



*T*HE *A*NCHOR *T*ATTOO

AND THE

*P*ISTACHIO *D*REAM

PAULA COOTS

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Love's Landscapes

An M/M Romance series

THE ANCHOR TATTOO AND THE PISTACHIO DREAM

By Paula Coots

Introduction

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

What Is Love's Landscapes?

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

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

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

Words of Caution

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

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THE ANCHOR TATTOO AND THE PISTACHIO DREAM

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Photo Description

A man with sandy hair, shaved close to the scalp. His facial hair is similarly close-cropped. He's leaning his head back, with eyes closed. There is a tattoo, a skull with wings, centered on his well-developed chest, and his upper arms are vibrantly tattooed, as well. His abs are pronounced, but not in that body builder way. He looks strong, but his face shows a hint of hidden pain, or perhaps the after effects of overexertion.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

I go to the gym three or four times a week. Not because I'm about getting fit and buff, but because I have a bit of an ice-cream addiction. Spending some time on the elliptical means I can eat as much as I want, almost guilt-free. He started coming into the gym about six months ago. I'd never seen him before, and I'd been going there for about two years. He looked like he could bench press a small car, and I would have been happy to have him bench press me. The best part? The tattoos. A couple of times, I'd found myself getting ever closer and had to scramble to avoid an awkward, weird, stalker kind of situation.

The thing was, my mom taught me growing up that guys with tattoos were scary. We'd actually run out of gas one time after she refused to get gas when she saw the attendant had tattoos. She'd never tell me why, but she'd cross the road to avoid them and was always telling me to stay away. But like most kids, the more your parents tell you to avoid something, the more it fascinates you. I hadn't yet worked up the nerve, I wasn't sure I ever would, to get one of my own, but men with tats? Oh, God, I wanted to lay down and purr and rub myself all over them. I'd had the pleasure of doing so a few times in my short twenty-four years, but this guy, damn, he was all my fantasies come to life.

I'd love to take the first step, but if he's straight, and offended, I'm toast. But he's so yummy. Like triple chocolate with caramel swirls and sprinkles on top. What to do, what to do?

Sincerely,

Tattoo obsessed guy

Story Info

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THE ANCHOR TATTOO AND THE PISTACHIO DREAM

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The green of emeralds. Sinew. Muscles sliding and bulging under the tattoos. I step a bit closer, I can't help it, I've got to see the details... aquamarine, black, orange, red, and yellow bleeding into flame. That winged skull centered on his chest, and those pecs...

Shit. I spin around and head right back to the elliptical. Admittedly, the wussiest piece of equipment in the gym, but still. I pick up speed.

Did he see me, staring at his chest like that? My mouth is drier than the West Texas sandstorm kicking up outside the gym's *hey, look at us working out in here* picture window.

The sweat shivers me. Not mine, necessarily, but the memory of the sweat that shines on top of the skull expertly rendered on his damn fine chest. I fan my hand at my face, then quit because it's so girly it even embarrasses me, especially here. Besides, I'm already *not* working out like most of the guys. There's so much grunting, and whips of laughter or shouts of "Hold it. I'll spot you!" going on that I can close my eyes and pretend I'm at a Roman orgy or something.

And, ah, all these man smells. I breathe in deep.

I open my eyes. I can see him a bit in the mirrors, my usual view. And he's often dropping his head back and pausing a moment, closing his eyes, lost in some rapturous music in the obligatory white ear buds. Or recovering from some major overexertion, maybe? He just doesn't seem... here, somehow. It's like I can almost feel him lift off through the ceiling. And then, bam, his eyes roam over to his next conquest.

Except, damn, why can't he head toward me? He's moving away from the machines toward the free weights, and I'm too far in the cardio section. I bolt off that sissy machine like the pedals have caught fire. As he hurries away, so light and quick on his feet, I watch him give a loud hand slap to two other guys.

All I know is, I've got to pick a new torture device so I can keep a bead on him. I don't know, maybe I've got a problem, because the past week, it's gotten

more intense, more desperate. I move over to the what-cha-ma-call-it machine for building killer triceps on one side, shapely biceps on the other. Out of the side of my eye, I watch him toss a medicine ball with some grinning black guy, who is also shirtless and also mostly shaved except for a fine dusting of hair over his scalp, along his jaw, and over his mouth. It's a pretty common look lately—one I refuse to adopt. I like my mop of spiky, dyed-black hair, and I don't care if it's so nineties or not. I just hope my eyeliner remnants are not too obvious.

The object of my affection is named David. I know. Ridiculously appropriate, almost too stupid to believe, but I've heard it. Not Davy, or Dave, but David. I watch him. He's hairless, his chest, armpits, back, and arms anyway, and it makes me wonder. I've never once seen him do more than glance into a mirror, apparently checking out his form, not himself, like a lot of body builders. He's got a serious kind of *I'll body slam you head first into the cement if you look at me wrong* kind of vibe going on there, anyway.

He keeps drawing my attention, and it's not just the high-definition ink. He's mysterious. I can't figure him out. Even now, he's not really even smiling back at his medicine ball partner, and waves off after about twenty tosses.

He's here for one thing: pumping iron. I can think of a few more things he should pump...

Damn, he's walking my way, with a swagger that's so pronounced, I've never been sure if it's a limp or not. He jams the buds tighter into his ears, his eyes downcast, his full lips moving.

I wonder what he's listening to.

I wonder why I can't ask? He walks on by, without even glancing at me.

Is it because I look gay as hell? He's out of my league and I know it. I've had other inky guys, gay ones, to rub on, and it's as delicious as mint chocolate chip ice cream. Or Cherry Garcia. Or...

Yes, I should think about that. Quit wasting my time.

My mouth waters just thinking about my guaranteed after-workout reward. I love ice cream. I have no intentions of bulking up, and I won't at this rate even if I try, but I do enough cardio so that I can eat my thirty thousand creamy calories a day practically guilt free. Now, we'll see if my arteries agree with that logic in six months when I get my next checkup. But shit, I'm twenty-four, I don't do drugs, I barely drink—I eat ice cream. What can be so bad?

Well, maybe this stupid gym addiction could be construed as a bad habit. I'm like some kind of animal—a dachshund on the scent of a badger, maybe—trailing after him, wiping my neck with my towel. I watch his head bob as he high fives some other non-inked dude who has given me the eye once or twice. Now, that dude is packing a couple of pieces of equipment I require, and good-sized ones, too, if all that flopping around in the red shorts is any indication. But he's missing the artistry, you know? And David's ink is perfect in every way, the best I've ever seen. Well-placed, vibrant, and not too much. The work on his arms stops just above his elbows, and there's one spotlighted killer piece on his chest, and then the masterpiece on his back.

Okay, so I stop myself as David heads for the dressing room. I have never followed him in there, I know I couldn't handle it. I pretend to sip from the water fountain and glance at his back and the phoenix that spreads its wings across his shoulder blades. Huge, glorious wings, tinged with all shades of red, yellow, and deep-down burning indigo. Eagle-like beak open wide, more flame pouring out along the curled tongue. Fierce, piercing eyes that seem to follow your every move. Gaping talons that look so real, I would never want to succumb to their razor grip in real life.

I've never been shy; I was popular in school. People even like me at work because I am a certified smart-ass motormouth, and a cloud of laughter usually surrounds me. So WTF? I have rehearsed talking to him in my head a hundred times, wondering how not to come off as a complete doofus. I could say, "Who does your ink? They're really great, with photo realism." I can think of a million things, but I can't utter a syllable.

Maybe if I had some kind of clue how he would react, maybe if I knew he wouldn't trash my fantasy by acting like a complete douche bag.

I catch a glimpse of his small bubble butt as he disappears. He always wears black Nike pants that hang low on his hips, with a white stripe down the outside of the legs. Same pair? Surely not. He couldn't possibly do laundry every day. But then... oh, lordy, my dick stirs as I think about what they would smell like if he *didn't*. And why pants every damn time he works out? Why? Why can't I see his legs? I bet they're covered with more than fabric, too, and I so want to see. I want more art. And the bulge is nice, but held firmly in place. My guess is the guy probably sports a good jockstrap since he seriously works out, probably even more than I know.

What I'm sure of is this: he's here forty-five minutes, every day, doing mostly free weights, and then thirty on the cardio. He probably comes in the

mornings and at lunchtime, too. It's a twenty-four hour gym. Could he possibly be here, more alone, after midnight?

Iffy, and I'm too lazy to check out that theory. It's a nice fantasy in the shower, anyway.

I can barely stomach this evening routine as it is, but the eye candy beats the worn-out gay bars in this hick town, and there's only so much TV I can stand before I start losing IQ points.

Believe me when I tell you it is very hard for me to stay busy this long in a gym. Since I have his schedule down now, I miss his cardio ninety percent of the time.

I head over to the thigh machine, but my heart is really not in it when I can't at least hear him grunting or see his reflection. I manage five wimpy-ass lifts and head back to the bench press machine. At least I can lie down on that one, in spite of the stinky vinyl.

"Hey," this guy says, and I lay there looking up at him and struggle for a moment until I remember him. Sort of. He flicks my gut with his gym towel, so I sit up.

Oh, now I know who it is. The tattoo. It's the traditional Japanese tiger climbing up the inside of his right forearm, complete with crimson, bleeding claw marks. I can't camouflage the disappointment. "What's up, Reg?"

"Nothing. Haven't seen you around much. Change your hours or what?" A nervous-looking smile. "I hope you're not just avoiding me, because—"

Oh, hell to the no. I hold up my hand, but I can't help stealing a glance at the body I used to find so beautiful. I try hard not to say, *Yes, I changed my hours, you arrogant prick, but not to avoid you. I switched so I can stalk... I mean, catch a glimpse of David. And like you should care.* I try to be normal. I'm not sure I've ever achieved that state. "Yeah, I get tired of the same old grind, you know?" Like him. What a boring lay, sorry to say. He had some pretty art, but he was so selfish and he rarely ever called except late at night. I had been too young or vain to actually believe that I could only be a booty call. I'd thought I'd found a keeper, was well on my way to a boyfriend, even, though it'd started as an immediate hookup. And when has that ever worked out for me? Still, I floated until I saw him at Baskin Robbins with some dark-haired woman, spoon-feeding her my favorite chocolate mint chip, and grinning like he used to grin at me.

Okay, so he's slipping her some ice cream; that's perfectly natural to do that with your friends, right? But not slipping her some tongue right after. Right at the table in front of God and everybody. Little kids! Families! The trauma.

Somebody drops a weight bar. Expletives and laughing draw me right back to this jerkoff.

My lips grow tight, like I am trying to keep his tongue out of my mouth. We'd had plenty to yell about back then. I wish he didn't think he could just pop me with a towel and give me that gorgeous grin like nothing had ever happened between us. I swallow and eventually say, "Well, how's Lisa?"

"Theresa."

I roll my eyes, a maneuver I save for spectacularly stupid moments from spectacularly stupid people. "Whatever."

"Man, I told you... at the time I was—"

I hold up my hand again. "Uh huh. Look, I'm trying to work out. I'm not here for social hour."

"Trying is the word, all right." A ridge forms over his nose, a frown like a caged animal. I used to find that attractive? God, what is up with me and these MMA-looking brutes? "I was just trying to be friendly, man. You used to crack me up, you're funny. We had fun. And don't give me that, you were cruising, you always were, even though I admit you hid it very well." He sniffed, shifted his weight. "I thought... maybe we could go grab some ice cream or something."

"Ah, such a low blow. I wish you'd stooped to that level more often back then." I stand up, feeling too sticky from the bench. "FroYo is more your style, honey. Please. Don't talk to me, okay? It's been, what... two years? And the passage of time hasn't made you any less of an asshole."

