was planning on getting him. I had him take a few stances. The light would be more diffused in the gym, since the lights were higher than the office fluorescents in the ceiling but it was enough to give him an idea of how I’d show him. I showed Sammy the shots.

“See, this will be darker than the shots I take for the show, but even with the bright light in here the shadows are subtle. Just enough to create visual contrast.” He smiled at me as I traced his ear on the viewfinder.

“Okay, I’m in.”

I was happy to get another new subject. I had quite a few different athletes. If I included three different poses from each one, I’d have a good mix for the showing.

When I least expected it, the golden god kept popping up in my head. I kept thinking about how I’d photograph him. Definitely outside in the natural light to show off that tan and white hair. Something about him caught every artistic desire in me to touch, to taste, to possess. Instant lust... though I’d be happy just touching him. My fingers curled around my camera as I sat at Cort’s desk waiting; I wished they were touching something softer, smoother.

My eyes drifted shut as I leaned back and I saw him, Paul, again in my mind. The golden sun was shining on his skin. This time I trailed my fingers

down his shoulder, tracing the small freckles that speckled the tanned skin. I ran the backs of my fingers down the back of his arms to those big hands. I sent shivers down his spine when I drew small wavy lines on my way back up, and then let my hand wander down that fine back.

He had a deep ridge on either side of his spine, creating a small trough that would be perfect for my tongue. I slowly sank down, relishing the salty sweat of his skin as my goal came within reach.

That ass.

It was perfectly shaped, round and tight enough to bounce a quarter off. The smooth fabric of his shorts hung over the top curves, and then loosened over those dark, muscular thighs. I pulled the waistband down, baring just a hint of the top of his ass—

Knocking at the door brought me out of my reverie. I jerked in my chair, leaning forward and hiding my raging arousal behind the desk. My eyes opened, and my jaw dropped.

Paul was standing in front of me in a Speedo with a small towel over his shoulders as water dripped down his body.

A Speedo.

“Balian? You okay?”

He was in a Speedo. I blinked and struggled to find my voice. Any professionalism I might have been able to muster was gone. “Fine,” I croaked.

He raised an eyebrow, using the end of the towel to scrub at his head. “Okay,” he said slowly. “Sorry I wasn’t here at five. Coach kept us late after practice. You mind waiting while I shower? Or you could come into the locker room and tell me more about this show you’re doing.”

Thank heavens I was wearing tight silk boxer briefs and loose jeans. I made sure my polo hung down over my crotch as I stood up. No way would I miss out on seeing more of Paul. Christmas in... well, it wasn’t July, but damn!

“Lead on.” I let out the faintest whimper when Paul turned around. Damn, damn, triple damn. Luckily, he must not have heard me because he didn’t turn

around. I gathered what was left of my wits, the few I had to begin with, and managed to get out a whole sentence. “So, are you on the swim team?”

“Dive team, actually. I do spend a lot of time in the water. Frisbee is just for fun.” He threw his towel down on a bench. I straddled the end, letting my shirt pool on the bench. “We’re almost ready for Nationals. Only two of us made it this year, so Coach is pushing us hard.”

He stretched and grimaced as he popped his back. “I am ready for the weekend.”

“You don’t dive on the weekends?”

He shook his head. “Usually I’m in the pool every day, but I’m taking this one off. I need a break and to visit the trainers for a massage. I think I pulled something along my glutes.” He rubbed at his ass.

My god. He needed his ass massaged. I’d daydreamed about fondling those smooth curves all day. I licked my bottom lip, about two seconds away from offering, when he hooked his fingers in those insanely small shorts and peeled them off, bending over to push them down his legs.

That time my gasp was loud enough to echo in the locker room. Paul stood up, looking at me. He had a mischievous look on his face. “Like what you see? Want to take this photo?”

He was standing slightly sideways to me; I could see he actually had a tan line from his Speedo. The flesh there was a light, pale white standing out in stark contrast to his deep-bronze tan everywhere else. There was the lightest fuzz all over his ass that became small blond hairs on his legs. He had deep ridges going along his hips, pointing straight toward a nice-sized cut cock hanging over smooth balls.

Paul ran his hands over his ass. My fingers twitched, and I clenched the edge of the bench.

“Still natural. Not all divers shave, but I like it. I won’t until just before Nationals. Do you like that, or do you want to see all this skin smooth and hairless?”

I was completely mesmerized by his hands stroking over those sweet curves.

“Hmm, I think you like something. You’re an ass man, aren’t you, Balian?”

“Yes.” I licked my bottom lip and then somehow tore my eyes from his body to stare up at him. “Wait. How did you know that I...”

“My mother loved Faces of France when it came out two years ago. You actually used one of her cousins as a model. I looked you up and found out that wasn’t the only type of book you’d made. The human body seems to inspire you to create some of the most beautiful shots I’ve ever seen... but you seem to highlight one part over and over in your erotic pictures.”

I couldn’t help but look right at his ass.

“When you gave me your card, I knew exactly who you were. I couldn’t believe you were shooting here or that you wanted me to pose for you.” His voice lowered. “I saw you watching me.” His cock started to plump up, right there in the locker room.

“Paul.” Here he was, the embodiment of my type, and he was hitting on me. “I don’t know...” I let go of the bench with one hand, flexing my sore fingers. I ran my hand through my hair, desperately trying to clear my mind of the lust that was turning me into a blithering idiot. “The college has a-a morality clause.”

