

LOVE'S LANDSCAPES



Don't Read in the Closet 2014

WET DREAMS AND ADULT REVELATIONS

Tara Spears

WET DREAMS AND ADULT REVELATIONS

Taz is the love of Eric's life. So beautiful with his cinnamon skin and dark soulful eyes, not to mention his brilliant smile that he hands out to anyone willing to accept it. Of course Eric didn't realize that when he left for college. Taz was just someone to dream about, a sexual fantasy with all that ink, a harmless crush. But when Eric sees him again he realizes how wrong he might have been.

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Love's Landscapes

An M/M Romance series

WET DREAMS AND ADULT REVELATIONS

By Tara Spears

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.

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

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WET DREAMS AND ADULT REVELATIONS

By Tara Spears

Photo Description

That's me, with all the tattoos, at my twenty-first birthday party. The guy next to me is my best friend, Josh, and the one taking the pictures... let's just say I have a bit of a crush on Eric, and I know I shouldn't. He's only seventeen after all, but he drives me crazy with the way he looks at me, like he'd ravage me given the chance. God, I hope when he's legal, I can give him the chance to do just that.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

Do you see the black man on the end? The one with all the hot tattoos? We used to be co-workers at a fast food place when I was in high school. He was a little older than I was, so he was the assistant manager and I was just a skinny white kid. I had such a crush on him and he was so sweet to me. We even went out one night with a group to celebrate his twenty-first. I wasn't twenty-one yet, but that's never really stopped anyone, has it? After I graduated I moved away and I figured I would never see him again. Recently I moved back to my old town and one morning I visited the local coffee shop, surprised to find it remodeled and with a new owner, my old assistant manager. He's still got that great smile and now I'm old enough I'm ready to make a move.

Tell me what happens when we reunite and give us our HEA.

Sincerely,

Shanna

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: sweet, first time, interracial, tattoos, barista, engineer, family drama, reunited

Word Count: 15,165

Acknowledgements

Thank you for the lovely prompt Shanna, I hope I did it justice. A special, heartfelt, thank you to the M/M Romance group, and the faithful, ever-fabulous volunteers who donate their time to put this event together. Without you, there would be no stories to write!

WET DREAMS AND ADULT REVELATIONS

By Tara Spears

Chapter One

“Ma...” I told her not to unpack my suitcase, yet she did, and now I couldn't find a damn thing. “Ma!”

“Eric, I'm not deaf, so no need to yell,” she called back in the same voice she used to use when I was a kid. Booming and slightly irritated.

And what exactly was that, if not yelling? Annoyed, I stepped out of my room, and glanced at her in a frumpy housecoat covered in bluebirds. Since Dad passed on, she'd kinda let herself go. *Kinda?* Fifty pounds wasn't that... yeah, it was. It was a lot on her frame. Her face was still the same though, always looking slightly put out, no matter the situation. Like now, her hands were on her hips—at least I assumed they were on her hips, it was hard to tell—and her brows were raised beneath those perfect salon-blond bangs of hers.

I gave her a daringly sweet smile. “Where, might I ask, are my work shirts?”

“Oh... well...” She waved a dismissive hand. “They smelled funny, so I washed them.”

I gave her a suspicious glance. They had been clean when I packed them. “Funny how?”

She gave me the once-over, just as she had ever since learning her son preferred the beauty of the male form over the soft curves of a female's. “Like perfume,” she said, with a huff of indignation.

God forbid her son should smell good. “Like my lilac laundry soap... great.” I said, exasperated, pinching the bridge of my nose, an ache forming behind my eyes. “Are they at least in the dryer?”

“Mmm...”—glancing over her shoulder, her lips pressed together—“no, not yet.”

I tossed my hands up. “Fabulous! You knew I had to be at the site this morning.” I dove back in my room to find a button-down, and the lanyard that, hopefully, had my badge on it. I reminded myself I loved my mother, I really did, and that strangling her, no matter how lovingly I did it, would probably be taken wrong.

Walking into my old coffee house haunt, I glanced around, taking in the bland interior, and walked right back out. I stared at the sign for a moment, making sure I was in the right place, not that Long Beach was a mecca of coffee houses. There were two, along with a few drive-thrus.

I headed back in to what had become part of the establishment... establishment of *boredom*. Gone were the mismatched comfortable chairs and loveseats, antique bistro tables, and the small black stage in the back corner. Everything was now in varying tones of tan, and it was like walking into *nothing*. Well, the chairs were these uncomfortable looking, sea-green and chrome things... I guess they provided a smidge of color.

The order counter was the color of sandstone, and the Torani bottles looked out of place in this ocean of drab. The shop wasn't totally deserted. There were two silver-haired folks, probably retired tourists, tucked at a table in the back corner. I rang the bell, since the counter *was* deserted.

A man came through a swinging door, wiping his hands on a towel. "Sorry, just catching up while it's slow."

I couldn't help wondering if it was like this at eight-thirty in the morning, when, and what, constituted a rush. The swart guy dropped his towel over the edge of a stainless sink, and turned to face me, a smile in place. I blinked as my pulse rocketed, that smile still able to affect me like no one else's.

"What can I get for you?" Taz didn't appear to recognize me, but even after five years I remembered him, and my body seemed to, too. That last part came as a bit of a shock, actually.

I hadn't been exactly chaste in college. I had been so keen on losing my virginity, that the first guy who showed any interest got the job. And it was so spectacular I couldn't have recalled his name if someone held a gun to my head. Rough, cold, and painful would be better adjectives to describe my deflowering, but, oh no, I hadn't stopped there. Stupid and needy, my days as a lackey were something I preferred not to think about. Yet despite having left college quite insensate, I felt my whole being basking in the glow of Taz's smile—as I always had. Maybe first crushes were never really forgotten.

I looked at him, practically willing him to remember me as I placed my order. He wouldn't though. Back when he knew me, I had been a pale, skinny kid, all sharp angles, and lacking any form of coordination. I had followed him like a lost pup begging for scraps, or in my case; a soft look, his fabulous smile, or God forbid, a touch. Those rare touches had been hormonal lightning to a

seventeen year old. Most times, I couldn't get home from work fast enough... and other times—if it was early in my shift—home proved much too far away. I couldn't even imagine what that beat-up Honda smelled like back then, with the multitude of sex-smearred napkins shoved hastily under the driver's seat.

I ducked my head, afraid Taz would see my thoughts. Then squared it back on my shoulders, remembering I wasn't that meek, unknowing kid anymore.

"Four dollars and twenty-five cents." Taz canted his head as I paid, and for a second, I thought he might have figured out who I was, but then he closed the cash drawer, and set to making my drink.