Reg flips me off and stalks away, his usual mature method of handling conflict. "Fucking queen."

"You should know. Does Lisa?" Uh oh. Was that a little too loud? I stare at his receding back, at the setting sun and all the tribal swatches under it that framed the storm clouds so perfectly you could almost smell the rain. Damn, his skin is pretty.

Some of the other guys are looking at me, but Sai's Gym is known for three things. Number one, all male. Number two, everybody minds their own

business. And number three, no funny stuff allowed, or the owner, Roid Roy, will toss your ass. And not gently, right out into the alley, and what transpires there nobody knows.

If Roy Sai sported some ink... he might have been worth more than a surreptitious glance or two. Well, and if he wasn't crazy, that would help.

Maybe what had just happened was almost funny stuff. I feel a few jungle stares, and there is a definite pause in the clanking metal. But then... okay. Maybe the confusion factor saves my ass this time. I don't think it will the next.

So, why Sai's for me when there's a perfectly fine Gold's Gym in Gay Town? Well, like I said, there's usually not a lot of drama going on here, and contrary to belief, as flaming as I could be when I let my inner bitch out, I didn't much care for all those size or muscle queens. So objectifying. And the way they mostly looked down their aquiline noses at me, this skinny ass with wild hair, who fits in there even less than the straight workplace in the fascinating world of data entry.

Sometimes it's okay to have a cube of your own.

I'm sure there are some great guys at that gym, really, if I looked hard enough and waited long enough. But I'm just not into that scene of meaningless, expected blow jobs in showers. You tend to get tender knees. And maybe I like it here because it's safer to dream than actually risk too much.

It's not like I'm lonely, that I don't have plenty of friends, or that I've even had too many of them for lovers. I mean, I even have my share of "best straight girls" to gossip with until the sun comes up.

I climb on the stair stepper and think about how I'd gotten into this whole scene in the first place.

One day, after work, bored and exhausted, I'd decided to just drive around, and caught a glimpse of this new gym. It was painted a forbidding black, smack dab in the middle of two seedy tattoo shops. I had wandered through them before, flirting with the idea of actually getting a goldfish or something until the whirring of the tattoo needles turned my stomach into a rolling ocean and out I'd gone.

Was I that squeamish or that brainwashed from Mama?

I stood and cupped my hands around my eyes so I could scope out the new place. Hey, could this feast of beef actually be the lost gay Mecca of gyms? All

the dudes looked a bit rough, but that certainly didn't rule it out. The equipment looked kind of old, but appeared to be well maintained. I noticed the red, hand-painted name: Sai's Gym. And I laughed out loud when I got closer and read the sign on the window that proclaimed, "Where you come to work out. No bullshit."

Well. It's a red neon sign now.

I remember thinking back then that driving out of my way on the route to work was a passing curiosity. Lord knows tons of flighty ideas course through my hyperactive brain frequently, and always have. Once, when the tattoo "parlors" were closed, I stopped and stood in front of the door again. I vowed that one day I would go in and just see if you had to sign your life away. I knew I'd get tired of it pretty quick, and didn't expect to find out there was no membership plan. It was a *pay by the month as you go* kind of deal.

And the solution to my ice cream craving struck me in a blinding flash. I could work out for real! I could burn enough calories to eat my favorite, tiny-bowled treat more than once a week... and in bigger bowls.

I've been coming here now for two years. And maybe, since this place is right on the same block as the thriving tattoo shops, I'll grow a pair and actually go through with it. And at any rate, browsing their new flash occasionally after a stimulating workout was more entertaining than watching CNN on the stationary bike.

I nod in time to the AC/DC thumping through the speakers. I like that it isn't too loud so you can listen to your own stuff in your buds if you want. That first day I sauntered into the dressing room, I half expected to slip into some easy action, because I knew from experience that I am of the build that a certain percentage of macho guys like.

I had carefully flirted with my eyes and got ignored mostly. I got scowled at once.

My eyes had worked plenty of magic before, and I knew it was a tool in my arsenal that I could break out in the right circumstances. I'd known it right off with the aforementioned Reg. And about a year ago, I'd had another one of those *I've found my artistic masterpiece* moments with a small but built Asian-American man, truly tatted up like a Yakuza. The only problem was... I think he really was a Yakuza. Or the American equivalent. That didn't stop him from having a sweet laugh and giving great head, but it did stop my heart after I saw the collection of guns one evening in his closet.

I could remember it, *just like it was yesterday*. How I listened to him in the shower, singing something about spinning around like a record...

We'd been seeing each other every weekend for over a month, and he always dressed so swank, in his silk suits, or leather jacket and perfectly ripped jeans that showed a death's head right above his left knee.

In the closet, I'd yanked on the chain, wanting a perfectly legitimate gander at his fine threads and saw no reason not to nose around. I mean, his cock had been up my ass maybe twenty times and mine up his about half that, so I thought I had earned the right to browse. Hmm, hmm, hmm. Immaculate clothes. Boots. I breathed in the smell of fresh laundry, dry cleaning, and his spicy scent. But at the back of the closet...

How would you explain a rack with two machine-gun-looking thingies and four hand guns? Pegs holding up a couple of holsters, one that looked like it should be strapped on your leg.

Either that, or a freakishly huge cock ring.

Gangster guns? No redneck hunting rifles or antique six shooters.

I shut the door, breathing way too hard, while he sang some other song from the eighties and I dragged one sweat-drying leg into my Diesel's, and then the other. Thank God I was in my no socks wearing phase. I slid my beige loafers on faster than an ill-fated television pilot gets yanked off the air.

He opened the door, steam billowing around him like a staged cloud, all one-hundred-and-twenty pounds of muscle and art, and my heart beat even faster. God, was he pretty. He said, "What's up with the pants? And you've got your shoes on? Uh uh. It's not Monday yet."

"There's a Ben and Jerry's sale at Thom Thumb, I just remembered."

He hung his head, his long wet hair inviting me to suck on it because I could tell he was getting horny again. I buttoned my shirt with shaky fingers. He said, "Why didn't you get in the shower with me? I was trying to lure you in with my fabulous singing."

I grinned. It was a joke of ours. He couldn't carry a tune in a teacup. "It almost worked, like a siren wailing from a jagged seashore." I slipped on my jacket, way too chill and cool, he should've known I was acting. "I'm sorry, Jim, I've really got to get home."

There was no sweet-eyed grin, nothing but the hard look my mama had always run away from and warned me to stay away from like the plague, too. I

could still hear her say, "Tattooed men like that... all they think about is themselves. It's the ultimate in vanity. Think about it, Tam. Why would they go to all that trouble, to display themselves like that? It's nothing but white trash, criminals, or psychos."

Yakuza Jim said, "There isn't an ice cream sale at Thom Thumb. What the hell is going on?"

My tongue tried to stick to the roof of my mouth. "I thought I told you. I need to go in early tomorrow to make up for getting off early this weekend to spend with you. And we both know if I stay here, there ain't going to be any sleeping going on."

That did it. The eyes softened and he laughed, and I remembered running my tongue up the inside of his thigh, tracing that raging bull up until I hit the Manga-eyed beauty that seemed to be worshipping his erection. I'd done enough of that.

He let me go, not knowing anything was any different, I don't think.

And I spent the night terrified he'd hunt me down and kill me... but... no. A few nail biting weeks. Just normal phone calls, and then calls not returned, and then... he left me alone.

Fortunately, he didn't work out at Sai's anymore. He'd never been that regular, anyway. He probably stayed so fit chasing down losers who refused to pay off loan sharks for their drugs. Or popping some caps in some asses for fun to spare me too much thought.

Crap in one way. Hallelujah in another.

Obviously, my ink record sucks. So Reg is a self-centered jerk. And with Yakuza Jim, Mom had been a tad too close to correct. Damn it, I hate it when she's right.

Lifting the biceps bar, wishing that I had worn my own earphones this time because some death metal ground through the gym speakers, I start thinking about Mama. I wonder if she'd been raped or something, by some tattooed thug. We'd even run out of gas one night, outside of Midland, because she didn't have a card that would work, and when she saw the tattooed love boy through the window, she wouldn't go in and pay, and she damn sure wouldn't let me do it.

Then, I think about how when I was around thirteen, I'd fantasized once in awhile that maybe my real father was dark and evil, like a tatted-up Darth Vader, instead of a computer nerd who apparently fell back into his passionate obsession with electronics once I became a component in their high school, night moves mistake.

I get up in disgust and wipe my face.

And then somebody taps me on the shoulder. I turn around and holy fuck, it's David. He's wearing a black, short-sleeved Polo shirt, with his coloring book arms showing. And slacks? What the... where are the usual jeans that accentuated that wondrous bulge?

His face gives away nothing. He's talking to me? And his voice isn't all manly deep, either, but more quiet. Like a psycho, maybe. "Why do you watch me so much?"

My knees feel like jelly and not the good kind. A fresh wave of sweat stings my eyes. I wipe at them with the limp towel. "Excuse me?"

"When I'm here, you're usually here. And you don't think I see you watching me in the mirrors? What's up with that?"

I look around at the floor, find my Gatorade. It's lukewarm, but I finish it, looking at his face, really trying to get a read on his eyes. But they are so brown, I can barely tell where the iris ends and the pupil begins. "I do not."

Muscles jump in David's jaw, under the fine auburn stubble, and I find myself trying to hide my crotch behind my towel. I have to say something. "I just like tattoos, man. That's all."

He runs his eyes fast over my body. I feel my dick stirring even more, though for security reasons it should be trying to shrink, probably. "Naw. You're not sporting any ink."

"Well... that's because... because I'm scared of needles. I pass out, I'm not kidding, or proud of it, but uh... well... I want tattoos, I really do." I needed more Gatorade. Or a gin and tonic. "I mean, yours are great." I prop my chin and cock a hip. Just one more time, I have to try to sound halfway sane. "Does the same person do them?"

A slight softening around his cheeks. "Yeah. All except one." He sniffs, and stands up straighter, crossing his arms. "Kat Von Dien."

My face feels blank. Obviously, I should know that name if I am such a tattoo aficionado. The silence hangs a second too long, maybe, but I've never been called dim. "Oh, wow. That must have cost a lot."

He beams. "Fuck yeah. It took me a year on the waiting list, but shit, she is just as hot in person as she is on TV. Hotter, maybe." He adjusts his junk, and my heart falls. I mean, it feels like somebody actually reaches in there and squeezes until juice spurts out.

Another straight one.

Why do I torture myself?

I think I say, "It's cool. It's the phoenix, isn't it?"

He grins. "Yeah, you can't miss her work anywhere, huh?" He tries to look over his fully clothed shoulder. "I just wish I could see what I paid three thousand dollars for. I've heard it's nice."

And then he laughs, and so do I. "Oh, it's fantastic. Why do you think I look?"

He nods. "I thought so. I just... couldn't figure out why you didn't have any ink or piercings or nothing." Again with the grin. "Do you want to see the rest of them? There's this great guy, his name is Charlie Watts, I shit you not, just like the drummer for the Rolling Stones. He's at Exotic Ink, and I don't let anybody else do me but him. Except Kat, of course. Man, I can hook you up. For real. I can get you a deal."

"Uh. Well. I don't know..."

He makes a face, like *what a dumbass*. But in a teasing way. He grabs my arm. "Come on back here, let me show you my art."

As I let this... fantasy man, this walking painting, pull me toward the dressing room, I feel like I am tiptoeing over hot coals, rising on heat waves. Up my thighs, over my face. I say, "Do you like ice cream?"

He looks over his shoulder at me. "What?"