“I know, but I’ve loved your work for years.” He smiled at me. “I have to admit I’ve had a huge crush on you for a while.” He ducked his head. “I had to pinch myself when I heard you groan in the hall. I peeked in the mirror while we were walking in and saw you looking at my ass. When I’d heard you moved here last year I dreamed about meeting you and making you want me. I didn’t know you knew any of the coaches here though.”

“You don’t have to make me.” My voice was breathless. My heart was racing. I’d never had this reaction to a fan, but I’d never seen anyone I wanted as much as I did Paul. I stood up but I didn’t reach for him. I didn’t want the first time I touched him to be in the locker room. “Why don’t you shower while I get my stuff? Meet me outside and I’ll take you to dinner.”

“Dinner?”

I took a deep breath. “To start.”

Paul grinned and rubbed his hands together. “Sounds good.”

“I’ve always been amazed at your talent. You had a show before you even entered college. Your junior year, you put out your first book. I mean, I know you know what you’ve done, but well... I’m still a bit in awe, I guess.” Paul took a bite of his steak, closing his eyes slightly as he chewed. A little sauce had dribbled on his lip, and I watched avidly as he licked it off.

“My parents got me a camera when I was six. I’ve been taking pictures ever since.” I shrugged one shoulder. “It’s a lot of trial and error.” A *huge* amount of trial and error. I couldn’t begin to count the number of rolls of film I went through before digital became available.

“A lot of what I do is practice,” I said. “I guess there’s such a thing as a talent for it, just like some people have a talent for sports, but knowing how to create a shot with good composition takes training.”

Paul nodded. “Like diving. I’ll never be Olympics material, and I know it. I’m good enough to have gotten a full-ride scholarship and keep it, but only because Coach dogs us to practice.”

“So you don’t plan to conquer the world one plank at a time?” I’d already finished my grilled chicken breast and steamed vegetables, but I was sipping the cup of Irish coffee I’d ordered while Paul finished his steak.

“Nope. I’m going to be an environmental engineer.”

“Wow. That’s quite the goal. I’m impressed.” I took another drink of my coffee, enjoying the sweet cream and the bitter dark roast.

“I already have a line on my first job when I graduate next year. I’ve been interning at Joabcon Inc. during the summers. I’m hoping to land the junior engineer position at their corporate office here when I’m done next May.” The waiter came over and offered us a refill on our coffee. I put my hand over my cup. I didn’t need caffeine jitters.

Paul’s silverware clinked as he set his fork and knife down on his plate, letting the waiter take his dirty dishes. He picked up his coffee. He took it black, which had surprised me a little. “So tell me more about this photo shoot. Are you doing a new book too?”

I shook my head. “Gallery show this time. I’m taking a short break from the books. I haven’t done a show in a long time, but it felt right. Besides, I’ve been all over the world in the last year. I need some time to relax at home.”

“And you’re using athletes.”

I took the folder with the check and tucked my credit card inside, leaving my wallet on the table. “There are a few artists doing conceptual art, a modernist painter, and a sculptor all using the concept of motion in their pieces. I wanted to use athletes.”

“Why not go with pros? Well-known names that people would recognize.” Paul leaned back in his chair, toying with his napkin.

“This isn’t about the athletes themselves. This is about the way they use their bodies, how they move and bend in the pursuit of their sport. That’s why I decided to use college-level athletes instead of pros. I thought you’d be great as a Frisbee player, but I’d love to have some photos of you diving. I’m paying, and you’ll get copies of your prints. We’ll make an extra one for your mom.” I winked at him. “I’ll even sign it.”

Paul chuckled. “You know how to butter a guy up, don’t you? Dinner, promises of money and gifts...”

The waiter came back with my receipt, stopping me from replying. I couldn’t look away from Paul, not even as the waiter thanked us and then left. I leaned forward, lowering my voice. “The money and prints are yours if you agree to pose for the show. Dinner—and anything else that might come after—is us spending time together because we want to, no obligation involved.” My voice was husky. I wanted Paul, but not if he thought there were strings attached.

His foot brushed my calf under the table, rubbing up and down gently. I’d never had someone play footsie with me before. I’d never understood the appeal but now the illicit movement made me shudder.

“I’m thinking we should go back to your place.” Paul raised an eyebrow at me when I hesitated. “Because we want to.”

I put my card back in my wallet with shaking hands. “After you,” I said. I tucked my wallet into my back pocket when I stood up, before following Paul out of the restaurant.

“You know,” Paul said on the way to my car, “you like to walk behind me an awful lot.” He glanced over his shoulder at me. “Any particular reason why?”

Uh huh. The tight black jeans painted over his perfect butt. He’d already blown the cover on my fetish wide open, so why hide it? “You have the best ass I’ve ever seen.” My hands positively ached to touch him.

Paul laughed. I enjoyed the light sound and the way his eyes lit up with humor and desire. He held out his hand, and I reached for it, letting him pull me up beside him. He tugged my arm around his waist and then slid my hand down. The firm muscles flexed as he walked, holding my hand to him with his palm covering mine. I swallowed hard, rubbing my palm in small circles and then squeezing one cheek.

“Oh.” He pushed backward into my hand, arching his back.

I couldn’t believe I was touching him. It had only been a day since the first time I saw him, but he’d occupied much of my mind since then. Lust slammed into me and walking got awkward really fast.

“How,” he stopped and cleared his throat, “how far is it to your place?” Paul asked.

“Twenty minutes.”

“Too long,” Paul groaned.

“I’ve a king-size bed and a dual-head shower.” I knew exactly how a college student lived in the dorms, having only left them a few years earlier myself.