A few minutes later, he set it at the end of the counter where a sign read: pickup.

"Enjoy," he said, with another winning smile as he turned, and began wiping the sink down. Retrieving my vanilla mocha, I headed out the door, feeling foolish for not introducing myself. Today, however, wasn't a good day, with everything that needed to be checked at the site before the environmental impact statement could be filed. Maybe tomorrow... or next Friday might be better... yeah, I was sure I could get the courage up by then. I sighed as I climbed into my truck, the ghost of my teenage self clinging to me like damn Saran Wrap.

Chapter Two

Thankfully, I had grown out of my slovenly ways, and sex wasn't the end-all-be-all anymore. Although a date would be nice. Maybe dinner, handholding, and even a goodnight kiss would be deeply appreciated. I enjoyed kissing, and cuddling, and even sleeping with guys—sleep being the optimum word there.

Pulling out of the small parking lot, I sighed and shook my head beratingly. I was the most pathetic male on the planet. When had I gone from having a jack-in-the-box living in my pants to cringing whenever a guy gave me a salacious look? Back in California there had been plenty of guys interested, but like a scared mouse, I had always run home, preferring to date the untouchable men on my laptop. At least I could say I practiced safe sex, even if it was the cowardly version.

Arriving home in the dark, the porch light off—*thanks, Ma*—my head was pounding out a pretty decent rendition of: *Oh my God, kill me now*, the equalizer completely out of whack, causing my left eye to twitch. It wouldn't be long until people figured out who I was, but right now my anonymity was proving useful against the onslaught of irate citizens. It was a given that the company I was working for were slime. They had bought out Mr. Grimes' cottages, and evicted some longtime residents from their homes in order to build a resort that would encompass the marshlands—an area many were set on preserving.

That was precisely why I was here. Eric Houge, environmental engineer. More like environmental wizard, since this project would require some magic, and a hell of a lot of luck. I rubbed my tired face as I stepped into the house.

Ma beamed at me from her recliner, *Jeopardy* on the television. "How was your day?"

"I wish I was Irish." *Because I could use a boatload of luck about now.* How the protestors had found out about the fucking boardwalk was beyond me... And now, I had to figure out a way to make the thing pretty much invisible to every living creature in order to keep everyone happy. *Woohoo, yay me!* Yet, no matter how I sliced it, I couldn't visualize a way to do that without pissing off a crapload of people.

My mom's face scrunched up. "What?" she asked, confused.

I flipped my hand, giving her a low-energy head shake. “Nothing. I’m beat and not very coherent at the moment.” I took in my mom’s expectant expression, and decided I wasn’t up for a cheery chat about my day. “I have some paperwork to do, then I’m going to hit the hay.”

Her face fell. “There’s some casserole in the fridge,” she said hopefully.

I turned so she wouldn’t see me blanch. She was an okay cook—I hadn’t gotten food poisoning growing up, anyway—but her casseroles had always been questionably edible. Not enough cheese, not enough salt... I never could figure out what was missing. “Thanks, but I picked something up on the way home.”

She nodded stiffly as I headed to my room, wondering again what had possessed me to accept her invitation to stay here. Without even thinking, I knew the answer. Ever since Dad lost his battle with cancer, she had been slowly turning into a recluse, and it wasn’t in her nature to be antisocial. I hoped my presence would nip that problem. Of course, I probably had to spend time with her in order for that to actually work.

I would, just not tonight. It had been a day of placating the public, and trying to keep them from tramping around the site. People didn’t seem able to comprehend the no trespassing signs, or the fact James Brothers Inc. now owned the marshlands, as well as the long stretch of beach adjacent to them. It was a logistics nightmare, and I had been assigned the tasks of mediator and security guard, even though neither were part of my job description.

With a rather woe-is-me sigh I sat down at the small desk—the same small desk where I had spent so many hours of my youth doing homework, chatting online, and after my parents had retired for the evening, behind the added security of my locked door, discovered the wonderful world of gay porn. I hadn’t *exactly* been one of those teens who hid their sexuality; there just hadn’t been many options in our small town for a hormone-crazed gay boy. A homophobic father might have had a small part in my chosen sedentary life too. Yet I preferred not to give him the power of having affected any part of my life. I managed to screw it up all on my own, thank you.

I opened the folder containing the plans for the boardwalk that meandered around the marshlands to the tide pools, and stared at the blueprints for the twentieth time today. An hour later, I was still staring at them, having written down, and rejected, a few ideas. None of them worked. They all required a system of pylons that would disturb the blue-winged teal’s nesting grounds.

Hell, the construction alone would more than likely chase off the one pair of sandhill cranes who had been returning here to nest for the past six years. I couldn't even think about what this project would do to the local butterfly population... they were a bit too close to my heart. Leaning back, the chair groaning threateningly, I closed my eyes. Maybe taking this job had been a mistake.

I fully expected the butterflies that had befriended me in my youth to be fluttering angrily behind my eyelids, however, the image of Taz's sexy smile flashing through had me snapping forward, cracking my knees against the low desk. "*Fuck...*" I hissed, rubbing at the sharp pain.

Where the hell had that come from? I'd dreamed about it plenty, but he'd never *actually* flashed that sexy smile at me. The first time I saw him unleash that bad boy had been at his twenty-first birthday bash. He'd allowed me to tag along, although I've never understood why.

I'd only been seventeen at the time, yet that hadn't stopped me nipping—or guzzling, for that matter, from people's unguarded beers. Taz had been working his way past tipsy when he let that smile out to play, aiming it at Josh and his girlfriend. I stared unabashed, mesmerized by his wavering aim and the slight blush that lit his dark skin every time it landed on Josh.

I almost fainted when I caught Josh returning a playful smirk. Of course, the beer had completely gone to my head by that point, and afraid I might do something idiotic—such as blurting out I was gay—I turned to flee, and literally crashed onto a couch, my face landing in some girl's lap. She shoved me off to the side, and I did pass out then. I awoke hours later, the apartment quiet, my upper body slumped over the arm of the couch.

Noisy breathing caught my attention, and with a slight lift of my head, my teenage world shifted. Josh and Taz ground against each other in every imaginable fashion. Lips to hips, their bodies undulating to an erotic rhythm only they could hear. In that moment I would have given anything to be Josh. It was all so sensual, sexy, beguiling, and invigorating.

It was also false. Since that magical early dawn, I had come to understand what I witnessed had been nothing more than alcohol-induced bewitchery. Passion seemed to be a myth of the mind, something we searched for that didn't truly exist. A bit like an environmentally-friendly fucking boardwalk.