I don't know how I manage to make any words at all. "I like to reward myself with some triple chocolate with caramel swirls and sprinkles on top after I work out. It's a tradition."

And his laugh... all I've seen him do is half-smile maybe four times in the last six months. Or grimace under three hundred pounds of iron. "Doesn't that defeat the purpose?"

"Exactly. I need a reason to keep coming back. I mean, your tats are nice and all, but that's hardly enough motivation."

So... I get dressed first. I do it fast.

Okay. I can stand here and watch him skin off his shirt, and show me the wild red, blue and green fish around his right arm. The snakes and skulls on his left. Smaller Latin writing on his wrists. He tells me what they mean, but I forget. His back. Something snaking down into the top of his pants back there, but he doesn't offer any more peek show.

He starts putting on his shirt again.

I say, "What about your legs?"

"Huh?"

"Aren't you going to show me your legs?"

The faintest hint of rose tinges his fair cheeks. "Well. My right leg is good. And my left thigh... I don't know, man, I—"

I sit on the hard bench. "Like I'd know the difference."

"Believe me, you would. My left leg is like... practice."

I frown.

He starts with the belt, then the zipper, and I wet my lips, wondering where the hell this is going. He drops trou halfway, stopping at his knees. Well, what do you know. No jockstrap, just very tighty whiteys.

For some reason my hearing starts acting crazy again, like he is speaking Russian or something. On his right thigh, a beautiful tree of life, dotted with bright red apples. A few had dropped to the base of the tree. More damn snakes. Fountains. It gives me a reason to squat, and get closer to him. It gives me a reason to memorize even more of his body. All I have to say is, "Yeah?" And, "Ah. Cool." And he keeps right on talking. I wish I could hear what he was saying.

I glance at the shapes beneath those bright drawers, then follow his finger back toward the owl on the top of his left leg. He says, "The only good part."

"What does that Latin writing down the inside of your thigh say? And why Latin? I mean, the Gothic script is super cool."

He shifts his leg so I can see better but says nothing.

Hairless and muscled, like I suspected. What kind of a freak am I? Maybe there doesn't have to be a reason I like the ink, other than it visually turns me on. Like ice cream turns on my tongue.

Like his dick would, if it shows any interest at all. Which it doesn't. I try not to look at it too much, but it is damn near as pretty in his undies as his ink and just a little bit too close.

I say, "These are all great. What are you talking about, practice?"

"My calves."

"Well, let me see."

He clears his throat, starts pulling up his pants.

My voice sounds so confident. "Let me see. Really."

He ducks his head again, letting the pants puddle around his ankles for a second, and then just steps out of them, tossing them on the bench. "I've had most of the bad ones covered, but this... hell, this is embarrassing." On the back of his left calf is a clunky anchor, of all things. Faded to that unattractive blue gray of old tattoos.

I say, "Yeah, well... I guess everybody needs an anchor?"

I glance up and he looks at me like I am so strange, but then he sort of smiles. "It was my first one. I don't know. I can't quite work up the nerve to get an elephant or something to cover it. It'd have to be that big and dark." He pulls at the muscle. "Damn. The definition sucks. I should cover it, but..."

I watch him, bent over, still pulling at his calf. He studies it longer than the others.

"It means something to you."

He looks up, and I can see even less of his irises. "Yeah, like I said, it was my first one. My friend did it in high school."

Maybe because I have my clothes on and he doesn't, I feel bigger than him. Older. Though I'm not. "But it's more than that."

Like Reg, he frowns ferociously. Apparently, I like that in a guy. "Why do you say that?"

I shrug, watching him. And since he doesn't look away, I don't either. After a moment, he straightens up and glances around the locker room. We are alone except for one person back in the shower area. It smells of soap and stinky gym clothes and sweaty men, and I don't mind if we stay here forever.

He turns and grabs his slacks, starting to get dressed.

Well, hell. I say, "Where do you work, that you wear slacks? Don't tell me you're a waiter. Though you must make a killing in tips, if you are."

He rolls his eyes. "I work at Roxanne's."

A high-brow piano bar. My eyebrows pull up, and I squash the instinct and stick my effeminate hands under my armpits. "Doing what?"

"What do you think?"

"They need... bouncers? There?"

He tosses his head back with a loud, sharp laugh. "I'm a bartender, asshole, and yeah, 'I kill it in tips'. Sooner or later, I want to open my own tattoo shop. I hope it's sooner. I've been apprenticing with Charlie."

"What?"

"No, Watts. Charlie Watts. Anyway, that's how you learn. I mean, you think you go to college to become a tattoo artist? I didn't want to show you my lower legs, because that's where I practice. From potatoes then to your own skin. But after awhile... you've got to have somebody trust you enough to let you do your first tattoo."

I sniff. "The anchor. I get it."

"That bad, huh? Well, I told you." He whips his head up to meet my eyes. "I always think maybe it isn't as bad as it really is."

I wish I could read him better, his body language. After studying him for half a year you'd think...

But he says, "I've got a little time before my shift starts. You want to go get some tutti-frutti or whatever the fuck you said earlier?"

In the parking lot, holding our gym bags.

He says, "Yeah, I'll meet you there. I got to get some gas first."

Oh, sure. Yeah. Right. He's really going to meet me. "You know where it is?"

He lets his head fall back. "Where are we? Dallas? Of course I know where it is. You want to follow me to the EZ Mart or something?"

I wave him off and hurry two rows over to my ancient Honda. "Nah, show up or not, what do I care? I'm about to have some killer ice cream, what do I need you for?"

He shrugs and climbs into his super-shiny, black Dodge Ram, and I act like I really only want my chocolate fix. I watch him drive off in the opposite direction as I turn right and feel about as empty as the super-size container is going to be.

And now, fifteen minutes later, would you look at this? I'm here and so is he.

Chocolate melts on my tongue, and I close my eyes on the almost stinging touch of mint chips riding on top. "Mmmm." I realize I've just made a sound and steal a glance at him.

OMG! OMG!

I'm sitting across a pink table that never looked tiny before, in a pastel parlor. It's like... we need a man-sized table, not a twink-sized. I'd always felt right at home until now. I feel like a blazing flame, and I'm really not. A few flourishes here and there, true, but now I feel like a flouncing sissy. I make sure to keep my butch on.

Actually, I can't believe I'm watching the peculiar way he eats pistachio ice cream. He takes the spoon and turns it upside down then sticks it way back in his mouth. Then he pulls it out totally clean, and then rolls the ice cream around for a couple of seconds. It's just about the sexiest thing I've ever seen.

I say, "It's the Pistachio Dream."

"Really? Is that what it's called? I didn't see that on the menu."

It isn't on the menu. "Yeah, you just didn't see it."

"Oh." Swirl, stick, lick.

Maybe he savors it like that because he hasn't had it in five years. Could he be that sensual in other sordid ways?

He takes another bite, kind of floats off into his own world for a bit, like he does in the gym. He doesn't look at me much, and how great is that? I can study his cheekbones, his long, pale eyelashes. They look almost like brushes. The ridge of his brow. I wonder what the bristle feels like on the top of his head. Prickly and fun? I wonder what that thicker-than-normal neck might taste like. Or...

I could just go on.

When he glances up at me, I actually jump and get a major brain freeze on top of it. I have to lean over, pinching the bridge of my nose. He laughs low, a purring sound.

“It’s not funny. Jesus.”

But I laugh, too, and wonder what the hell. The brain freeze wiggles into my esophagus, and I rub my chest. I notice him watching my hand, smiling around his swirly bite.

It just busts out of my mouth. “You do know I’m gay, don’t you?”

His eyebrows raise ever so slightly, and he takes that spoon out of his pretty mouth quicker than usual. “I forgot how good ice cream is, you know? I stick to a tight regimen. Soy protein isolate—”

The freeze is burned away by flustered jitters and the heat in my ears. It feels like they’re about to melt. “Did you just hear me?”

He nods, not looking up, not smiling, for what feels like five minutes, though it’s only a couple of beats. “Yeah, I heard you. So?”

I run my hands through my hair. I try to roll out the full arsenal of my charm, no matter how lame I feel. “I’m glad you’re so well adjusted and secure in your manity.”

“My ‘manity’? What the fuck is that?”

I dare only half a spoon. Brain freeze hurts and I’m not totally recovered. “I like to make up words.”

“Hmm.”

“You don’t like words much.”

He shrugs, and mixes up the remaining ice cream in his bowl, making it creamier. “You can’t lie if you don’t talk, right?”

I sip some water from a purple cup. “Ooh, revealing. So uh, you lie a lot? Or have a lot of people lied to you?”

He adjusts himself in his seat, glancing around at the noisy-ass kids and the bored parents playing with their iPhones. “Maybe.”

“Sorry, but I just have to get this little detail out of the way. Are you a serial killer?”

“You say the weirdest shit.” It really looks like he’s trying to stay tough and not smile. I feel like I’m winning something. He says, “Yes.”

I roll my eyes. And then remember Yakuza Jim.

And David says, “So, is that the truth, do you think?”

“Well, you look like you could strangle a crocodile, so could be. Should I be afraid, very afraid?”

“I think *I'm* the one who should be afraid, as long as you've stared at me and followed me around.”

“What? You're scared of little old me?” But inside, I beam like Rainbow Brite. He had noticed me. “I mean, I don't know you. I kind of feel like I do, because of the gym and all, I guess.” I slip in my last bite then swallow it. “Are you going to strangle me now?”

He takes another slow spoon of ice cream, and tries to look mean but fails this time. “I wouldn't give you the satisfaction.”

“It jokes, too. Oh good lord, I need some more ice cream.” I jump up, totally on autopilot since I don't have much sense left.

“No, really, you don't. This is not good for you, man. This crap *will* kill you.”

“Well, neither is sitting across from a serial killer, but what are you going to do?” I let myself swish a bit, a zip of excitement shooting through my gut, too much glee singing in my voice as I order some more. I never indulge this much, but I never get to sit in front of such a slice of heaven, either. And I need some time to collect myself, between worrying whether he's going to bolt, or God forbid, dismember me.

I can't keep my eyes off him as I return, and he stirs his ice cream around. I shake my head and sit down hard. “I don't believe you.”

He shrugs again, but there's a shine in his eyes. “Really. Good. I'm just a weirdo. Speaking of fucking weird, I hear your name is Tam. What kind of name is that?”

I copy him, swirling my ice cream. It does seem to taste better like that. I wonder why. “Well. I'm twenty percent Scottish, eighty percent mutt. My name is Thomas MacEwen. So you know, what a boring name. Tom. So why not Tam? Like a Tam O' Shanter?”

Blank stare.

“You know, like the hat?”

“What?”

My voice fades. “It's a Scottish hat...”

His eyes start to glaze.

I cut in with, "Well, uh, I don't know who that tattoo person, Kat 'Carpe Diem' is, either. So we're even."

His lips turn up higher than ever. "That's a good one."

Be still my thudding heart. "Thanks."

"I thought it was maybe short for Tammy, like you used to be a girl or something."

"Yeah, you're so funny."

He doesn't laugh much, but he does have a great smile now that he's apparently cracked himself up. Probably the stoic, one grunt kind of guy in bed. Ahem. I say, "Seriously, what are you doing here with me, anyway?"

"Making sure you're not dangerous. I've never had a stalker before, and I'm kind of freaked out."

I take a bite. The pauses between our sentences certainly could have allowed enough time for a translator at the United Nations. "Ah. And your verdict?"

He makes a face. "I don't think you're Hannibal Lector."

"Why, thank you, sir."

"But you're still kind of freaky, man."

"And you're not?" I stop myself before I say *and you knew I was watching you*. Time to change the subject. "So you sat for, what, hours and hours getting your back done? I mean, you've probably heard this a billion times, but... did it hurt?"