“We’ll survive twenty minutes.” It might be the only foreplay I could get, if Paul was as eager as he seemed. I loved seeing him practically vibrating with the need to touch and be touched.

A slow smile spread across my face. The drive felt like a lot longer than twenty minutes because at every light Paul would reach over and stroke my leg, the caress creeping higher and higher each time. The edge of his pinky skimmed the bulge of my cock at the last light before the turnoff to my street.

Sweat broke out on my forehead. “Driving here.” He was a lot more aggressive than I expected.

“Not while we’re stopped.”

“Oh gods, you’re going to kill me.” I groaned, way too turned on for this kind of torture.

Paul’s face was cast with a red glow from the light. “But you’ll enjoy every second.”

My hands had a fine tremble that made turning off the engine and getting the front door unlocked difficult. Paul was standing close to me; I could smell the faint scent of chlorine under his cologne. The spicy scent coupled with the sharp undertone was heady.

I locked the door behind us, taking a moment just to breathe as I set my camera equipment carefully in the hall closet while Paul set the gym bag he’d brought down against the wall. I needed to find my control but I was hanging onto bare shreds by the tips of my fingers. “Do you want a drink?”

“No. I want to go to your room and try out that king-size bed you used to lure me here.” Paul held out a hand to me, and I took it. I was suddenly calm. “Lead on.”

My room was down a short hallway. I hadn’t made my bed this morning, but the sheets were mostly clean. I’d only slept in it for one night and my maid service had put fresh ones on right before I got home. I couldn’t wait to see Paul spread out across my bed, so I turned on the lamp on the nightstand.

Paul nailed me to the wall beside the bed when I stood back up. He pulled my head down and our lips met for the first time. He tasted like steak sauce and spice when I sank my tongue into his mouth. He moaned, his hands clutching the back of my head. I pulled him in close to me with both hands on his ass. Our cocks rubbed together as we kissed again and again, pulling away, gasping for air and then sinking back into each other.

“Fuck, you can kiss,” Paul said. His lips were swollen and dark where I’d nipped at him. I had one hand on his back, tugging his shirt up. I loved his mouth but I needed more of him. I needed his skin.

The first thing to go was his white T-shirt. All that dark skin over sleek muscles and I could finally touch. My dreams from the night before had been hot. I’d spent all night worshipping what I’d imagined Paul to look like, but he

was even more cut in person. I circled his small brown nipples, skimming the edges but not quite touching the sensitive tips.

Paul arched into my touch, and then his hands were tugging at my shirt. It choked me, too tight at the neck to come off over my head. "Buttons." Paul grunted, then fumbled my shirt back down and attacked the buttons on my polo, undoing them so he could rip my shirt off.

"Oh, nice." He ran his hands through the light hair on my pecs, tugging. "Very nice." I grabbed his hands and started walking him backward toward the bed. I pushed him down.

"Let me." I went to my knees in front of Paul where he sat on the edge of the bed. I wanted to touch every inch of him, to trace the muscles and taste the salty sweat on his skin. I started at his feet, unlacing his tennis shoes, and then tugging them off. His white socks were next, exposing long feet. His toes were calloused and two of them were purple. I barely skimmed my fingers over them.

"Hazard of the sport, the edges of those planks can be hard," Paul explained.

I nodded and rubbed my hands up his calves over his jeans. I slowly worked my way up to his knees, then his thighs. His legs fell open for me. There was something so sexy about a man in button-fly jeans. A sharp tug on each one popped them open. He was wearing shiny, red... Speedos!

"You seemed to like them." I swallowed hard as Paul lifted up his hips so I could pull down his pants.

The gorgeous diver I'd gawked over in the doorway at the gym was back, but this time he was in my bed. I groaned, unable to resist the wet spot growing over the wide head creating a bulge in the tight fabric. "Gorgeous." I leaned forward and mouthed that spot, tasting salty pre-cum as I traced the bulges with my tongue and then sucked hard.

"Fuck, Balian!"

"Not yet." I had to see that ass. I urged Paul back onto the bed, then over onto his stomach. His thighs were slightly furry, just enough to tickle my palms as I skimmed the heated flesh. There was just enough room for me to kneel between Paul's legs on the bed.

“Are you really sore?” I asked him. He’d mentioned needing a massage. I lightly traced the edges of the briefs where his ass met his thighs, tickling the sensitive area.

Paul flinched and shuddered, then pushed back. His voice stuttered when he spoke. “N-No. I just wanted to get your attention.” I smiled, impressed with his technique.

“Never been a problem,” I murmured. Cruelly, to tease both of us, I leaned forward and began stroking Paul’s back, up that deep groove along his spine. He had freckles on his shoulders, just a light scattering. I began kissing them, starting at the back of his neck and working my way down his shoulder. I paused to suck up a mark, biting down lightly and scraping the reddened skin.

“You’re driving me crazy.” Paul tried to push his ass against me, and I sat back on my knees. “I need you in me. I’ve been thinking about you since we met this afternoon.”

“Slow is better. Besides, I saw you yesterday so I’ve been waiting longer.”

“Sadist.”

I chuckled. “Maybe.” I had to be a masochist too, because I was killing both of us. My cock was pushing at my jeans painfully, and I could feel a growing wet patch in my silky underwear. I stood up, unbuttoned my pants, and pulled down the zipper. Paul turned his head to watch as I hooked my hands in my pants and underwear, and then pulled them both down at the same time.