I could have stayed a few minutes sipping coffee, eating Eggos, and spending some quality time with my mother, but I hadn't. I awoke edgy, and fled the house before she even had a chance to say anything to me. Maybe it was guilt for not coming home after Dad died, or maybe it was because I couldn't stand her looking at me as if I had grown two heads. She'd been doing that since I told her I was gay, two years ago, after Dad died. She didn't do it all the time, but enough to make me feel as if I had changed in some inexplicable way I was unaware of.

More than likely, however, it was my own guilt. I felt helpless when I looked at her now, always in housecoats or loose-fitting sweats, rarely leaving the house—and it bugged me that I didn't know how to fix her.

I turned the truck off, and stepped out into the biting wind. Jesus, it felt more like winter than spring. As I closed the door, I glanced up, and blinked. *Huh. How'd I get here?* Best's Coffee squatted directly in front of the chrome bumper of my truck. I'd heard people talk about driving somewhere and not remembering how they got there, but it had never happened to me. I was a damn precise person who paid attention to his surroundings. Or at least, I thought I did.

There was no denying Taz had drawn me here. Teenage fantasies had returned to taunt me through the night, leaving me with damn impressive morning wood, and thankfully a dry crotch. I seemed to have finally outgrown the sticky reaction those dreams used to have on me.

The same flurry of giddiness that had ruled me in my youth returned to wreak havoc on my insides as I approached the entrance. As I opened the glass door, the wind gusted through, sending a few dry leaves skittering across the sandstone tiles, and making it feel as if I were being shoved from behind. Napkins lifted off tables, taking flight, and were captured by patrons before they could truly escape. With a lift of my shoulders, I smiled apologetically as I made my way to the short line.

The coffee shop was busier this morning, but still far from crowded. Somewhere around ten customers occupied tables, while an additional three stood before me in line. Taz whirled behind the counter, taking orders, and making drinks efficiently. He had always had an air of calm about him. Even when all hell would break loose at Shoreline Burgers, he kept his cool. I guess that's the reason he was the assistant manager and I was a fry cook. Of course, he was four years older than me, and truth be told, I was his biggest troublemaker. Why he never smacked me upside the head, I'll never know—God knows I deserved it.

I perused the pastries while Taz finished the previous customer's drink order. Through the clear case, I had a tantalizing view of blue boxers and a splash of dark skin along his back where his shirt had ridden up. His red long-sleeve tee covered his tats, but I knew they were there, having stared at them enough whenever I caught him shirtless on the beach. My eyes registered movement and instinctually flicked up, colliding with the warmth of Taz's thousand-watt smile.

"Handsome stranger's back. I must have done something right," Taz said in his soft, raspy voice. God, I'd forgotten how sexy it was. *Wait...* he just called me handsome.

I cleared my suddenly dry throat. "Um, yeah." *Smooth, Houge.* Four years of college and *so* articulate. "I don't know about the handsome part, but I'm not as strange as you think." *And that was sooo much better!*

He laughed. If he only knew how much I had stalked him, or how many wet dreams he had starred in, I doubted he'd be laughing. His laugh was infectious, however, and I found myself chuckling.

I scratched my cheek. "Mmm, maybe I am strange," I admitted, then leveled my gaze on his dark, dancing eyes. "You don't recognize me, do you?"

A slight smile remained, yet his brows vee'd giving away his confusion. "I wouldn't forget a guy like you." A smear of color painted his neck, and his eyes flicked down. *Wow,* Taz was flirting with me.

I leaned towards him. "You did though. We used to work together at Shoreline Burgers."

Chocolate eyes rose and narrowed, while the bridge of his nose scrunched up. He leaned on his hands, his head tipping like a dog trying to figure out if I was friendly or not. My fingers twitched in my coat pocket, wanting to smooth the lines from his nose and brow. God, he was cute right now. *I did not just call Terrence Best cute.*

"Eric..." I said, ignoring my internal eye roll. "Houge."

His eyes narrowed further, challenging the validity of my statement. "No way..." he breathed, blinking slowly, as if trying to see what he didn't believe.

Smirking, I glanced down, removing my hands from the safety of my pockets, and running them over my shirt. "I was when I looked in the mirror this morning." I nodded assuredly. "Yep, I appear to still be him."

Taz chuckled. "Cute."

I raised my eyebrows. "First handsome, and now cute. I think I'm on a roll."

He opened his mouth, then hesitated, color infusing his cheeks. "Cute," he said again.

"You already said that," I pointed out, enjoying his discomfort. I had always been the one stammering around him, so this role reversal was... entertaining, to say the least. I offered my hand. "It's good to see you again, Taz."

His smile returned as he clasped my hand. "Likewise." Although his grip was firm, I felt a tremble in the tip of his fingers, saw his eyes warm, and I shifted uncomfortably over the instant reaction his touch could still evoke. Releasing my hand, he stepped to the register. "So, Eric, what can I get for you?"

The laughter came unbidden, from a crevice where it had been hiding for some time. I wasn't exactly sure what lured it out. Possibly the flirty tone Taz had used, or the knowing warmth lingering in his eyes, or the hilarious fact my body still reacted as if I were a teenager around him. Whatever the reason, it rolled out of me until I was breathless. The other patrons probably thought me a mental case, but Taz only looked on with amusement.

Once I managed to straighten up, I shook my head apologetically. "Sorry, I don't know what that was about..." I dabbed my eyes with my palms. "Yeah, okay, a tall vanilla mocha, and..." I leaned over, looking in the case again. "Does that cranberry thing have nuts in it?"

"Pecans, actually."

"No nuts, I'm allergic—"

Taz snorted softly, then quickly cleared his throat. "I'll have to remember that."

A smile was fighting for control of my face, but I refused to succumb, afraid another bout of ridiculous laughter might escape. I could feel it right there, effervescing happily beneath my skin, making me all tingly.

"The lemon cake doesn't contain any... ah, nuts." Taz gestured to a dainty little yellow slab coated in powdered sugar, and my nose crinkled at the mention of lemon. "Hmm..." he frowned in concentration, then his eyes snapped wide, "Oh, the blueberry strudel." He tapped the shelf where a few fat, oozy, streusel-coated, frosting-oppressed calorie monsters hunkered.

God, the things looked sinful. "I'll take one of those then, and no whipped cream on the mocha, or I'll go into sugar shock for sure." I pulled out my wallet.

"Boy, no nuts and no whipped cream..." Taz tisked under his breath, probably assuming I couldn't hear him since he was tucked behind the case.