"Well, it did take about twenty-two hours, broken up over two days." Twirl of spoon, lick of contents. He is almost done. "It should have been broken up more, but... I couldn't afford to stay in L.A. that long. And yeah, it does sting a bit after about, I don't know, six hours. It's hard to stay that still."

"Did you cry?"

He rams his spoon into the bowl. "Little bit."

I actually shudder. "Damn. That takes some willpower."

"Guess so."

“Guess that’s why you can work out so much. Do you do three times a day?”

He sits back in his chair. “Yeah, but how did you know that? Do I need a restraining order, for real?”

“No,” I say, sipping some tepid water from the tiny-tot cup. “But I’m not an idiot. You don’t get a body like that working out what, an hour and a half, once a day?”

That rose-colored flush over his cheeks just about slays me. How could he be so stone-faced, and yet still blush? I think of how he drops his head back and closes his eyes after a rep, collecting himself between sets. I finally realize that maybe he is shy. Except for flaunting his ink, of course. I want to ask him everything. I want to know everything. Not over a period of weeks, though I sure as hell wouldn’t complain, but I want to know it all. Right now.

I think it feels like that because we’d been having a conversation without words for perhaps four months.

He says, “Yeah. Usually three, sometimes only two, depending on my schedule.”

“Seven days a week?”

Swirl. Lick. He needs to stop eating it that way. “Yep.”

I scoot back in my chair. I smell his body, his clean sweat. “So discipline is definitely one of your strong suits.”

He flashes his teeth at me. “No, my Batman suit is stronger.”

We laugh. His is higher than I expected when he’s not being evil, but adorable. He sounds about seventeen. “Ah, great! Another joke!”

“No, I really have one.”

“If that’s the only joke you’ve got, you better work harder, mister.”

“No, not my only joke, my suit. My Batman suit.” He fakes serious very well. He almost has me going, gets me imagining maybe a little latex or handcuffs...

I’m not particularly into that, but I’m crushing on him so hard I might consider giving it a go. Hell, I haven’t “crushed on” anybody like this since I was what, twelve? I am starting to embarrass myself. I try to shut my mouth to keep from further self-incrimination, but oh no. There she goes. “Now that sounds interesting.”

Leaning his chair on two legs, it creaks, so he puts it right again fast. He reaches his arms high over his head, stretching, and then pulls each arm over his chest, holding for a second. Then rolls his neck.

There really isn't even any need for me to try to keep my mouth closed at that moment. I am too enraptured by the simple masculinity. The male beauty.

I mean, his face isn't the most gorgeous I've ever seen, but there's just something about him. Strong, solid, measured, quiet, compared to my flighty, chatty, ADD tendencies. How long would he be able to stand me? I won't change for anybody, I've fought too hard my whole life to discover and accept who I am. But would we be like oil and water or would this be a kind of yin yang situation?

Would it even be a situation? *Stop getting ahead of yourself, Tam.*

I take a bite, and for the first time, don't really taste it. "So if you knew I was watching you, why didn't you stop me?" I drop my spoon on the napkin. "Oh, crap, I get it. You're like a circus freak exhibitionist or something."

That sneaky smile. "I like to show off my tats. You know that. Like all those other shirtless assholes."

"Well, your body is nice."

A nod. "Yeah. Should be. I work at it."

"Why?"

Now he finishes up with the last of his baby scoop, and lays his spoon down, almost daintily. "Because I like tattoos, but not on flab, you know what I mean? And it keeps me out of trouble."

"You don't do it for the 'ladeez'?"

He rests his elbows on the table, squeezes his big hands together and leans on them. "For me, I guess. Or whoever wants to see. I feel better when I'm in shape, when my endurance is up."

Now why does he have to go and say something like that?

I hold my chest again. "I feel stupid, but I'm just going to say it. Are you like... bi?"

"You wish." He sits back, with that look, like he's getting ready to go.

"Wait, did that offend you? I'm just curious."

"Why are you so curious?"

Now my face feels like it's about to melt off. My heart bangs too fast. "I don't know. Maybe I like you. Does that offend you, too?"

"Why would that offend me? You act like I'm some kind of shitkicker. Do I look like a hick to you? I was born in Austin, and you know what they say, the 'Keep Austin Weird' shit. I'm proud of that. I'd still be there if my mom hadn't gotten sick so fast... and just died on us."

"Oh, David. I'm so sorry."

"It was about eight months ago."

"God. Do you want to talk about it?"

"Fuck no." He clears his throat and pushes his tiny bowl away. "I was talking about Austin earlier. I want to open my own shop there someday and I will."

I follow his lead. "I know you will. I have faith. So why are you staying here, then?"

He plays with his spoon. "I have a younger brother. He's two years younger, and kind of... gotten in with the wrong people. Meth, dealing, who knows. I'm hoping to stay on a little longer, because... I think he needs me and he's heading for jail if he doesn't straighten up."

Ah. Sweeter than puppies and kittens wrestling in my heart. "I hope you can help him, but you know how drugs are. He won't stop until he wants to, until he hits his own bottom."

Does every thought have to morph into a dirty, ridiculous *Three's Company* double entendre? *Stop it, Tam. Just stop. This is serious.*

"I know. Do you have any brothers or sisters? Parents still living, or... together?"

"No brothers or sisters. Both parents, though they're divorced. I never see my dad, but not a big loss there. I'm really close to my mom, she's great. So..."

The natural conversational lull.

He purses those perfect lips. "Ah, nice and stable. Lucky you."

"Yeah, I'm feeling pretty lucky right now."

With a quick flick of his eyes, I don't feel so lucky. If I could only read his face better. I say, "Not everything I say is meant to be all gay and shit."

"Sounds like it."

“Well, I can’t help the way I talk. You just have to trust a bitch sometimes.”

Now, that makes him laugh and throw up his hands. “Proves my point, right there.”

“Hey, I gave you that one, sucker.”

So then after our laughter dies, I say, “I want more ice cream.”

He gets serious. “No, you don’t need it. What are you trying to do to your body, anyway? That processed sugar will kill you, I’m not playing.”

I shrug and get up to buy another giant cup. And hell, I’m glad I’m wearing a big T-shirt, because my woody just keeps getting out of control. I feel that urge clawing up inside my guts, sort of pulling at my back. I need to come pretty quick, maybe within a half hour. I don’t think that would be too much of a problem, at least with my ingenious self. I know already there’s no way I’m getting that close to him this evening. But I am starting to feel that maybe, just maybe... I might have a shot at it. Someday. I hope sooner, rather than later.

When I make it back, he sort of curls his lip. “Are you kidding with that? You can eat that much ice cream?”

I sit and take the spoon and make moaning noises. Funny, though, I am stuffed and don’t even want it. “I can eat a lot.”

He looks away and rubs the back of his neck.

“You want to taste it?”

“No, I do not. The more sugar you eat, the more you want. It’s a drug.”

Jack Tripper in my mind. Honey, you got that right.

He sniffs, all manly now, and levels his gaze on mine. “Look, I’ve got to get going pretty quick. So I’ll just tell you. You’re kind of different. Interesting. And even though you’re a health disaster, I don’t have any guy friends. I mean, there’s some guys at work, but most of them just want to go out and get drunk and get laid, and... I’m not into that.”

“Getting laid or getting drunk?”

“Oh, I’m definitely into getting laid, just not drunk. I’m into living a clean, focused life, if you didn’t notice. I don’t drink. I mean, kind of like I don’t eat ice cream. Usually. I mean, I can do it if I want.”

He’s a doll when he’s flustered. “You are a big boy.”

“Yeah, I’m a big boy. I can do what I want.”

I think I'm too excited to fully understand what I'm saying. I pretend I don't know about rejection or its slicing edge. "So what do you want to do?"

He narrows his eyes at me again and crosses those muscled arms across his chest. "I know you're flirting, and that's okay. I get flirted with a lot. Mostly chicks, but hey. Like I said, you don't freak me out, believe me, or I could have had you kicked out of the club a long time ago."

I toss my spoon on my napkin. I'm way too full, anyway, starting to crash from my sugar rush and beginning to feel a bit sick. "Yeah, I don't get this little conversation at all. Especially if you figured out I was watching you."

"Me, either. But I get... I don't know how to say it. You seem real. And kind of sweet."

"I told you, ice cream is good for you. Makes you sweet in a lot of ways."

"God, you're so corny."

"True. So why... well, let me start over. I'm just going to lay it out there. So what do you want from me? Do you want to hang out again? Join me in my ritual ice cream? Or is this just a one-time kind of..."

He drums his fingers on the table for a moment. "I think I just want to try a new thing, okay? I'm just going to try to talk for once, too. Death has a way of making you realize life is short, you know?" A flicker of emotion crosses his face, his recent loss cutting him as deep as it should. "The best I can come up with is maybe I'm looking for a friend who isn't a redneck sonofabitch. Maybe. That's mostly all I've met, besides a couple of really nice chicks, but... maybe it's losing my mom, I don't know. I don't feel like getting too close, you know? But at the same time, I feel like... I'm too quiet inside."

Finally, I say, "Are you depressed?"

"I guess so. I want to have some fun, but it's like I don't know how anymore."

I realize he's *lonely*. "Have you had fun now? With me?"

He clasps his big hands. "Maybe. At least you've held my attention, and that might not sound like much, but for me, right now, that's a big deal."

I clear my throat. I hadn't expected anything like this. But then, I hadn't expected anything at all. I start feeling more real, and my dick loses a bit of its chokehold on my brain. "So it's just you and your brother? Where's your dad?"

He scoots his chair back further, finally preparing for departure like a big old jet airliner. "No idea. He split a long time ago. Mom had a bunch of

deadbeats and pricks. For a lawyer, she sure knew how to pick them. Eh, whatever. I need to get going—”

But I'm not done yet! “David, can we do this again sometime?”

He studies my face then, for the first time, for maybe more than thirty seconds. It's hard to stay still under his gaze. He says, “It's weird to me, too, kind of. I guess I do feel like I know you a little bit, from the gym and everything.”

“So maybe we can be friends. Can you be friends with a gay guy?”

He narrows his eyes. “I've been friends with ‘gay guys’ before. Believe it or not, a lot of them hang out at all the gyms I've been in.” But he got serious. “With you, though, I'm not quite sure. I never knew why you kept looking at me. You're not *that* into tats, are you?”

“Oh, no, I really am. Yours are so beautiful. I think they're the best I've ever seen.”

That one nod. “I could tell you were looking at them. And I didn't feel like you were... you know, acting all creepy over me. It was like you were looking at a piece of art. Which you are. My tats are killer, I know that. I wouldn't just junk up my body with bad designs.”

“Except for your lower legs.”

A grin. Ah, he has nice teeth. A bit crooked but that only makes him seem more real, for some reason. “Practice, I told you, you dipshit. That doesn't count. And anyway, it's better than polluting my body with this ice cream crap.”

And that gets him laughing again. I think he really needs that, his shoulders seem to ease down. I think he needs a lot more laughing in his life. “So, what do I do to be friends with a gay guy? Do we have to go shopping? I hate shopping.”

“Well, you've never been shopping with *me*. I could deck you out good. Or we could go to the movies. Or rent them and hang out. We could go out to clubs. I can pass for straight, you know that.”

He nods.

I say, “Do you like to dance? Gay bars are better for that.”

“No, I don't like to dance in any bars, so scratch that off your list first thing.”

I clap and femme it up just for him. “So does that mean we can make a list? You might want to hang out more than this once?”

He scratches at his chin bristles. “Sure. Why not?” Another cocky smile. “I can take care of myself just fine, don’t you worry.”