His eyes widened as my cock slapped against my stomach. Fluid leaked from my tip in pearly drops to splatter against my stomach.

“You’re a leaker.” He licked his lips. “That is so hot. I want to taste you.”

There was no way I’d keep from coming if he wrapped those soft lips around my cock. I wanted to be buried inside him, in that ass, too much. By now, it felt like a need I didn’t dare ignore. “Later.”

He nodded his head when I crawled back on the bed. This time I didn’t hesitate. I began caressing both cheeks of his ass, rubbing with my palms and then running my fingers down the crack to his soft balls just bulging between his legs. I enjoyed the way he moaned when I rubbed his taint but I wanted skin.

“Off.” Paul squirmed as I took off the Speedos, throwing them onto the floor. Minutes passed by unnoticed as I explored those soft curves and the dark rift between them. I was immersed in it, reveling in the freedom to touch and caress as I’d been longing to do. My greatest fantasy had come to life and was sprawled out on my bed, moaning in pleasure, and then begging for more as I gave it to him.

“Please!” he shouted. The cry finally broke through the fog of pleasure I’d been lost in as I slowly drove him crazy. Paul was panting, his hands clenched in the sheet. “Now, please, now.”

I crawled up his body, my hips flexing as the underside of my cock rubbed against his ass. “Shh. I’m just getting what we need.” I kissed his shoulder as I stretched past him to the nightstand. I pulled a condom out of the box and retrieved the bottle of lube before I rested back. I ran my hand along Paul’s side to his hip, pulling him up onto his knees. “Just like that.”

The lube was cold, so I rubbed my fingers together to warm it. “Hurry.” Paul looked over his shoulder, a hungry look on his face. His pupils were huge, almost eclipsing the toffee brown of his iris.

It would’ve been cruel to make either of us wait any longer. I started with one finger, stroking the outside of his hole, watching it flex and flutter. The tip of my finger slipped inside, and I twisted it around. Paul’s eyelids slid shut. Slowly I sank my finger inside the velvety heat. It was soft and his rim clung to me; he was going to feel amazing around my cock. I drizzled more lube on my fingers, then pushed my middle finger in beside the first, gliding them in and out a few times until his hole relaxed.

“More.”

“Pushy,” I said, but I pulled out and thrust back in with three. I stopped at the first knuckle when Paul winced. “Deep breath.” He took a shuddering breath in and let it out slowly as I sank in deeper, my fingers curling, finding and stroking his prostate.

“Ahh,” he sighed. He pushed back against me, riding my fingers and stretching himself. I started teasing the rim with my pinkie. I couldn’t take it anymore and pulled out. He whimpered when I left him empty, but I wouldn’t for long. I ripped open the condom package. The head of my cock was slippery; I stroked down my length, the muscles in my thighs quivering, then

slid the condom on and rolled it down to the base. More lube and then I was inching closer, spreading Paul's legs more and tipping his ass up.

"Relax for me. I'll go slow." My voice was deep, arousal giving it a hoarse rasp. Gripping my cock, I pushed forward, staring intently as I pushed open that tight ring until it flared wide around the thick helmeted head of my cock, and then snapped around the shaft. Paul tensed, and I froze. I slid my hand up his back, stroking the deep groove up his spine soothingly. We both struggled for a moment, him to relax and me to keep from shooting immediately as his muscles squeezed my cock.

I slowly moved forward, rocking my hips in small increments. Amazement shook me as I watched my cock sink into that perfect ass. Never, in a million years, would I have expected to be in bed with a man with such a beautiful body. I stroked the sides of his ass, holding still when I was fully inside him. I slid my hand over his hip, reaching for his cock. The slender shaft had softened. To distract him from the discomfort as he adjusted I began sliding my hand up and down the silky skin, rubbing the slit at the top with my thumb.

The need to move was too much. He was still tight around me, but he was breathing easier and his cock had hardened in my hand, filling it with a nice, heavy weight. Paul squirmed as I pulled back, his muscles clinging to my cock like they didn't want to let me go, and then moaned as I pushed forward. Every thrust in was gentle until he rose up on his elbows and pushed back.

I grunted. "Harder?"

He nodded.

Finally knowing he was ready, I stopped holding back. Sliding my cock almost completely out, I slammed in. My fingers gripped his ass hard, spreading his cheeks so I could see my cock sink in, over and over as we rocked together. Sweat beaded up and slid down my temples. Paul's body glistened as he met and matched me stroke for stroke. I leaned forward, sliding my free arm around his chest while I fisted his cock. I pulled him up on his knees, his back to my chest and stomach. Hot skin slid against hot skin as he spread his knees wide around mine and leaned his head back against my shoulder, opening to me fully. I could feel the fleshy bump of his prostate as I nailed it again and again.

The smell of sex filled the air, the musk of sweat and the spice of his skin saturated my senses. All I could feel was him, against me, around me. I sucked the fleshy lobe of his ear into my mouth, suckling and then biting down. Paul's spine twisted, wrenching his ear from my mouth. His cock swelled in my hand and he fucked back against me hard, slamming that perfect, tight ass against my hips and milking my erection.

"Balian!" he cried. I rolled my hips against him, enjoying the spasms tightening like a pulsating vice around me, as I ground my shaft over his prostate and he shot thick streams of viscous cum over my sheets. The last spurt slid down over my fingers. My balls tightened; I was so close. I lowered Paul to the bed; his back muscles flared as he struggled to breathe. He whined as I pulled out of his well-fucked hole. Ripping off the condom, I used my sperm slicked hand to stroke my shaft. Paul's cum eased the thrusts I made into the tight ring of my fingers.