I handed him the cash, and took the pastry bag. "I'm not against whipped cream... on *certain* things." Taz's cinnamon-skin came to mind, lighting my face on fire, and further hardening what was already pretty damn hard from just being around him. Taz's chest rose and fell in rapid succession, hinting he just might be up for that. At least, I hoped that was the case, or I'd be too embarrassed to show my face in here again after all my shameless flirting.

The card he slid into my hand when I retrieved my coffee, gave me hope that we were, indeed, on the same page.

"My cell's on the back. Maybe you'll call me sometime, and we can catch up."

Grinning stupidly, I pocketed the card, and practically floated out the door. Once outside, I gulped the salt-seasoned air, feeling the panic of what I'd just done settle in. It had been two years since I'd flirted with a sassy blond, sporting teal and black streaks through his hair, and jeans so tight no man could comfortably wear them. It had been at a house party off campus, and we'd ended up in one of the rooms, in someone's unmade bed, and that was where the fun ended. I blamed alcohol for my lackluster interest, but honestly, sex had become a source of anxiety for me, and the fact he wanted *me* to fuck *him*, something I'd never done, terrified me. From then on, I'd avoided anyone who might be interested in me that way.

I glanced through the window, catching sight of Taz with his elbows on the counter, head tucked, hands roaming over his tight curls. Maybe he was having second thoughts too.

Regardless of my insecurity, I found myself at Best's Coffee the very next morning. A pert redhead gal manning the counter gave me an expectant look, and I mumbled my order. It took two more trips before I found the nerve to ask her where Taz was. A clipped *family emergency* had been my answer. Her cool tone didn't encourage further inquiry, and I decided to take my coffee at home the rest of the week. Maybe I'd call him over the weekend... or maybe not.

Chapter Three

“Ma, I ran into Charlotte today...” Shrugging out of my wool coat, I hung it in the small coat closet. “Ma?” Hearing the TV on, I ambled around the corner, wondering why she hadn’t answered me.

She flailed her hand dismissively when she saw me. “I heard you.”

“She told me you’ve refused every invitation to rejoin your pinochle group.” She made a face over that, and I ignored it. “It sounds like they miss you, and really want you back.” I’d been trying to get her out of the house this past week, but she had been more than stubborn, refusing my dinner invitations, and even a trip to the library, a place she used to love. She sat in the recliner under an afghan, concentrating on *Animal Cops* as if I wasn’t even in the room. My blood began to simmer.

I yanked my tie free, just about strangling myself in the process. “Get off your ass before you root to that fucking chair.” I pointed a menacing finger at her, my burgundy tie lassoing my wrist, and draping demurely over the outstretched digit, completely ruining the effect. She scoffed, and hunkered deeper into the chair. God, she was being ridiculous! “You’re going to your pinochle group tonight, and if you’re not ready in ten minutes, I’m dragging you there *as you are*.” I stormed from the room, hoping she heeded my threat, because I wasn’t sure I’d be able to drag her anywhere if she refused to move.

By the time I had changed out of my suit into jeans and a T-shirt, what I had said—how I had talked to my own mother—sunk in. She wasn’t the enemy here. I was. My less-than-amiable mood the result of a day full of exasperating meetings with the city council, the planning commission, my boss, and to top it all off, I found my truck decorated with some lovely artwork—letting me know what the people in this town really thought of me. The bass head speared on my antennae had been a nice touch, but the egg-glued seashells had been the crowning glory. An hour at the carwash, and you could still see the swirl of a bingo dauber that had spelled out traitor along both doors. My mom had just been the icing on a shitty day.

I headed out to apologize to her, and found the family room dark, the TV off, and the afghan folded, hanging on the back of the recliner.

“Where are your shoes? You’re going to make me late!”

Startled, I spun around. “Jesus, you’re going to give me a heart attack.” A quick breath through my nose calmed me. “Ma, I’m sorry. I had a bad day and shouldn’t have taken it out on you. You don’t have to go...”

She lifted her chin, running her hands down a linen pantsuit I’d never seen before. But then, any of the clothes I remembered wouldn’t fit her now. She looked nice.

“Maybe I want to.” Her voice carried a speck of indignation. I turned to get my shoes, and she laid a hand on my arm. “It’s a start, isn’t it?”

I smiled, and kissed her cheek. “A big one, Ma.”

Dropping her off, I watched as she was engulfed by her friends and dragged into the house. She had forgiven me, but I still felt like shit for yelling at her, even if it had gotten her off her ass.

On my way back to the house, I slowed as I passed my father’s old watering hole—or rather his home, since he spent more late nights here than with his family. Walt’s still looked the same as when I left, one of the few places that hadn’t changed. I went around the block and parked behind the rectangular ocean-battered structure.

“Watch this you sonofabitch...” I muttered, climbing from my truck. I hoped the alcoholic homophobe was watching his gay son walking into his favorite bar from wherever he was in the afterlife. Of course, he hadn’t known I was gay when he died, but I assumed he did now, and was turning over in his grave.

The scene hadn’t changed much, Walt’s daughter, Julie, was behind the bar tonight, rather than Walt. The same old drunks huddled on their stools at the shadowed end of the glass-topped bar, spending their fisherman’s pensions just as Dad had.

Julie made her way towards me, a smirk on her pretty face. “Heard you were in town.” She tucked her dark hair behind her ear before indicating the passel of stooped bodies at the end of the bar. “I could probably find a drunk who needs a ride...”

“That’s a low blow, even for you,” I retorted.

“It was, but you once told me the only time you’d ever step foot in a bar was to pick up your old man.”

I shrugged. “Things change. People grow up.”

She nodded, then reached out, stroking down my fingers. “Eric, I don’t want to know if you’re heading down that road.”

I let out a cynical laugh. “I’m not my father, and I never will be.” I promised myself *that* long ago—back when I used to clean up his puke from my truck after collecting his drunken ass from this very bar.

Julie smiled sympathetically, and I huffed at her. “So... are you going to take my order, or be miss-high-and-mighty, and refuse me service?”

She shook her head, her hair falling from behind her ear. “Nope. What can I getcha?”

“A beer, whatever’s decent on tap.” I tossed a fiver on the bar, and received an approving smile in return. *Told you I wasn’t my dad.* I couldn’t stand whiskey or gin. Beer or wine worked just fine.

The wind gusted through the door as Julie set the glass in front of me. She looked over. “Hey boys. How’s Maimie doing?”

I caught the waffle of dark fingers, indicating so-so, and my head tipped just enough to recognize the owner. Taz came towards the bar, sexy as hell in a skin-tight grey T-shirt. The discouraged look on his round face didn’t fit him though, and Josh—as handsome as ever—was rubbing his back.