Well, thoughts dance through my mind. I want to say, yeah, we can be friends. But I like your muscles, too, and your face and your crotch and the way you make those sounds when the weight is just that much too heavy. Can I really be just a friend underneath all that yummy?

I want to throw that out there, but I can’t. There’s something about him, for sure. He is the kind of guy who can hide behind his own face. I start blabbing. “That phoenix on your back. What does it mean to you? I guess I want to know what all your ink means. If I could get one half as good as yours... I might do it someday.”

A different smile. A bit tighter. “Really? What would you get?” Now he sucks his lower lip, trying not to be such an obvious smart ass, maybe. “Now, I’m warning you. If you say ‘a rose’ or a ‘hummingbird’, I don’t give a shit what they mean to you, I’m out of here.”

I slap my hands on the table and notice my ice cream looks like chocolate milk. “Well, hell. It’s been nice knowing you.” I hold out my hand, and he looks at it all dumbstruck. When he decides to take it, my breath catches a bit. His palm is rough, maybe from not wearing gloves when he lifts. Warm. Big and enveloping, but not too tight. A perfect shake, and when he lets me go, it’s like I can still feel a buzz on my skin.

“Yeah. Cool.” He stands. “Really, I’m going to be late.” He rubs his stomach and makes a sour face. “I knew I shouldn’t have eaten that crap.”

“But it was good, wasn’t it?”

He sighs. “Unfortunately.” He almost snorts, trying to stop his laugh. He baffles me, too, in a way, maybe that’s why I find him even more irresistible than ever. “Thanks for the, uh, interesting... uh, meeting? Like I said, most guys around here... we don’t talk about anything that matters. I get tired of it. Most girls, too, they just want my body.”

“And who can blame them? You torture it, you decorate it, show it off. Of course people are going to admire it.” I swallow. “Want it.”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“Are you stupid? Don’t you enjoy your body at all?”

“Well, shit yeah. I did for a long time. Like you said, maybe I’m just still... down right now. But I like it when somebody notices.”

“You don’t mind that I notice?”

He hangs his head. “Would I be here if I did?”

The top of my head nearly blows off. “Well, fuck, am I supposed to pretend I don’t notice? I thought I was behaving quite well.”

He slugs my arm, and it is just like junior high. Like the time Randy the varsity quarterback hit me after they’d won a game and I congratulated him, still holding my clarinet and in my dorky band uniform. I’d walked on a cloud for a week. “Relax. Your problem is too much sugar.” He taps his temple. “And too much of this.”

The knot in my throat feels as tight as my pants over my returned full-fledged hard on. I lean forward, trying to move my junk over to the left a bit without being so damn obvious. I sip from my bowl with my pinkie held out, and he just busts out laughing. He says, “See what I mean? You’re an addict.”

He squeezes my shoulder. I put the bowl down before I drop it. I sound all bitchy. “You are totally blowing my mind, David.” Seriously, I want to blow *him*. Right now. “You know I’m gay. And you know I’m attracted to you. So... you might want to lay off touching me a little, at least until we start to bore each other.”

“Oh, come on.” Then a flash of that frowny scowl again, and then he chews on a corner of his lower lip. That flush of rose. “Maybe this won’t work.”

Desperation. “No, no, it can. We just need some guidelines, how’s that? You’re good with discipline, right?”

“Yeah, but you’re obviously not.” But he shifts his weight and thinks awhile. I watch him looking around at the tacky décor, then at the mom with her daughter, who looks about five. Her sandy brown hair is pulled up into pony tails nearly at the top of her head. It’s cute.

I jump when he says, “Okay, how about this. Since you’re at the gym so goddamn much, what if I train you? Let’s say for three months.”

“Oh, hell. You just want money. I should have known.”

A laugh. “No, asshole. You didn’t listen. You have to listen or what’s the point?”

“Well, get to the point then.”

“Okay, how about this. What if you really let me train you? And if you’re a good boy, we can have ice cream afterward sometimes, but only if you work hard enough. And then, after three months, we’ll know if we can be friends by then, right?” And he’s winding me up, for sure. “And then all you have to do is pay me.”

My voice sounds reedy. “How much and with what currency, if you don’t want sexual favors?”

The grin lit those almost dull eyes, delineating the pupil from the iris, making them shine. “You let me do my first tattoo on you.”

“What?”

“Yeah. You be my guinea pig.”

Memories of experiments in backseats with guys who didn’t even wave the next day. Yeah, I know guinea pigs. “I’m not into being used.”

He crosses his arms, looking like a younger, much cuter Mr. Clean. All he needs is some pirate earrings, but now he’s clearly enjoying his power over me. “I’m not saying that. If we make it that far, at that point we can talk. See if you really want one. I am actually a pretty good artist already, I can show you my book—my drawings, if you don’t know what that is. I do some kick ass designs.”

“Well, your calves don’t look so great...”

“Very funny. And hey, either one of us can change our minds, right? I might get bored with you if you don’t work hard enough, or you might find somebody else to stare at. I’m just saying, you need more than cardio, man.”

“You *are* crazy.”

“Never said I wasn’t.”

“Do you see these arms?”

“Where do you think I came up with this screwy idea?”

A great laugh between us. And I know it, I should run. I pick at a dried spot of what looks like cherry vanilla that my damp napkin must have missed earlier. “We could try it, I guess.”

“Cool,” he says.

I look up at him. “So we can talk and stuff when we work out?”

“Yeah, dude. Why not?”

"I've never seen you do that before."

"Do you think any of them wanted to talk to me? Or had anything interesting to say?"

"You think I'm that different?"

"Possibly. Probably. I kind of like this idea." He looks pretty pleased with himself. "There's a limit, see, so no pressure."

"No Nazi pressure, either. You push me too hard—"

"Hey, I won't. I got to push you a little, though. Get you ready for a nice man."

I drop my head dramatically. "Who are you kidding? You just want a sucker who'll let you do your first 'real' tattoo."

"Hey, look at me."

So I do. He says, "You think some chick wouldn't let me try out my works on her? Some other guys? I want it to be special."

"Oh, good God. You want your virgin time to be special."

"Yeah, why the fuck not?"

Walls begging to be built, begging to crumble.

God, he's so sure of himself. I wish I was. He glances at his wrist, like he's supposed to be wearing a watch. I'd been like that until I got used to my phone last year. "Look, sleep on it. It's not a big thing. I got to get. If I'm late, Joan will have my ass. See you."

And just like that he's gone.

She'd have his ass.

Damn. I want to have his ass.

What's his deal, anyway? Holy hell. What other kinks lurk behind those secretive eyes, under those brilliant colors and hairless muscles?

I watch him slide into his truck like a cowboy, throw his arm over the back of the seat, back out and drive off.

Everything about him confuses me. So he's impulsive? Thoughtful? He can actually talk. And most importantly, he is not an illusion.

I guess it always has to be like that. A spin of the wheel.

Sometimes you win a prize.

Seems like most of the time you land on the bankrupt space.

I wish I hadn't wasted my six-dollar bowl of ice cream and try to ride the queasy. My balls kind of ache. My mood turns as blue as they possibly are.

I don't brood, I won't start now. But I feel like I've mixed the wrong flavors in a disaster of a sundae, like pineapple and bubble gum.

But then maybe I'm afraid of really having a friend, too, somebody to know. Not just somebody to obsess over, or occasionally fuck.

I try to find some trace of bullshit in what he'd said, and I can't feel any.

Well. Like Mama always said, "You don't get married on the first date."

It isn't like I have to stick with it, he'd said so himself. I decide then and there to set some boundaries for myself. I am not about to give him all the power.

No phone numbers, no addresses. Just the gym, where there are lots of people and it's safe enough.

And if he gets to me too much, in any way... if I do fall too hard... well, it isn't like I haven't fallen before and gotten back up.

And what's the worst that could happen? A broken heart.

And maybe a terrible tattoo.

"I can't!"

"You can! Do it. I got you. One more. Okay, good, good, one more!"

"Are you trying to rip my shoulders out of their sockets?"

But I did one more bench press, and thank God he is there to catch it or my windpipe would have been history. I lay there on my back, my teal tank top sweated through, even my shorts. I am too exhausted to care about his sweat dropping on me, about his smell, his nearness, his goddamn anything.

"I hate you," I say, almost under my breath.

"I heard that, fag," he says. And claps his hands fast, like a coach. "Up. Time for lunges."

Those first few sessions... I don't even want ice cream.

Can you believe it? If I didn't want to puke, I just wanted a shower and to go home and get ready for my stupid job in the morning.

He calls from behind as I strip to get into the shower with my noodle arms and legs. "Hey. Ready to drop out yet?"

"I can make it more than two weeks. Bastard."

And he just laughs.

Asshole.

I won't come back anymore. I am over my tired, freaky obsession. Long over it.

I am back the next day, working legs because he has me on a regimen, working different body parts, like a pro. Only four days a week. I would have killed him if he insisted on anything more from me. At least, you know, this kind of physicality. And I find out we can cut up, and he laughs, and he's a nice guy when he isn't a gym sadist.

I think we even start getting the side eye once in awhile.

This time, I'm on my back again. For some reason, this has become my favorite part of the workout. Maybe it's because I *am* on my back, looking up at him. "Look. I'm getting abs."

"You've always had abs, silly. You just couldn't see them. Put your shirt down."

I shake out my arms, blow out a huge breath, buzzing my lips. "Okay, then. I've always wanted biceps."

He doesn't bother to even go there. I really try. I did enjoy getting stronger, much to my own surprise. I feel better, more energy. I kind of like being sore the next day, the good kind of sore. Kind of like the good sore you get after a particularly hard fuck. I wear it like a badge, whistling at work just like I am getting some. My mood is that much better.

I don't know how it came up, but I start blabbing about boyfriends, and he interrupts with a quiet, "How many have you had?"

"What?"

"How many people have you slept with?"

I bobble the bar, and he helps settle it in the weight holder thingy. He says, "Rest a second. Then we'll do your second set. I think that's enough for one day."

I link my fingers together over my chest and look at him. "Personal question. Wow, um. Okay. You tell me first."

He shakes his head like he can't believe what he's said, either, and glances off across the sea of muscles and machines. "Three."

My body jerks. I don't know why. Thank God I hadn't been in the middle of the lift. "Are you serious?"

"Why wouldn't I be?"

"Well, I wouldn't go around saying something like that. Guys might think you're a pussy or something."

"So how many have you had?"

I narrow my eyes, not even pretending to think. I could estimate... maybe twenty-five? More than that, if you count just the occasional fooling around. I grab the bar too soon, and settle my shoulders. "Talk about feeling like a ho. No, I'm not telling you. You don't have any need-to-know clearance."

"You're ready to go again?"

I want to say *oh, you have no idea*. But I am a good boy, and start another lift. "One," I say, all deep voiced and butch. "Two."

He leans over. "Go slower. Push it up slower. That's it. Really concentrate on the movement. Concentrate on good form."

"It's a little hard to do that, with your endless, mindless chitchat."

He says, "So what do you do when you're not working?"

"Really. I told you. I'm trying to concentrate. Six!" My arms are starting to shake. I stop short of the twelve reps. "Whew. I don't know. Give me a minute, I need to get some oxygen to my brain."

He stands up and crosses his arms over his chest. "I didn't tell you to stop yet. That was barely half a set."

"So what do you do when you're not working or here?"

He does an impromptu set of squats. He does stuff like that sometimes, so he won't get totally cooled down. "I don't know. I like to read. Listen to music. I'm boring, I like to be alone, I guess."

I sit up, careful not to bang my head. I push at my sweaty hair, at least getting it unstuck from my forehead. "What do you like to read?"

"Mostly architect stuff, or American history."

"God, what are you? Fifty?"