Paul sounded wrecked as he asked, "Want some help?"

I shook my head, biting my lip. All I needed was that ass. I caressed it, rubbing the head of my cock gently into the crack until I couldn't take it anymore. Then Paul reached back and spread his cheeks, those dark tan hands gleamed against the pale flesh. Gasping for air, my stomach muscles and thighs burning, I shuddered and lost it. My balls drew up and sent a volley of cum boiling out of my cock to paint Paul's skin, a primitive claim I couldn't resist.

The sheer pleasure ripped a deep groan from me as I shook with my eyes closed, unable to keep them open to watch another second. I braced myself and stroked, drawing out every last drop as I came. Exhausted, I fell sideways on the bed... right into the wet spot.

I grimaced, my eyes popping open. "Ugh."

"What's that look for?" Paul asked.

"It's cold... you made a mess... on my sheets," I gasped.

For the second time, I got to see Paul's face light up as he laughed. Worn out, sated beyond measure, I shook my head and ignored the feeling. "Come here."

Paul snuggled against me, his face nuzzled against my chest. I didn't care if we were sweaty and sticky; I needed to hold him. I kissed him, gently and without the urgency from before. Our lips moved, tongues barely brushing against each other lazily. My lust was far from gone; if anything, I craved him even more. I wanted to fuck him all over again. I wanted to see him ride me as I lay under him, watch him lower himself onto my shaft. I wanted to bend his legs back to his ears and hammer my cock into him until he shot so hard he'd cover his own face in spunk.

I wanted to kiss every inch of him. I wanted to hold him in the shower, scrubbing him clean just so that I could make him dirty again. Most of all I wanted to grab my camera and capture the sultry look on his face right then, his cheeks pink and his lips swollen from my kisses, so I could keep this memory forever.

When I woke up Paul was laying on his stomach, the sheet and blankets tangled around his legs. The sun was shining on him as it hit the window, highlighting the golden skin on his face and turning his hair into a white nimbus. I blinked and looked at the clock. Wow, we'd really slept in. Sometime in the night, Paul had woken up and proceeded to wake me up in the best way possible. I'd urged him to kneel over me so that I could return the favor.

After we came again, moaning around each other's cocks, we'd showered. Then we collapsed back in bed and fell right back asleep.

My urge to photograph Paul was too much. I slid out of the bed and grabbed my backup camera off my dresser. I set up my f-stop so I could take some bracketing shots since my flash setup was in the closet. Crouching down by the bed, I caught my breath at the sight in front of me. From this angle, the sun lit up the blond fuzz dusting the taut curve of his ass cheeks. His body was all lean muscle covered in dark-bronze skin... other than that small area usually covered by his Speedo.

I got lost in shooting, changing angles and settings repeatedly until Paul stretched. I took several shots as he moved, focused on him intently. "Hold that, don't move," I said softly. He'd barely woken up, blinking those beautiful brown eyes sleepily at me, stretching his arm across the bed toward me.

Holding my breath so I wouldn't shake the camera, I pressed down the shutter release. The rapid clicking echoed my heart as it began to pound while I took a long series of rapid-fire shots. Paul licked his lips, wetting the smooth curves. I let out a big breath in a whoosh.

“God, you're beautiful.”

He smiled at me. “Normally I might feel insulted, but being called beautiful by you...” He waved his hand lazily at me. “Thank you.”

“Handsome wouldn't fit you because you *are* beautiful.” I set my camera on the nightstand, then reached up and laced my fingers together with his hand, still outstretched on the bed. “Good morning.”

“Good morning.” He yawned, looking at the clock. “For a few more minutes at least.”

“You were sleeping hard.”

Paul raised an eyebrow. “How long have you been taking my picture?”

Was he weirded out by having his picture taken while he was sleeping? He might be, especially because he was naked. I hadn't even considered that, though I'd once had a lover freak out and break my camera when he woke up. Damn. I should've stopped sooner. “Forty-five minutes?”

“You didn't even put clothes on, and you've been taking my picture for that long?”

I looked down. “I guess so.” It was a bit chilly with the air conditioning, now that I was thinking about it. The hardwood floor was cold under my legs as I knelt beside the bed.

“Come up here.” Paul tugged on my hand until I climbed back on the bed. He squirmed down and grabbed the blankets, pulling them back up and over us. I lay on my side, not quite sure what to do with my hands.

“Are you upset I was taking your picture nude?” I asked. “You looked so amazing with the light on you that I wanted to capture it.”

Paul smiled at me. “No. It was a little strange, waking up to a camera in my face, but I'm flattered.” He snagged a pillow and bunched it up under his head as he faced me. “You're an artist. I love that you wanted to take my picture.

Just... don't put those in a show or book, okay? That pesky morality clause and all."

I shook my head; I'd never do anything to jeopardize him that way. A surge of possessiveness shot through me. "I don't want anyone seeing you like that but me anyway." Oh damn. I felt my face heat up. I really needed to find a censor for my mouth. Talking to models I could do, even the ones I thought were hot. Paul had affected me strongly from the second I first saw him though. There was something about him that brought out the idiot in me.

He didn't get mad, or smirk, or do anything but stare at me.

Shit. Fuck. I'd really screwed this up. I'd let my possessive nature get the better of me. It'd ruined more than one relationship.

"Are you still going to want me to do the shoot?" Paul asked.