I gulped down half my beer before plastering on a cordial smile and turning to face them. “Taz, Josh, how nice to see *both* of you.” There was a bit of snark there, but damn, seeing Taz with Josh wasn’t setting well with me. What had all that flirting in the coffee shop been anyway? *Just flirting, you moron.*

Taz’s dark eyes widened for an instant before he averted his gaze, a shy smile making its way across his face. Josh’s green eyes narrowed, as he tried to work out who I was.

He shifted on his feet. “Do I know you?”

Taz laughed. “That’s Eric Houge.” Josh’s mouth fell open. “I didn’t recognize him at first either. Kinda grown up isn’t he?” Taz’s voice held a hint of perplexing admiration.

“I’ll say...” *Did Josh just wink at Taz?* Josh snaked his arm around Taz and offered his hand. “Good to see you. God, what’s it been... four years?”

Clasping Josh’s hand, my knuckles grazed Taz’s side, and I swear he pushed into the touch. “Five, actually.” Josh leaned over Taz’s shoulder, indicating he hadn’t heard, and I cleared my throat. “Five, actually,” I managed to say above a stage whisper.

Taz was swaying in the space between me and Josh as if he wasn't sure where he wanted to stand. Josh noticed and gave him a little shove. *Huh.*

Taz spun on his friend. "Stop it..." He glared up at Josh, but I didn't miss the look that flashed between them. Something was up, and it obviously involved me.

Josh shouldered Taz out of the way, retrieving two drinks off the bar Julie had evidently set there during our introductions.

He handed a cola and something to Taz. "I think I'm going to play some pool. You boys have fun." That time, the wink was unmistakable—and aimed right at me.

"I, um... thought, maybe..." Taz sighed, dropping his chin to his chest. "Damn," he breathed, then his head snapped up, eyes locking with mine. "I can do this... I really can."

The doubt in his voice made me smile. "Can you really?" I could feel the smirk tugging my lips.

He scratched his cheek, trying not to grin. "You were going to call me."

My brow pulled tight. "Yes..."

"But you didn't." His brows rose, but the warring grin remained.

"No. I was going to this weekend."

His hands found his hips. "Were you now?"

I battled my lips for control. "Yes."

"And?"

"And what?" I asked.

"What were you going to say, when you called?"

"Um..." I frowned at the scuffed floor.

"I'm waiting."

I shifted uncomfortably. I could do this, I could ask him out. "So, you're... would you..." I hesitated, rubbing the back of my neck.

"Yes..." Taz tipped his head, biting off his amusement.

"Jesus, get on with it all ready!" Julie blurted. A bar towel hit my face, and I flung it back at her. Taz started chuckling behind his hand. The towel flew

back, and I gave her a *do you mind* look. She had her hands on her hips, her astute, cerulean eyes rolling.

I tucked the towel under my arm. "I think I'll keep this. I might need it later." That sent Taz into hysterics, and succeeded in sending her away, her nose wrinkled in disgust. I turned back to Taz. "So, what do you say?"

"To what?" His eyes gleamed.

"You're not going to make this easy are you?"

He moved until only inches separated his chest from mine. "No."

The smell of coffee wafted around me. I laughed, that teenage giddiness taking over. "Okay. I can do this..." I stared down at his white sneakers toed up to my brown loafers for a moment before meeting his teasing eyes again. "Would you be interested in going out to dinner with me?"

His index finger tapped his chin thoughtfully, drawing my eyes to the quirk of a smile taunting his agile lips. "Depends on when."

Man, they looked so smooth and soft, and I wondered for the hundredth time what it would be like to kiss him. "Tomorrow," I said, transfixed.

Warm fingers propelled my chin up, dragging me away from my sensuous thoughts. I felt my face warm, just as it had when I was a teenager and Taz caught me staring at him.

"Pick me up at the shop at six-thirty."

I nodded. "Six-thirty... I can do that."

He leaned in, his warm breath feathering my neck, and raising a plethora of goose bumps across my shoulders. "Don't be late. You've kept me waiting long enough." His lips pressed beneath my ear, sending a jolt straight to my groin. That minute touch took a moment to recover from, and by the time I did, he had already returned to Josh. His eyes caught and held mine as Josh leaned down to say something to him. Taz smiled softly, his chin dipping down once. Josh rattled him with a rough one-armed hug, and a quick grin thrown my way. My phone vibrated, indicating it was time to pick up my mother. Laying the towel on the bar, I left Walt's for the first time in history with a grin on my face. Damn, I had a date with *Taz*.

Chapter Four

The coffee shop was dark when I pulled up. I was a few minutes late, but not *that* late. Yanking the note off the door, I opened it, fearing he had left. I blew out a sigh of relief. I drove to the back of the building, and honked, as the note requested. He stepped out the rear door, and locked it behind him.

“You’re late...” he said, as he slid into the passenger seat, the scent of citrus and coffee following him in.

“Ten minutes... I suppose I could have called.” I stared at him, drinking him in. He was stunning in a black V-neck sweater, and grey leather jacket that matched the slacks hugging his hips. I had this insane desire to lick from where the V settled against his sternum, all the way up to the hollow at the base of his throat. I swallowed, yet my eyes stayed riveted to the way his chest shifted as he breathed, giving me a peek of the tattooed rosary I knew lay between his sinuous pecs.

He shifted under my steadfast gaze, running a thumb across his lips. “I thought you might have changed your mind.” His eyes finally rolled towards me.

“Not on your life.” I dragged my eyes from him, and headed down the alley.

“Really?”

“Really. I have a confession to make.” I shot him a quick glance.

“Yeah?” He glanced out the side window as I turned onto Pacific. “What’s that?”

“I’ve wanted this for a long time.” It wasn’t as hard to admit as I had thought it would be.

He turned towards me. “Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“You look nice.” Fingertips traveled over my shoulder and down my arm, sending goose bumps skittering across my skin. *What was it with the damn goose bumps, anyway?*

My grip tightened on the steering wheel. “You look amazing...” I breathed.

“Thank you,” he said quietly.

The remainder of the short trip was spent in tense silence, our scintillating conversation seemingly coming to a halt.

I pulled into The Depot, and found a spot along the south side of the building.

“Good choice. I like this place.” Taz flashed me a grin and some of the tension evaporated.

“I wasn’t sure... It wasn’t here when I left, but the reviews seemed promising.” I hefted myself out of the cab, as Taz did the same.

While we waited to be seated, Taz kept his shoulder pressed against mine. I wasn’t sure what was up with that until we were led to a table that could be deemed nothing short of romantic—and very secluded. The large, fake plants completely hid us from view. I wasn’t sure if I should be thankful or offended. As I sat down in the little nook, the bustle of the restaurant dimmed considerably. Definitely thankful.