He stops squatting. "No, I'm twenty-four. And I watch TV."

"Like what?"

"*True Blood* when it was on." And then that rose flush comes over his cheeks again. "I like news shows. Shit, maybe I am fifty."

"You need to get out more."

"You need to get to the dumbbells station."

"I thought we were done for the day." I get up, and towel my face. "So, uh, I know I need a break from this routine. Sounds like you do too. What do you want to do other than this shit?"

He doesn't answer, just motions for me to follow him to the free weights.

There we stand, looking at each other in the mirror, both with dumbbells in our hands. I mean, his are three times heavier, but still. I feel tougher just standing next to this tattooed bad ass. I feel kind of cool.

He says, "I already told you. Don't be asking me out on dates."

"That was a friendly invitation. Maybe you can't tell the difference?"

He grimaces, pulls two very slow, alternating curls. "You know, one of those people I slept with was my best friend. We were tight, you know, from eleven to about... sixteen. And then his family moved away."

Now, I drop a weight, very bad form and just barely hopping out of the way to save my foot, and then somebody even yells, "Hey! Watch it over there!"

"Did you say..."

"Yeah, I did. Russell. I thought we were just, you know, being guys, messing around." He does two more curls, then replaces the weights. "I missed him so bad when he was gone. I realized... it was different."

"Holy shit," I say. I put my weights up, too. "And don't talk so loud."

"I thought you were out and proud and loud."

"Well, I am, but you're not." I cock my head, my heart pumping faster. "And the other two?"

“Girls.”

Deflation. “Oh. So... you are bi. Or just ‘gay for him’.”

He crosses one ankle over the other one, takes the towel out of his back pocket and dries his face. A shrug. “I’m not really sure. I didn’t really... get into girls as much as I thought I should. I mean, I liked it better with him. But I thought it must have been because we were so young, and it was the first time, or some shit like that. I don’t like to think too much.” He taps his temple. “Makes me crazy. So I work out, no time for thinking.”

I suddenly don’t want him to be *bi-curious*, especially not with me. I don’t even want it to be a possibility. I say, “Maybe you haven’t found the right girl. I mean, don’t you get off on them hitting on you all the time?”

He shrugs. “Yeah, I do, but I don’t like feeling like a piece of meat, either. And I try, but I’m not really interested, and even I think that’s weird. Don’t you?”

I try to come up with something funny. I can’t. “Okay. So. Did I tell you I like to cook? Why don’t you invite me to your place, and I’ll bring some food and cook and we can talk. No funny stuff. Just talk without... all this noise.”

He works at his lower lip for a second.

I say, “Without the distraction of Pistachio Dream.”

He laughs. “You’re so funny.” And then he says, “How about we skip the workout Thursday, because it’s my day off.”

“Swell,” I say, in my goofy Hollywood voice. “What do you like to eat?”

He sits at the table as I cook gluten-free spaghetti with tofu meatballs and make a salad. Nothing too fancy because I am too damn tired.

We talk about everything. Favorite foods, politics, music. Sports. I actually like watching basketball. He doesn’t like to watch, he likes to play. He loves classic rock and plays some “on the original vinyl”, but I can’t tell any difference between that and listening to a CD or mp3. We kick back with beers, and I’ve never felt so comfortable just sitting on a couch with a guy, listening to Queen. I doze off, even.

When I jolt awake, my neck hurts, and it is a good thing my bottle was almost empty, or it would’ve spilled all over me and his still new-smelling couch. I take the warm bottle to the trash can, and then go around the corner,

feeling sneaky, but also content. He is already in bed, and I watch him awhile. His mouth hangs slightly open and he is snoring. He looks so young and kind of innocent. I don't know why that makes me smile.

It is past midnight.

I let myself out.

So after one and a half months, I can finally *really* talk to him while we work out without forcing humor or keeping a wall up. He might as well have been wearing his ear buds before now, the change in his body language and face is that drastic. He grins at me. A lot. I start thinking about him at work. At home. In the shower.

He takes mercy on me, and we toss a fifteen-pound, truly sweat-stinky medicine ball back and forth. About twenty feet between us. I have never done this before he came into my life, and true, it is easier now. But still, don't fool yourself. It's a heck of a lot harder to do than you'd think.

Ice cream time again.

He brought his "book" and my jaw drops. Not because I am playing it up, either. "Oh my God! You did all these? You're amazing."

He scratches at the side of his eye and gives me an almost smug little smirk. "Thanks."

"The detail. Shit, now that is one scary skull, like a gargoyle or something."

I can see how proud he is, and he has every right to be. I swallow, because I want to say it, even though I know it will sound so lame. But since I have always wanted to hear it from my dad, I take the risk that damn near chokes me up. "You should be proud, David. I am so proud of you."

Now the cheek flush spills all the way down into his neck. "You think I have a chance to make it in my own shop?"

I close the book. "What do you think? These are so good."

"You don't know anything about tats."

"No, but you're a fucking great artist."

He stands up quick and takes my nearly finished bowl of pistachio and his empty tea away. "Stop talking, you're embarrassing yourself."

But there is no missing his pleased grin as he ducks his head and goes toward the trash cans.

Ah, wow. He might just achieve his dream. With enough money behind it, some advertising, some luck.

He motions for me to get up and I do, satisfied for the first time because I feel like now... he is letting me see. He is truly letting me in. And under that easy-to-irritate side, like when you don't do a chin up right, he is like an excited kid, full of plans and hope.

How do you get to know somebody? How long does it take? Do you ever really know someone?

You can get to know a body in one evening, if you are extremely thorough.

He knows I watch him get out of the shower more than ever, his pale skin all pink and clean. He dries his head like he actually has hair and then commits eye contact, complete with a smile. So I check out his junk, and there's no disappointment on my end of the deal. But if he is interested... why doesn't it show when I actually stand and look at his dick? I like how he is shaved down there. Makes it all look bigger, maybe. Cleaner. Kind of surprisingly more like a boy and I am not sure how I feel about that part of it. I've been damn careful this whole time, not to get in his space, to keep my flirting to an acceptable level, to keep my eyes to myself.

Most of the time.

I kind of feel sick that he doesn't seem to notice, but kind of relieved, too. I have done the "gay-for-you shit", and I don't like that. It never works. But the man part of me... it sure as hell takes too much notice of his closeness. Maybe if I show him, would that change everything? I've been having so much fun, I'm really not completely sure I want it to change.

I don't want to lose it. I don't want to lose him.

In this steamy, teeming dressing room, we sit side by side on the bench, with our clothes on. He is struggling into some black Nikes with neon green swooshes and soles. I slide into my almost dorky oxblood Doc Marten shoes. No, not cool boots, but shoes. Since he is off on this Wednesday night, he wears faded jeans and a Metallica "*And Justice For All*" black tee almost faded to gray. I touch his shoulder. "The fabric just looked soft. How old is this thing?"

He shakes his head. "I don't know. I got it, um, when the album came out."

"Did not."

"Did."

So I sigh like a martyr and stand up. I start cracking. "Look, I know you like broccoli and surprisingly, Julia Roberts movies. I know the name of your first girlfriend, where you went to school, who you want to win the Super Bowl. But I don't know what's going on here—"

He stands up so fast, I have to step back. He grabs my face, and I let out a little squeak. He lightly kisses my lips. Like most events regarding him, I chalk it up to a dream, until he doesn't let go and keeps looking at me. Nobody has a sweeter blush.

Somebody, Eric, I think, walks by and says, "What the fuck?"

And I try to dart my eyes at least, since my head is in a vice, and try to explain my dirty little self, but like Vin Diesel, David says, "Eric, this is none of your business. Get out."

I grip David's forearms, feel the smooth skin. I glance down, wishing I could somehow feel the tattoos, but of course they are perfectly smooth, like his skin. "Do you use Nair or something? To get rid of your body hair?"

He cocks his head. "I just kissed you and you're asking me about my grooming techniques?"

I try to step back or at least free my face because somebody else walks by, but he won't let me go. And whoever the next guy is doesn't say a word. I try to talk but only manage some kind of noise. I start over, "I wouldn't go around kissing me, man. You don't know what you're going to wake up."

He glances down at my crotch. "I see something waking up."

I frown. "Who the hell are you, anyway? I thought... you were straight. Mostly. I mean, besides your crush on Russell."

A pulling down of his lips, a pain in his eyes I wish I can take back. "It was more than a crush, Tam. He did more than tattoo a bad anchor on my calf." He lets me go, looks down. "He broke my heart." He picks up his bag. "Do you want to go to my place? Or wait, let's go to yours. You're shaking like a sonofabitch. I didn't mean to scare you. Maybe you'd feel better at your place? Come on, I'll follow you."

"You've never been to my place."

He glances over his shoulder at me. "First time for everything, I guess."

So I float out of there, somehow drive home, watching his bright headlights in my rearview. I just keep thinking, *WTF, WTF, WTF.*

I guess I don't know this guy as well as I thought.

I know how he laughs, how he'd turned out to be nice. Not pushing me too hard. Barely eating his ice cream, but letting me talk a million miles an hour and eat mine. How he shakes hands. How he thuds me on the back and says, "Great job." How that makes me feel prouder than when my uncle did it after a rare home run.

I breathe like I am in a yoga class. Again, my thighs tremble slightly. I am so hard I ache. I am so scared when he walks up behind me; I drop the keys to my duplex.

He says, "I'll get them." And he unlocks my door.

Then hands me the keys.

I don't live high on the hog, as they say around here. In fact, my duplex is pretty dumpy. My three-seater, thrift store couch is way too small to sleep on. It's barely big enough to lie down with your feet dangling off the end and watch TV. My stereo is over ten years old, with big speakers. My flat screen isn't mounted all sleekly on a wall. It balances on a brown TV tray, the kind you eat off. I have a kitchen from the seventies and a bathroom that looks just the same. And my bedroom? A fucking mattress on the floor. Sort of made up. At least the covers are tossed over the sheets.

He looks around, purses his lips.

I laugh a little. "Not what you expected, huh? Not all gay? I didn't get that decorator gene, apparently."

"Apparently."

I watch him examine a couple of framed pics my mom gave to me. French style posters from Target or something. One from a vet, one for some kind of wine. I toss the keys in the black bowl on the junk table by the door. "Do you want a beer or something?"

He rushes over, slams me against the door, a very clever way to shut it. My breath whooshes out with the force of it, then he kisses me again. It isn't like the first time, because this time I can feel his soft lips. The sting of his bristles. The exploring tongue. I throw my arms around his neck. He picks me up like I

am nothing. Hell, I probably am nothing to him. He half lays me on the couch, and my frantic hands feel him like the house is on fire, and maybe I have five minutes in my life to memorize a body I'll never touch again.

We have to breathe sometime. I say, "Goddamn."

He pushes my too long hair off my forehead and smiles. "You don't like it?"

I grin and rub my hand over his scalp, finally, touching it, and it tickles just like I thought it would. His head is hot, though. It makes me laugh. "You have no idea how long I've wanted to do that."

"What? Kiss me?"

"No, touch your spiky little head."

He pushes me back on the couch. "Why didn't you just do it?"

"Uh, yeah. Like, right."

"Why didn't you just kiss me, if you wanted to?"

I push his shoulders back, long enough to keep him off my lips. "Are you fucking kidding me?"

"You're a man, right? What, aren't these balls?" He runs his hand from deep under my ass, shivering me all over, cupping me between my legs and squeezing almost too hard. I wince, and probably moan and all that shit, as he starts working on me through my pants.

I say, "That part right there. That's my dick. Are you sure you're big enough to play with it?"