The gallery show was what he was worried about? A ton of people would be invited and would see the photographs, but it was different. "You'll be wearing a Speedo. People see you in it all the time for practice and meets."

"It doesn't cover much."

I ran my hand down his body under the covers. I stroked his hip, and then reached behind him to cup his ass. "As long as this is covered, I'll survive."

Paul began to smile. It started small and then grew wider. Soon he was laughing, the happy sound loud in the quiet room.

I raised an eyebrow. "What?"

"You're cute."

I'd been called many things, but cute... never cute.

"You don't mind that I'm possessive? Even though we just met?"

"Of my naked body? Nope. As long as you don't go crazy jealous, it's actually kind of hot. I don't like to share anyone I'm seeing either."

Someone he's seeing. I liked the sound of that. "So, this wasn't just a one off?" I caressed Paul's ass cheek, enjoying the smooth skin over hard muscle. The soft hairs tickled my palm.

"Not for me. I'd like to spend some more time with you. Do you have plans for today?"

“Before or after I give you that glute massage you mentioned yesterday?” I was excited in a way I’d never been before. Of course, I’d never been with the embodiment of my ideal man, either. He was tan, toned, and best of all, a swimmer. I loved how his smaller body fit in with mine, and watching his muscles ripple as he moved under me. We’d talked after we sucked each other off in the middle of the night. Conversation between us flowed smoothly.

Paul didn’t even seem to mind that I wasn’t nearly as cool as he’d seemed to think I was before he met me, especially with all the idiotic bumbling I’d done ogling him at first.

Paul chuckled. “Well, I certainly won’t say no to that, but I meant after.”

“I need to go shopping for some props for the shoot.” My stomach growled. “And get some groceries. I haven’t been home in a few months so my cupboards are pretty bare. You want to spend the weekend with me since you took it off from school and swimming?”

Paul’s eyes widened. “You want me to stay all weekend?”

“Didn’t I just say that?”

Pushing me over, Paul slipped over me, kneeling over my hips. The blanket slipped down his back. He leaned down, his hands cupping my face. They were soft against the bristles on my cheeks. I leaned up off the pillow when he fit his lips to mine softly, needing more contact with him. Our tongues met and tangled.

I followed him, demanding another kiss when he tried to pull away. I slid one hand around the back of his neck and the other found his ass to hold him still. I kneaded the warm flesh. I was already half hard and leaking on my stomach just from touching him.

Paul broke away when his stomach growled. He laughed, pressing our foreheads together. “I think the massage, and anything else, is going to have to wait. I’m starving and trust me, going without a meal is not a good idea for me. Or for anyone around me.”

Next time I was going to have groceries delivered the first day I was home. “Do you really need to eat now? I could—”

“Feed me!” Paul said in a monster voice. “Feed me!”

He didn't just... "Feed me!" he roared.

I burst out laughing. "Okay, okay. Jeez! Breakfast at the diner on fifth good? It's still popular with the college crowd, right?" Cheap meals, large portions, and all within three blocks of campus.

"Of course it is. Ooh, I want the Belgium waffle. With strawberries and," his eyes twinkled, "whipped cream."

I was going to have to wear tight underwear and dark jeans, otherwise I'd never make it through the day without a big stain on the front of my pants showing everyone just how much I wanted the gorgeous diver. "Let's go then."

Paul borrowed a pair of my silk boxer briefs since he only had a clean spare shirt and sweats in his bag. I could barely stand keeping my hands to myself when he pulled up the black fabric that was skin-tight over his round ass.

"Breakfast," Paul reminded me when I stared at him, my mouth parted. "Shopping." He pulled his jeans back on from the night before.

"Bossy."

"Yep." He winked. I managed to keep my hands to myself as we finished getting dressed. We held hands in the car over the center console but Paul didn't try to distract me from driving this time. We didn't play footsie through breakfast but I was just as absorbed as I'd been during dinner the night before. Paul talked about his plans after college again and his diving career through high school and college so far. He also asked me a lot about photography and my plans for the show.

"Hey, Arrow." Paul's head shot up. He wiped off a bit of whipped cream from his mouth with the back of his hand.

"Hey, Trav." Paul greeted the large guy in a pair of shorts and a tank top who stopped at the end of our booth.

"What are you doing here scarfing down carbs? If Coach saw you now you'd be in for it."

"Having breakfast, duh."

Trav looked at his phone and raised an eyebrow. "It's one in the afternoon."

"Yeah, so? It's not all carbs, anyway. There's some fruit on there." He stirred the bright red berries with his fork until they were piled up on the deep divots in his waffle. "Hey man, this is Balian. Balian, my friend Travis."

I held out my hand and Trav took it, shaking it firmly. "Nice to meet you," I said. "You go to college with Paul?"

"Yeah. We met freshman year at the pool."

The guy was tall with wide shoulders and chest, along with those big wide hands meant he probably wasn't a diver. He was too big. "Ah, a swimmer."

"Freestyle and butterfly," he confirmed. "What are you guys up to?" He looked back and forth between us. "I noticed you weren't at practice this morning, Paul."

"Nope, took the weekend off. I need a break. I met Balian yesterday at school. He's doing a photo shoot with some athletes for a show."

"Oh!" Trav nodded. "I remember now, the coaches mentioned a big-name photographer was looking for some people to let him take their picture. Not my thing, but that's cool, man. So you using Paul?"

"I sure am." I couldn't help the heated glance I sent Paul's way when I thought about how I was going to get him to pose. I'd had some ideas when I'd seen him play Frisbee, but as a diver I could do even more. Instead of getting upset at the way I was obviously ogling him, Paul smiled at me. Which was good, because I hadn't even thought about if he was out or not. Trav gave us both another look but didn't say anything.