I perused the menu without really seeing it, despite the gentle rumbling of an empty stomach. This stagnation was beginning to bother me, but for the life of me, I couldn’t think of anything intelligent to say, ask, talk about. Every time I snuck a peek at Taz, he appeared deep in thought, his black brows knitted together, his rich lips pulled thin. The pilsner I ordered hit the table with a *thunk*, Taz’s pinot noir arriving more gently. We both looked up at the bright-eyed, smiling waitress. I didn’t know about Taz, but I felt guilty sitting here like a nervous high school kid in what was really a lovely, quaint restaurant.

I ordered the sea bass and Taz chose the planked salmon. Once the waitress had left, Taz, elbows resting on the table, wine in both hands, dropped his head, and let out a lengthy sigh.

“I need to get something off my chest.” His head came up, and after a hearty sip, he set his wine glass down. *He is seeing Josh, or worse, he’s not gay.* “I know who you are. Julie told me.”

I blinked, confused. “I told you who I was, and I’d be pretty devastated if you didn’t remember me, even a little.”

“That’s not what I mean. I almost cancelled tonight.” He took another more moderate sip of his wine, then tilted his head to the side, his nostrils flaring as he exhaled. “My nana was one of the elderly your company evicted. Forty years she lived there—”

I held up my hands, already knowing where this was going. “Wait. First of all, it’s not *my* company. I’m just an engineer, and have nothing to do with

acquisitions.” Taz was practically glaring at me. Settling back against the chair, I ran a hand through my mousy hair. “I don’t... I don’t agree with how they acquired the property. I don’t agree with a lot of the things they do. But I took this particular job, so I could guarantee no corners were cut.” I shook my head, unsure what else I could say to wipe the scorn from Taz’s face.

“Losing her home was a pretty big corner. She’s eighty years old, and she hasn’t adjusted well to the move.”

“Taz, I’m sorry.”

He gave me a tight-lipped smile, his eyes anguished. “You told me it wasn’t your fault,” he said flippantly.

“It wasn’t. But that doesn’t mean I can’t feel remorse for their sins.”

He stared past me, nodding acceptance. “That’s almost like admitting guilt, you know?” *Whoa, not so accepting.* Pinning me with dark, accusing eyes, he swiftly shifted, leaning over the table. “Why did you take the job? It’s not as if you love this town. You left without even a wave goodbye. You didn’t even come home when your father died. What’s up with that?” He slumped back in his chair. “Why did you come back, Eric? Was it to rub—”

My mind buzzing over the onslaught, I slammed a hand down on the table, causing Taz to jump. “Wait... just hold on.” I pinched the bridge of my nose, trying to stop the reeling so I could think. Taz was just another pissed off part of the populous, and I had provided him the perfect opportunity to slash me in person. That realization cut more than anything else had. I stood, and retrieved my wallet, feeling the shock settling in.

With shaky fingers, I tossed some bills on the table. “I’ll take you home.” I spun around, and strode from the restaurant, unable to look at one of the few people I never thought would turn on me. The one person I hoped would still be here when I returned. Terrance had always been a rock, he loved everybody, and I guess I hoped maybe he’d love me too. Obviously I was still that kid fawning for his attention, and maybe it was time I grew up.

He grabbed my arm, as I opened the door to the truck. “Eric—”

Shaking my head, I yanked free. “Don’t. Just... I made a mistake, I’m sorry.” I ducked into the cab.

As we crossed into Long Beach, Taz broke the silence. “Turn left at the next road.” I did, and he instructed me through a few more turns before the roar of the ocean came up on our left.

I took in the newer two-story homes less than a block from the beach, homes I couldn't afford on my best days. "You live out here?" I asked. He didn't answer, except to point me down a sand-covered single track. I parked where he told me to, and peered into the darkness, unable to make out anything but scraggy dunes and a footpath.

He reached over, and turned off the truck, taking my keys in the process. "I'm not leaving us like this." The door slammed, driving the statement through the slurry that was my mind at the moment. *Us?*

Taz waited at the top of the dunes, his outline framed by the moonlight bouncing off the unseen ocean somewhere behind him. I opened the door, knowing I wouldn't get my keys until he was ready to give them back. He'd pulled this shit on me several times before, not letting me leave work until I was calm enough to drive. He'd spent many a late night listening patiently to me rant about my father as only an angry misplaced teenager can.

Huddling against the damp cold, I trudged up the loose sand until I was flush with his shoulder. The tide was in. We both gazed at the blackness of the ocean as angry breakers slammed the shoreline.

Taz's head bowed. "You'd been gone so long, changed so much, I didn't even recognize you when I saw you again. How screwed up is that? I thought we were friends... I thought..." He hesitated, squeezing his eyes closed for a moment. "I waited for you, Eric. Every Christmas, every summer... I searched for you, hoping maybe..." He had to speak over the distant roar, and his voice wavered through the biting wind. "I went to the funeral, sure you'd be there to see him go into the ground." His fingers found mine, and I tipped my head down, the simple touch skittering up my arm and across my shoulders like an energetic sand crab. His dark hand enveloped mine, blocking out my alabaster skin. "But you never came home, never called—I figured I had been wrong about what I saw, what I felt—that the moment you arrived at college, everything here had become a bad memory." He heaved a sigh. "When I found out who you were, and why you were here, I used it to turn my hurt at being forgotten into anger."

"I could never forget you." I turned to face him, my body filling with accusations. "Why didn't you say anything before I left? Do you have any idea how much I liked you, how much I wanted you... how much I needed you to see me?" My thin hand sailed through my hair, giving a yank before traveling down my face. If he had shown even a smattering of interest... I would have... what?

“And if I had? Eric, I wasn’t going to be your regret.” That brought my eyes to his. He canted his head, his jaw soft under the moonlight. I wasn’t sure if I wanted to punch him or kiss him. All that time, and not once—and I hadn’t exactly been cautious with my gawking. “You needed to go. To make something of yourself, find all those pieces you were scrabbling for.”

“I wasn’t broken, you know.” I blurted, knowing people thought my distance was the result of a heavy-handed father, when in fact it was the opposite. He chose to ignore his “sissy” son when he realized I became seasick just standing on an unmoving boat. What good was a son that couldn’t fish? Evidently none, whatsoever.

Taz cupped my face, and I jerked away, not wanting his pity. “Hey, I know. But you weren’t whole. This place—”

I glanced out at the beach. “I love it here, I always have. There just wasn’t room for both my father and me.”

“And now?” Taz asked, and even in the dark I could see the doubt lingering in his eyes.

“I’m not chic enough for So Cal, so I came home.”