He leans and takes my lower lip between his teeth, making us laugh, making me grind into him. I say, "Oh, yeah. I can feel that you are old enough. Big enough, I mean. Shit. David... you don't have to do any of this."

He pulls his head up and touches my lips. I wish he'd reach down and undo my pants, and from the way his pupils look, as big as the irises for real, almost, I have a feeling he is about to. "I don't do things I don't want to do."

"I'm just surprised, that's all. I..."

"Do you have to fucking talk so much?" He skins off his shirt, then continues with his pants, slowly. And on purpose. I watch those muscles sliding under those beautiful tats, and now I do know how his skin feels under my

fingers. Soft, living velvet. He glances at me. "I want you to suck me off, okay?"

I wet my lips. Oh, I plan on it. But. "Why? So you can get off, then just leave? Make the little fag boy get on his knees, make you feel like a tough guy?"

He stops with his pants, glances down and toes off his shoes. And there he is, naked, standing in front of me. "Check out my ink," he says, flexing a bit, letting my eyes touch him. Then he stands closer, his hard, veined dick about a foot away. His hands a little shaky. "I like the way you look at me."

I take his hands, then, and kiss each one. Then he strokes my hair.

The heat in my cock, yes, I've felt a million times. But this spreading heat in my chest? This expanding light from just under my ribs? I can barely breathe. "What are you doing to me?"

He brushes my hair back some more. "I want you to love me. And then I want to fuck you. Does that sound all right to you?"

I swallow again. There is nothing else I can do.

He kneels in front of me and presses his lips to mine again. Our teeth collide. Then his tongue strokes inside my mouth, not invasive, not scary, and I lose myself in him.

So waking up in a tidal wave of fear is my usual state of mind, after I know I've been fucked over (and literally fucked) by some built, tattooed maniac who's already out the door. But this warmth was like the flowing ocean, like lying on the beach in the evening sun. And this arm...

The snakes. The riot of color. His hard, warm body against my back, his oddly metallic morning breath riding over my shoulder.

I start laughing. "Whew," I say, not caring if I wake him up, kind of glad when I do.

He sort of laughs, too. "Ah. Man. I need to piss." So he hops up and I watch him in my tiny bathroom, his back, the way he shakes his dick. He even washes his hands, his face, splashing water, and it is sexy as hell, the way it drips down his chest. He looks around, uses my mouthwash. I know that he knows that I am watching him, and exhibitionist that he is, he makes sure to turn his back so I can admire the expensive and expressive phoenix across his shoulders.

And the sunburst with stylized, curling tendrils at the small of his back. Curving tendrils reach inward over the top of his ass, too.

He saunters over, his penis swinging, and well... it was rather larger than I remember. And he is getting a good case of morning wood.

"Okay, my turn," I say. But I don't evacuate or wash with such *élan*. I do, however, brush my teeth.

He is laying there with one hand behind his head, watching me. I can't be cool like him, though. I run back to the mattress and crawl under the covers and lay my head on his chest. "You fucking lied to me. All this time."

"No, I didn't."

"How do you explain this?" I wrap my hand around his cock, and he draws in air between his teeth. I move the soft skin over the hardness.

He takes in a deep breath, and manages to do what comes so easily to me. Talk. "What is there to explain? I've been watching you, too. I'm just better at it... oh, fuck, that feels good."

We don't talk for a minute.

He says, "Remember my twenty-two hours on the ink table?" He pulls me close in a near choking one-arm hug and thankfully lets me go so I can work on what I'd started. "I ain't nothing, if not patient."

I listen to his heart. I can feel the health and strength radiating off him. "You just wanted me to have abs."

He gives that short bark of a laugh. "You have always had abs under all that ice cream fat, goofy, how many times are you going to say that?"

"Until you stop laughing at it." I take my hand away. I'm good at that, too. Teasing.

"Hey."

I tickle around his belly, making him jerk. I trace my fingers along the top of his thigh. He is starting to sweat against my cheek.

Until I just barely touch and bam, his body tightens, he nearly shakes the bed. He comes, just like that, and I grin. And no, he isn't the one-grunt kind of guy.

We still have the towel from last night, so I reach for it and toss it at him.

He laughs a little. "Crusty."

“Oh, all right.” I drag my horny ass up and get a fresh one, and then clean him up myself, while he nudges me with his head, and then we kiss until I can't concentrate on anything else.

After he repays the favor and I am floating around in some blackness behind my eyes, riding the streaking colors once in awhile, a huge happiness slithers inside. I finally settle back into my body. I am grinning. I could cry.

I pull away so I can see him, and our sweat sort of tries to keep us stuck together. He runs his rough hand over my chest, then touches my cheek. And it is weird, how soft his hairless skin feels against me. His voice sounds gravelly. “I feel good about the work we did.”

Mine sounds about the same, like I've been yelling. Maybe I have. “Work? Are you telling me I have to *pay* you?”

Now I am not sure for a second if he was kidding, so glad when he cracks up. “I was talking about the gym. Don't you feel good about your body? You should.”

“Why? I'm not all muscular like you.”

“No. But you're in great shape. Probably hardly any body fat, and you've got me to thank for that. Fucking sissy ice cream parlor.”

I punch his ribs. He curls up on me, and we kiss and are about to start something all over again. I memorize his face with my hands. The tickle of his whiskers pleases me more than I could have ever imagined. “You ain't nothing but a whore, is that it? Three people, my ass.”

He reaches for my hand, and makes me wrap it around his dick again. “You haven't finished paying me yet.”

I wasn't finished paying him the next day. Or the next.

In my bed again.

He shoots his wad on my bare thigh, over my dick, and I love the way he rubs on me, how we rub together. How he gets me off the same way and mixes those fluids that have always sort of surprised me. Like... how can pleasure be measured by these sticky teaspoons of jism that we are both so proud of and play with like finger paints?

We wipe off some, and rest.

He takes a while, then nips at my shoulder. I curl tight, turned away. He says softly, "I want to tell you this. God, it's embarrassing, though." And he surrounds me like a python, his leg squeezing as it slides over my hips.

"You. Have. Got. To. Not crush me."

He eases up fast. "Sorry." But he nuzzles up into my neck, and plays nicer with me this time. "You know, I never thought I'd admit this, but... after the first couple of months, after I'd noticed you watching me, I used to jack off thinking about it."

"What? You did not."

"Did. Don't make me crush you again."

"Okay, okay." I squeeze him instead until he complains, and a wrestling match threatens.

He almost crushes me again. "God, that's so lame. Don't you think that's stupid?"

I run my hands over the hills and valleys of the muscles beneath the circus ink. "Obviously. I have no respect for you at all." I quit acting silly and lay on my back. "Fuck, that's hot. I would've... I mean..."

He raises his head, and he is embarrassed, fair skin redder than I've ever seen. I can feel the heat from his cheeks. "I can't believe I told you that."

I pull his face around, and he fights me, but eventually our eyes meet. "I don't even know what to say. Except, uh... thanks for telling me. Wow. I would have never guessed that in a million years."

We lay there. I feel as much of him as my skin can soak in. I listen to his breathing, feel it tickle my shoulder. Listen to the traffic outside.

A surge of adrenaline shoots through me, and I flip over and push him on his back. "Well, you took your goddamn sweet time and you could've let me know you were fucking interested or something. You cruel and unusual bastard."

I love making him laugh. In the gym. In Ginny's Gourmet Ice Cream Parlor. And I am learning now how I especially love it here, in my crappy-ass, lumpy bed. "Never been called that before, but I guess it's true. This is hard to say, it's not real easy for me to talk about heavy stuff, but after Russell, I didn't want to feel anything like this again." He grabs my chin almost too tight. "I wasn't just

playing you. Or checking you off a list, waiting for a mistake. I just... wanted to make sure that look in your eyes meant what I thought it did.”

I lean over for a sweet kiss, and it doesn't stay sweet for long. Oh, the glorious moments, the first times, the new times. And I try to fight the fear of how those new times turn to familiar ones, even rather boring ones. How desire melts away, slowly, day by day, like mounting utility bills.

He touches my lips. “What? Come back. Why do you look so sad? It's not always that way.”

I find the smile that I'd lost. “What way?”

“The way you were thinking.” He taps my temple. “Too much of that.”

“You don't know.”

“No. Nobody does. But you do it anyway. And you know what?”

He wiggles under me. I say, “Damn, boy, Little David is feisty this morning.”

“Complaining?”

“Nooo, but...” He grabs my hips, and even if I want to get off him, I can't break his hold. I drop my head, open my mouth, let him rub against me until I match him and we come again. Not all at the same time, like in some romance. Him first. Me, maybe three or four minutes later.

All I know is I have to fall over, empty and full all at once. My ass kind of stings, too. I've never let anybody do that to me so hard. Never. But he knows what he is doing, he didn't hurt me. Much. I like how he can throw me around, and just... take whatever he wants. And oh, no, just remembering it... I can't possibly be ready for it again, can I? I mean, isn't it physically impossible?

“I'm usually ready for a guy to leave about now,” I say, taking deep breaths, blowing them out. “I mean, I've got to get more than two hours of sleep sometime. And I've got to go to work.”

He turns on his side, and I am glad he doesn't touch me. There was enough of that after orgasm rational fatigue that makes his voice as hoarse and slow as mine. “Yeah. I know the feeling. But I also know this feeling. I want to cut our deal short.”

That shot a lightning bolt through my chest. Am I seriously having a heart attack? I turn, trying to talk...

He is lying on his arm and shakes his head, almost not moving it. "Not like that. I want to tattoo you. Now."

"What?"

He grins, slow and spreading. "I've got my works in the car. I want to put an anchor on the back of your leg."

This cracks me up. And I roll around until I see that he is still smiling, but dead serious, too. I swallow a wad of anxiety as thick as the ancient memory of swallowing a mouthful of come. "Are you serious?"

"Yeah. But it'll be a pretty one, I promise, with a rose twined around it. I've already got it drawn up and stenciled."

A sliver of ice shoots from the base of my spine all the way up into the bottom of my skull. It hurts. "Nah. Not yet. Okay?"

"What? Are you skeered?"

He tries to tickle me, but I grab his meaty hand and he lets me kiss it. "You know I love your work. And I will let you." I let go, and blow out a big rush of air again, pushing my bangs back. "Wow. I can't believe I just said that. And I mean it. I think. Just not now. Can't we just do this for a little bit?"

That caveman "bad form chin up" look. Then this new one, that tender one. "You don't ever have to do it, you know? It was just an idea. You don't have to be what I want, or do what I want, do you know what I mean? I know I can look all scary." And he makes a face that would make any quarterback staring at him over the offensive line piss his cute little padded pants. "I like you because you're you. If you don't want a tattoo, fine. I just think you do."

I scoot closer and we start that playful kissing. Moving in, mouths open, teasing. Pulling back. Sucking on a bottom lip. Tongue flicking.

"Fuck, I have got to go to work. I can't be late again. Fuck, fuck, fuck."

I hear him groan as he lets me untangle and start scrounging around for clothes. I don't shower.

I want his smell all over me as I take phone calls and enter crap into computers, probably half of it wrong. I am barely even on the planet, anyway.

Well, meeting him in the gym... our eyes just lock. I can't help it, and apparently he can't, either. It is obvious as hell, and not just in the way we

laugh while we work out and actually have fun. That just doesn't happen all that much, and certainly not the way we do it, without even touching.

Ah, man, just enjoying him in our old environment feels surreal. My dick gets so hard it aches, and we just stand there by the trapeziums apparatus, bags in hand. We look around at some of the guys who actually stop working out and stare at us with tight lips and square jaws.

"Shit," I say. And then I start laughing, louder and louder until I double over.

He pats my back like I am choking and eventually clears his throat. "It's been getting chilly in here the last couple of weeks, don't you think?"