"Okay, well, good luck with that. Hope you don't break your camera." Trav smirked when Paul flipped him off. "No thanks, man, besides it looks like you don't need me."

"Hey, I'm trying to eat here! You... me... ughs!" Paul pretended to gag.

Trav laughed. "Well then I guess I'll let you get back to your pig-out, and I won't tell Coach even though you just insulted me." He looked down at Paul. "Because I'm the better man."

He laughed when Paul flipped him off again. "Nice meeting you, Balian. See you at practice next week, Arrow."

“Arrow?” I asked when Trav walked away. Pink tinged the deep tan on Paul’s face.

“The nickname just had to follow me from high school,” he muttered. “In an interview after I came in first at State during my freshman year, my coach said I always went through the water like an arrow, straight and true. Back then, I was this scrawny little stick. The kids started calling me Arrow to tease me. Of course it stuck.”

I tried to keep a straight face but it wasn’t going to happen. I sank back against my seat, laughing helplessly. The visual was just too funny.

“You’re an ass.” Paul threw his balled up napkin at me, but he was chuckling too.

“Sorry,” I gasped. “Sorry.”

“No you’re not.”

I shook my head. “Okay, you’re right.” I was not sorry I’d met this amazing guy. Not at all.

It was a lovely weekend. We spent every minute together, many of them naked. Paul even posed for me several times. I got out my light equipment and caught some shots of him in front of a cream backdrop I’d set up in the small studio I had in my spare room. The nude pictures were going to go into a special file, only for us.

“Okay. Turn over and do that throw again.” I’d asked Sammy to get a fellow teammate to join the shoot. Wrestling was all about balance, movement, and judicious use of force. To get the kind of shots I needed for the motion of the throws I wanted to feature, I needed two guys. I didn’t mind the extra cost because it really paid off. The kid he picked was a bit smaller but so flexible I couldn’t believe some of the positions he managed to twist into.

After four hours, the guys were exhausted. Sweat was dripping off them. I’d kept a bunch of water available in a cooler and tossed them bottles and clean towels when the shoot was over.

“Thanks a lot you two.”

Sammy’s friend groaned as he collapsed on the bleachers while I cleaned

up my equipment and stored it. “Remind me never to become a model. Oh, my god, I’m sore!” he said.

I chuckled. Every shoot with the athletes I’d chosen went well. Posing for a photographer might be new to them, but I could tell they were all used to taking orders. They were more patient than a lot of other models I’d worked with, repeating each motion I needed until I got the shots exactly right. It took a few weeks to finish all the shooting and editing for the photos of the athletes for the gallery show. I didn’t have any trouble not gawking at them. Paul had been working hard practicing, so he didn’t stay over very often, but when we had time we were like two horny kids who couldn’t get enough of each other. The “massages” I gave him drove him crazy, but I enjoyed getting to do it.

The day of Paul’s shoot was overcast. It hindered my plans, since I’d hoped to utilize the natural light coming through the glass ceiling, but I managed to pull off a new idea I’d had after we’d met up with Paul’s friend Trav. As I set up my equipment, Paul’s coach expressed some concern about him diving outside of practice but I promised I wasn’t looking for anything fancy and wouldn’t push Paul to do anything he shouldn’t.

Cort had popped in to most of my shoots, and of course, he was there for Paul’s. Maybe asking him to help me clarify part of the morality clause wasn’t as subtle as I thought.

Paul was on the diving board so I could check the positioning and get the needed light readings.

Cort was there when I climbed down.

“You’re dating him, aren’t you?” he asked.

“Why do you say that?” I deflected his question with one of my own.

“The way he looked at you. Even more, the way you were looking at and touching him. Those Speedos don’t hide much, you know.”

I might have touched Paul a little more than necessary to get the readings but he was temptation incarnate. I couldn’t not touch him. Still... I frowned at Cort. “You shouldn’t be looking at him like that.”

He laughed and slapped me on my shoulder. I winced. “Possessive bastard. You haven’t told me about anyone you were dating in so long, I decided to

find out for myself who you were doing. It had to be one of the models you were using. I knew you had to have some other reason for asking me to look at the athlete handbook with you. So... is having your swimmer everything you thought it would be?"

"None of your business. Now, if you don't mind, I have to work. Don't you have some guys to go torture with suicides or something?" I set up the tripod and glanced through my viewfinder to line up the shot.

"You can only put me off for so long. Amanda said come over for a barbeque tonight, and no excuses. Bring your guy, or I'll tell her you have a boyfriend and won't bring him over."

She'd kill me. "I'll ask him. He is pretty busy getting ready for his competition," I said.

"Excuses won't save you. Even legitimate ones," Cort said over his shoulder as he left the pool.

That evening Amanda was grace itself, her gently rounded stomach leading the way as she brought out the salads while Cort grilled. Paul had agreed to come and he was setting the table while I finished plating the deviled eggs.

"I'll admit I had an ulterior motive when I asked you to dinner," Amanda said. She stood beside me stirring up a pitcher of lemonade.

"Oh?"

She seemed a little nervous. "I was wondering, and Cort said just to ask you and it'd be fine, but would you take some pregnancy photos of me and then baby's picture when he's born? We can pay you."

"A boy? You're having a boy?" I grinned at her. "Cort must be relieved to be on familiar territory." He was such a guy's guy, though he was extremely gentle with Amanda and always had been.