“And?”

I smiled at that. “Hoped to find you. I don’t know...” I shook my head.

“What did you think you’d do with me once you found me?” The doubt was gone, replaced with a challenge.

“I, ah...” I sucked on my lower lip, and Taz’s eyes darted to my mouth, his pink tongue appeared, stark against his lips. “This...” My hand found the back of his neck, and I pulled his mouth to mine. Taz’s stout body collided with my chest, and a hand came up to grip the back of my head. My mind spun over the fact I was actually kissing Taz... and he was kissing me back. A hint of wine, and that same citrusy-scent from earlier, teased my senses. I slid my arm around his waist, tightening my hold in an attempt to ground myself to something solid. And, oh God, was he solid.

Hands explored, tongues met, bodies hardened. I’d never kissed anyone like this—nor had anyone respond with such fervor. It was frightening and exciting all in the same staggered breath. The wind whipped up from the water a second before the sky opened up, the rain bitter against our faces. Taz broke first, rolling his head back, and squinting into the deluge. Droplets slid off his jaw,

and found the hollow at the base of his throat, hunkering into the depression as if hiding from the very storm that had birthed them. It was a temptation I couldn't resist. A chuckle rose from his throat as my lips suckled the water out. The laughter died on a broken moan when my teeth nipped up his neck.

A flash lit the bruised sky, and Taz's hands clamped onto my shoulders. The angry rumble of thunder followed a second later, causing Taz's body to twitch.

I pulled him tight, recalling his dislike of the more volatile components of our spring and fall storms. "Time to go?"

He nodded, his wide eyes scanning the sky.

To Taz's relief, the storm moved south, and by the time we reached the coffee shop, the rain had stopped. I glanced at the empty alley. "Where's your car?"

"I don't have one."

I frowned. "Why didn't you have me take you home then?"

"You did. I live here." He shrugged sheepishly. "Sandy, the old owner, had a small apartment built into the back, years ago." He grinned, shaking his head. "The ceilings are only like six foot four, so it's a good thing I'm only five-eleven."

"Is it legal?" *Why did I ask that?* It was Taz's business, not mine.

"Yeah, I made sure before I bought the place. All to code, and the apartment was built so long ago it falls under a grandfather clause." He eyed me under a fringe of dark lashes, a finger running over those pretty lips of his. "Do you want to come in?"

I fought a losing battle with the grin working to take over. Jesus. Hell yeah, I wanted to come in. "You have no idea how much I want to. But I'm not interested in casual."

He nodded. "Thank you."

"For what?"

"For forgiving me." The lines of his face softened in the blue light from the dash.

I shook my head slowly. "I don't know if I have. I might still require some ass-kissing."

He chuffed a laugh. “Oh Jesus...” Fisting my shirt, he dragged me towards him, and planted a hard kiss on my lips. He bounced out of the truck, and I waited until the door closed behind him before touching my tingling lips. That teenage crush was still in full swing, trolloping through my veins, making my head spin, and my chest ache. Maybe this was more than a crush.

Chapter Five

Over the next few weeks work was hell, but Taz made walking through the gates bearable. He was my rock. My solace. I spent more and more time in his quirky apartment, not coming home until late most nights, and my mother noticed.

“Where do you go after work?” She turned in her chair, inspecting me. “There aren’t any other gays in town,” she snorted, “so it’s not a booty call.”

“There are more than you think, Ma.” I smiled smugly behind the rim of my coffee mug as I watched her squirm over that tidbit. Actually, I only knew of two, other than myself. Taz and Sora, his redheaded snarky employee who had yet to warm up to me... even a little. To my surprise, Josh married and now had two slender boys that looked just like him. I had the pleasure of meeting the little hooligans when they found me *attacking Uncle Taz* in the storeroom after-hours. Josh couldn’t stop laughing—what, after all, was a little frottage among friends—and in the end, Taz repossessed the key he had given him, just to shut him up.

“Who?” She waved her hand quickly. “Never mind. I don’t want to know.” Her eyes narrowed on me. “So... *are* you seeing someone?”

I lifted my eyebrows at her. “If I say yes, are you going to get all weird?”

“Nooo,” she said slowly. I shot a pointed look at her. “Maybe... but I’ll try not to.”

“I’ll take that, Ma.” I kissed her forehead, and headed out.

“Was that a yes?” she called after me.

“It was.”

“What’s wrong?” Taz had made manicotti, that I had devoured, and now we were lying on his couch watching a movie I wasn’t really paying attention to.

“Who says anything’s wrong?” Everything was wrong. Well, everything but this.

He nuzzled my ear. “I do. It’s as if you’re not here.”

I smiled. God, he’d figured me out quickly. Of course he had always had a sense about me, and other than being more confident, I really wasn’t much

different than I had been back then. When things weren't going well for me, I still got sulky.

"The planning commission shot down my new plans on the boardwalk. They want six less pylons. How the hell am I supposed to remove six pylons when the whole thing is less than a quarter-mile long?"

Taz leapt over me, padding to his computer. "Do you have the plans with you?"

I looked at him curiously as he fired the desktop up. "Yeeaah."

"Go grab them. A quarter-mile you said?"

I nodded, sliding my feet into his slippers so I could run out to the truck.

"Don't forget to disarm the alarm," he called after me. I punched in the code, and then proceeded to disengage the myriad of locks installed on the rear door. I shook my head as I slid over the last bolt. This was Washington, for Christ's sake, not New York.

When I returned, he pointed at the table. "Lay them out on the table. It will just take a sec for me to find this again."

"Find what again?" I laid out the ragged site copy.

He shook his head. "God, you're suspicious."

"I have a right to be. People keep decorating my truck, and I think someone threw up in the bed yesterday."

Taz's nose wrinkled. "That's still going on?"

I rubbed a tired hand over my face. "Yes, and they keep getting more and more creative. I had a dead seagull for a hood ornament last week."

He swiveled around in the black leather office chair. "No fucking way." I nodded, wishing it wasn't true. He swiveled back to the screen, clicking the mouse. "Assholes." *Click-click-click*. "Okay, how wide does the bridge have to be?"

"Thirty feet, to account for spring runoff." I walked up behind him, my eyes narrowing on a site completely in Japanese.

He clicked through several links. "I didn't bookmark it, but it's on this site somewhere."

"What are you looking for?" I asked again.

He smiled up at me, wagging his naturally perfect eyebrows, something that would take me a painful hour with a set of tweezers to achieve. “The answer to your prayers.”

I ran my hand over his soft, tight curls. “I already got that.”

“Pffftt.”

I chuckled. “Okay, the answer to my dreams then.”