Ducking my head, I say, "Yeah. I think Roid Roy is starting to take notice. I think maybe we need to find a new gym."

He slings his arm around my neck and takes my heavy gym bag into his left hand so he can carry both of them. "Plenty of places to work out. I could use some new machinery. I think I've reached a plateau here, anyway. What do you think, trainer?"

"Yep. You've just about maxed out everything this dump has to offer."

We strut out to the silence of the patrons and "Back in Black" growling in the background.

And then we proceed to our own gym, on his floor and then his table.

Over the weeks, even hand jobs in public bathroom stalls when we go out to eat, or to buy groceries. Those end up being quite a vigorous workout of my forearms.

We make our own gym wherever we want. In our skin.

His house is better than mine, and not just because it used to be his mother's. There's no overly feminine touch, all the family photos put away. A lot of her furniture replaced. I can still smell the traces of the relatively fresh ivory paint.

I've cooked in here plenty, we've watched TV, and I've listened to more rock from the seventies than I ever knew existed.

We've showered together and done just about everything you can do wet without busting your ass. Not to say feet didn't slip a time or two.

So far, we've been lucky, and his strong arms caught us every time.

Back in his new memory foam bed that conforms to us perfectly the nights I sleep over, I watch him strip. How he loves to do that. Showing off his ink for me.

And well, let's just say I never grow tired of that dramatic little display.

But then, he gives me a quick kiss and gets serious.

I rub his back. "What is it, baby?"

"I want to do it."

"What?"

"I want to tattoo you. Anywhere you want. But if we put it on your calf, and I mess it up... it's not very easy to see, you know?"

"Aren't you too tired?" I'd waited for him until his shift was over after midnight. I bite at his waist and that turns out to be much harder than you'd think. No fat to grab onto.

"No," he says. "I'm strangely wide awake."

My stomach rolls. "Okay," I say.

The grin and the kiss are worth it. "Okay, it's better if you lie down on your stomach. Like you're on a bench."

"Can't you, uh... take care of this first?" I flip my dick at him.

Now that grin is wicked. "It'll just make it better, so no, I won't. Quit touching yourself, kick off those blankets and let me get my kit."

I do what I am told and watch him turn on every light in the bedroom area, even the vanity lights in the bathroom. He sets up his works. Fascinated, I watch him move the lamp, plug in the gun. Set out his disinfectant and inks. Some time or other, he really had printed off a stencil. He holds it up. "Do you want to see the design I made for you?"

I slap my hands over my eyes. "No. Surprise me." I laugh a little. "You're good at that. Among other things."

"Turn over."

I do, the mattress inviting me to hump, but I torture myself, fighting the fear of the "needles".

He takes a deep breath, then rests a gloved hand on my ass.

I say, "Oooh, that feels kind of kinky."

A smack that stings and I move against the mattress. "Stop that," he says, in his deepest, sergeant voice and I stop. But I laugh, more nervous than I want to be.

"Do you trust me?" he asks.

I swallow and get serious. I just nod.

"So, uh. Be very still or you'll fuck it up for sure."

"I'll fuck it up?"

The bed sinks as he sits down, and I feel the coolness of him sliding the stencil in place. "Do you want to check the position? Make sure you like it? Because you need to be happy with this."

I shake my head. "You said it feels like little knives, scraping?"

"Yeah, but like I said, I am good at it, and it's not just the potatoes that say so."

"Potatoes know, from what I hear on the streets."

He massages my ass, and I consider all this. He says, "It's just a tool. Bundles of tiny needles, in and out, fast as all get out, scarring you with ink. That's the reality. But if you're good, you don't have to go too deep, and you've got a lot of muscle in that area. That really helps, it doesn't even have to hurt all that much. And real artists don't have to... you know, attack the skin. I've had great teachers, Tam. I'm good like that. I won't make you bleed."

I chew my lower lip, wondering... if I give him what he wants, my surrender, my skin, would this "honeymoon" start to die? Would it be over, just like all the rest of my, dare I say it, boyfriends had decided it was over and faded away or just downright left?

I listen to his breathing, heavy and yet controlled. Sometimes I still can't believe he even wants my body. He helped shape it, for sure. Maybe I helped him shape himself.

I've never wanted to give anybody everything like this before.

I say, "And you'll take me out for some caramel chocolate chip afterward?"

"Well, when they open. It's three in the morning, silly."

He eases closer, until his breath tickles the back of my neck, and he kisses me once on the spine. He hovers over me, holding himself up. With my head

turned to the side, I could see the corded muscle above his wrist. We stay that way, about three inches apart, longer than there was any reason to. He says, "Baby, this isn't some game, like your little stalker routine."

He falls on me then, crushing the wind out of me, and I buck him off and scramble on top, pinning his arms. Well, he let me, and I'm no wimp anymore. I stare down at him. "Don't play with me."

The big smile goes away. He knows what I mean. "I'm not."

So I touch our lips together and it is as good as all that chocolate.

And pistachio.

I hop up and resume my position. My voice sounds muffled. "So, am I, what, like the fortieth dude you've marked with an anchor?"

"I can't believe your self-esteem sucks so bad. I mean, you've got abs and biceps and everything now." He gives a little laugh but I can't. I squinch my eyes shut as the machine whirs to life, and I hear clinks and smell alcohol. He says, "You don't know that it's an anchor, anyway, now do you? And try not to be an ass for once. I've never done this before."

"Well, somehow that doesn't make me feel one iota better."

"Ah, just man up." Barked, just like in the gym.

The peeling away of the paper. "Ouch!"

He actually gets tickled. "Oh, come on, that was just the stencil. Are you sure you don't want to double-check the position in the mirror?"

"No, just fucking get on with it before I change my mind."

"Remember, there's usually a sign in the shops. Remember what it says?"

"Yeah. 'Think before you ink'. Because it don't come off, I know. And I've thought about getting one more than once, so come on already."

He turns my leg from side to side for a second. "I think I got it. Yes. I think it's perfect."

"Good enough for me."

So he moves the whole table an inch closer, without dislodging a single implement. I hear him rip off a couple of paper towels, which does nothing for my nerves. But I've seen this done on other people. I have a pretty good idea of what was about to start.

“Ready?”

My hands shake as I turn my head to the other side. I am sweating like a sonofabitch. “Shit, talk about drama. Why do you have to make everything so fucking... ow!”

“Hey, you have to be still, it’ll make a bad line, and I know that didn’t hurt. Talk about drama. Just be still or let’s forget it.”

“No, it didn’t hurt. I mean, it stung, but...”

“Do you need a shot of Jack Daniels or something? I’m getting second thoughts here...”

“No, I want it! I swear I do. I always have. I’ve just been afraid.”

His voice gets soft. “Well, don’t be. If you truly don’t want this, I’ll stop now. You’ve just got a dot at the moment.”

“A dot?”

“Yeah.”

“So I’ve already got a tattoo?”

He laughs. “Well, yeah. A perfect little dot.”

I crack up big time. “It’s too late! Mama will kill me!” After I get myself together, I sigh. “Ah, David, I’m so happy. Do it. Do it to me good, please.”

And so he does.

I listen to the buzz of the machine, feel the wipe of the cloth, the way he moves my leg, kind of pushing it over here and there. A dab of Vaseline. I think about him fucking me and think... shit, this little pain he gives me is like a shot of another pain that night he scissor-fucked me. I started to breathe fast and he notices. “Hmm. I think this is going to be the best tattoo I’ll ever do.”

“It better be.”

“Yeah. Well. You’re giving me good motivation.”

I start groaning.

“Stop moving. I mean, it’s sexy as hell, but this little detail... won’t be. Yeah. That’s it, baby. I’m almost done.”

Wipe. Sting. Move. Sting. Wipe.

Maybe it takes five more minutes.

“All done,” he says. And then he smacks my ass hard with the latexed hand. “You can relax now. You want to go see?”

I shake my head, and he falls on top of me, but keeps his leg off my sore one. “I marked you,” he says, and he growls all silly and bites down hard on my shoulder. “Now you’re mine.”

I grab his fine head, and nearly grind his face into the back of my neck. “I let you. Don’t ever forget that.”

He breaks my hold and hops off, sounding all hyped up like a kid getting a long-wished-for bicycle. “Get up. I want you to see.”

Rolling over, I look at him. I know the art won’t rub off on his sheets, but still. I don’t want anything to touch it, either.

He motions me toward his closet mirror. “I wanted it to mean something.” Then, he ducks his head. “Now I sound all girly. But come here. Please let me know what you think? For real?”

“Honey, I’m always for real.”

I glance at the clock. It took about forty-five minutes. And he’d gone through that for twenty-two hours?

I get up, and my knees shake deep inside just a tiny bit, and I hope that it doesn’t show. But I lick my lips as the anticipation buzzes in the pit of my stomach and mixes in with just a dollop of dread like soured whip cream. I go to the mirror and turn, then look over my shoulder. He holds out his hand and I take it. He squeezes.

I squeeze back and relish the burn, but not as much as the warm expansion in my heart as I see the shine in his eyes. “I feel like it’s time for some chocolate chip, asshole.”

“Quit torturing me and just look at it!”

“Paybacks are hell,” I say, but I let myself inspect my brand-spanking-new ink.

It is red all around the edges, like a wasp has stung my leg. But there are no bloody looking lines, no spots threatening scabs. It is just a solid, crisp anchor, raised up on the newly cut skin. Much smaller than his ancient tat, but hey, it was much better looking, too. My lip trembles.

He looks worried and like he is trying not to. He says, “Do you like it?”

"It's beautiful." My head feels a bit light, and a tiny knot twists in my throat. "Why does the rose have to have thorns?"

"You don't like it."

"It's not that. The lines are so delicate. And the roses. Wow, so red."

"The color will get a bit darker as it heals."

I say, all business, "Nice shading, too and the way they twine." I laugh a little. "God, you really get me, don't you?"

We kiss for a second, but a couple of tears slip, and his thumbs wipe them off my cheeks. "What?"

Not all business now. "I was just... I don't know. Why do roses have to have thorns?"

He takes a deep breath. "They just do."

I nod and touch his mouth.

He taps my temple. "Hey. Come on. Too much of this." But his confidence crumbles. He says, really fast, "I can try to cover them with flowers, or birds or something. Man." He sort of stomps his foot and looks ashamed. "I wanted you to love it."

"Oh, I do love it." I grab his head and make him look at me. "I love it. And I love you."

He drops his head back, shuts his eyes for a moment, like I've seen so many times before at the gym, in a kind of private ecstasy. Only this time, I can stroke and worship his wonderful face. And then when he looks at me, into me, there isn't a closed off look in those eyes anymore. He isn't alone on some distant planet. Not alone in the bliss of his little agonies. He whispers, "I love you, too."

His lips turn up, and then... the smile as he rests his forehead against mine, his hot hands around the back of my neck...

That is worth all the tattoos and ice cream in the world.

The End

Author Bio

It all started when I was eleven and saw David Bowie on The Midnight Special. From that moment on, I knew (with the confidence of a child) that I was born to make music. I learned how to play lead guitar and eventually I got to make that beautiful sound all around Texas. I've played with bands that took me to Chicago, Finland, Iceland, Germany, Croatia and South Korea.

And all along the way, I never stopped writing. When I was twelve, I had bravely started my first book, called, shockingly enough, The Rock Star. Well. I had some learning and growing up to do. And finally, through a series of coincidences, I found my way back to the central themes of that long ago "novel" about three years ago.

My book Another Rock Star draws from those early musical obsessions and filters this story through my own dreams, fantasies and experiences. Through fiction, I'm able to delve deeper into even broader issues and turn it all the way up to eleven.

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