"Yeah, I think he about passed out from relief to be spared from the pink and frilly world of baby girls."

I laughed. "I bet." I hugged her lightly, her stomach pushing against me. "I'd love to take pictures for you. And you won't pay me a thing. Don't even think about it."

“Thank you.” She wiped at her face. “Damn hormones.” She laughed, her eyes shining up at me.

We went out with the eggs and lemonade. “Ready?” Amanda asked Cort. Paul was standing beside him arguing about some game between some teams I didn’t know. Flipping the last thick burger onto a serving plate, Cort nodded and we all sat down at the table.

The burgers were perfectly grilled, with a nice smooth cheese melted on top, but I didn’t tell Cort that. He spent the first twenty minutes of dinner teasing me about robbing the cradle and asking how many supplements I was taking to keep up with my young boyfriend.

Paul had taken it pretty well, but his thigh against mine began to jiggle. There was only so much he could say to someone who worked for the college. Fortunately, I didn’t have to worry about that. Cort shut up really fast when I told him how much it would cost if I made him pay me for the pregnancy and baby photos Amanda had asked me about. I never would, but that got Amanda on his case. She’d cracked him good upside the head and made him apologize for teasing us.

He went red in the face but muttered, “Sorry.” He stuck his tongue out at me when he thought Amanda wasn’t paying attention and earned another smack. We’d all laughed when Amanda grumbled about having two kids in the house.

Unfortunately, Paul’s trip to Nationals was the same time as the gallery show. He felt bad about it, but I knew life wasn’t perfect. It would suck being apart for a week though; we hadn’t spent more than two days without seeing each other since that first day when I’d made the best decision of my life.

“I’m really sorry,” he said.

“Stop saying that.” I stroked his face, giving him a short kiss. We were having dinner out to celebrate both events since we both had our own obligations and couldn’t be together. I opened his door. “Come on, get in. I have a surprise for you.”

We drove through the city, the sinking sun turning the clouds bright-pink and pale-lavender that contrasted with the darkening blue sky behind the

buildings. I put my hand on his thigh, unable to resist touching him whenever possible. We'd been dating almost six weeks and that need hadn't lessened at all.

"Where are we going?" Paul was looking around.

"I told you, it's a surprise." We were within a few miles of the surprise, so I asked Paul to close his eyes.

"Balian!" he complained.

"Come on, do it. Trust me." I hit my turn signal to make a right. "You'll like it." I hoped he would, at least.

Paul grumbled but he closed his eyes. As soon as I parked, he started to open his eyes. "No peeking!"

"You're being silly."

"This deserves a special entrance. I'll be right around to get you. Don't peek!" I hurried around the car and opened his door. Paul held out his hand and I helped him up onto the sidewalk. I guided him from behind, one hand on his elbow.

"Hold on."

"What are you doing? Are those keys?"

I unlocked the door. "Jeez, can you be patient for two minutes?" I teased him.

"Okay, okay." Paul stood there waiting while I flicked on the lights, only turning on half of them. I started walking him forward again, weaving our way around the room. I pulled him to a stop. "Right here."

I needed to see his face when he saw it for the first time, so I stepped to the side of him. Taking a deep breath, I said, "Open your eyes."

Paul's mouth dropped open. He was staring at a blown up photograph of himself falling toward the water. His body was outlined with a bright, white light just inches from the light blue surface of the pool, his whole body a taut line from linked hands to pointed toes.

I'd titled the photograph "Arrow".

He'd complained that I was a bigger slave driver than his coach that day. It was important to show the world how I saw Paul, and I was relentless in achieving it. I'd lost count of the number of times he dove off the platform, but I'd made it up to him with a full-body massage to ease the soreness in his shoulders and calves. It'd taken a strip of lights hung on the wall behind the area to create the halo of light around him. I'd wanted to recreate our first morning together, the first time I'd taken his picture.

"You're amazing," Paul said breathlessly. "I can't believe that's me. You see me like this?"

Every muscle stood out in his back and ass. I'd put him in a white Speedo for the shoot and the stark contrast to the deep tan skin of the rest of his body matched the white illumination shining around his body. He almost looked nude, but wasn't. It was a small compromise to my artistic vision.

He reached out and grabbed my hand, pulling me over to him. I put my arm around his shoulders, and he snuggled into my chest. "I didn't do anything special. Everyone can see you like this." I still struggled with that but I wanted to show Paul how he looked, his tight body sculpted in the quest of his sport.

"You're beautiful all on your own. I was drawn to your body when I first saw you. After we met I knew your body was great, but *you* were even more amazing. Of course I was right," I said. I smirked down at him.

Paul laughed and kissed me. Our lips met softly. "I'm glad you were right," he whispered.

THE END

Author Bio

Alicia Nordwell is one of those not-so-rare creatures, a reader turned writer. Striving to find something interesting to read one day, she decided to write what she wanted instead. Then the voices started... Yep, not only does she talk about herself in the third person for bios, she has voices in her head constantly clamoring to get out.

Fortunately for readers, with the encouragement of her family and friends, she decided for her own sanity to keep writing. Now you can find her stories both free and e-published! She can be found quite often at her blog where she has a lot of free fiction for readers to enjoy and working hard, or maybe hardly working, as an admin on GayAuthors.org under her online nickname, Cia.

Oh yeah, she's a wife, mom of two, and lives in the dreary, yet ideal for her redhead complexion, Pacific Northwest. Except for when she disappears into one of the many worlds in her head, of course!

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