“And what dreams might those be?”

Heat scorched my neck, ears, and cheeks. When I didn't answer, he turned. “Hmm...” Shooting me a leering smile, he spun back around. “I've had those dreams.”

“About me?”

Taz let out a raspy laugh. “Maybe.” He straightened in his chair. “Here it is. It's a suspension system built by a gardener, if you can believe it. It's the only one I've ever seen like this.”

I stared at the wooden suspension walk wending around huge trees, and over wide creeks and gullies. The supports looked like fans, there were so many cables, but they were sparse and incredibly far apart.

“What do you think?” Taz rubbed his jaw, his shoulders tight, as he waited for my answer.

“What's the largest gap?”

“Fifty feet.”

“No shit?”

He scrolled down and clicked on a tiny picture of a waterfall. As the section in question appeared, he held his hands towards the screen; *Tada. I am your savior.* As he always has been. “No shit,” he replied, smug in his prowess.

Just looking at it, I knew it would go over budget, but it was a solution. And if they didn't accept it after everything I'd done for them, they were going to have one pissed off engineer to deal with.

I clapped Taz's shoulders. “Answer to my prayers. How the hell did you know about it?”

He shrugged. “At one point I wanted to build bridges... I still see the beauty in the unusual.”

"I guess that's why we seem to work. You're beautiful, and I'm unusual." I planted a kiss on his temple, bending to avoid his joking smack.

The instant the door of my truck latched closed, I let out a *whoop*, drumming my hands on the steering wheel. Taz was the one who deserved my commission. He'd found it, he'd helped me design it, working well into the wee hours of the morning right by my side, while drowning us both in high-end caffeine.

I waved at the beige concrete structure, hoping I never had to step foot in the city building again. I headed straight home, not even bothering to wash off the new crustaceans that had found their way onto my truck. The rotten crab should fly off somewhere en route.

My mother was backing out as I pulled up. I honked at her, and she sidled her car up to my truck, rolling down her window.

"Where are you off to?" I asked, trying not to sound surprised she was *driving* somewhere, at night no less.

"It's Thursday. Bridge night," she said as if I should know that.

"Oh." I grinned, and winked at her. "You look nice, Ma." Her salon-blond hair was swept back, held by ornate combs, and she had made up her face.

"It's just bridge with the gals."

"Have fun." Pinochle, bridge, and her book club... what was next? I was proud of her, though. She was getting out there again, and I'd like to think I had a hand in it, even if I wasn't proud of how I had played that hand.

Munching down a microwaved burrito, I plopped onto my bed, and dialed Taz. "Hey!"

"So how'd it go?" His voice came through tired.

"Good. I think I owe you a big fat dinner at a really nice restaurant, maybe a walk on the beach, a movie... choice is yours." I owed him so much more than that, but for now, it would have to do.

"So they liked it?"

"Maybe not liked, but yes, they accepted it."

"That's that, then," he said quietly.

“Are you okay?” He didn’t sound okay. I shuffled onto my side, propping myself on the pillows.

“Just tired. I had to clean graffiti off the building today, and that always takes forever.”

I frowned. “What kind of graffiti?”

“Teenage shit. It’s not the first time. Listen, I’m really tired. I was actually getting ready for bed when you called.”

Something wasn’t right. “Tell me you’re okay, Taz.”

“I’m fine. Eric... congratulations.”

“Thanks, I couldn’t have done it without you.”

“I doubt that. Night.”

“I’ll see you tomorrow.” But he’d already hung up.

Despite the bone-weary exhaustion, I tossed throughout the night, worrying about Taz’s melancholy mood. It wasn’t like him to be sullen. That was my deal.

Damn. A honk had me jerking the wheel and peeling my eyes from the pale ghosts still visible on Taz’s building. *Small-minded fuckers.* And honestly, *fag* wasn’t all that creative. I was partial to butt pirate myself. Something about the way it spit from one’s lips.

Taz was busy wiping down the counters as I walked in. He glanced up, the smile on his face drooping once he realized it was me. I tromped behind the counter, leaning in to keep the conversation private. His shoulders tensed beneath the red Henley he wore.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” I whisper hissed.

His brow hunched. “About what?”

I rocked my head back, noticing a water spot on the ceiling, before dropping it again. “The walls? The graffiti?”

His fingers flipped towards the front of the shop. “They’re just teenagers blowing off steam. It’s happened before, and it’ll happen again.” At my indignant huff, he gave me an exasperated look. “It’s no different than what we did in our youth.”

I pointed to the front wall. "I never did anything like *that*."

His smooth brows rose. "I remember someone taking a baseball bat to every garbage can along the pier late one night."

My arms came across my chest. "Not the same. Besides I was angry with my dad."

Taz rubbed my arm, then squeezed my shoulder. Something he had done that very night, only this time, he clasped the back of my neck, his thumb caressing softly. "And maybe they're mad at the world. Did you ever consider that?"

I shook my head. "What if they go further... try to hurt you?"

His hand dropped, and he turned to organize the already perfectly aligned spices. "They won't. Several of them come in here for coffee, actually."

"How do you know that?"

He pointed to the front and back of the shop, looking like a gunslinger covering the exits. "Security cameras. Both doors, in case someone tries to rob me."

"Oh... smart." No one was getting through the back door without a battering ram, but knowing he could see who was out there before he opened it, made me feel better about his safety. An older woman drowning in a grey raincoat, several sizes too big for her, came in, and I stepped from behind the counter so Taz could take her order. Retrieving a napkin from the bundle under the deli case, I rubbed off the finger smudges from the arched glass while I waited.

"Now I won't have anything to do when it gets slow," Taz teasingly admonished.

"I'm sure when I get back I could find a way to keep your hands busy."

"I think I'll pass." Taz's dark lashes dropped like a veil, the tenseness returning to his shoulders.

I squinted at him, trying to figure out this hot and cold routine he was running this morning. "Hey." I gathered his face in my hands without any concern for the handful of patrons in the shop. They were probably too absorbed in their electronic gadgets to notice anyway. "Obviously something other than the defamation on the building is bothering you."

He wouldn't look at me, his chin pushing down into the cup of my hands. He hadn't shaved this morning. The barely-there scruff along his jaw tickled my palms, and I had an urge to run my tongue over the rough surface, but I felt, in his current mood, he might not appreciate that.

His hands hung limp at his side. "When are you going home?"

"I don't know. I thought we'd celebrate tonight. Whatever you want to do, my treat."

"I meant California." His voice was so low and quiet, but once I strung the words together, his mood came to light.

"You thought I was going back to California... God, I feel so stupid." I forced his chin up until his eyes were level with mine. His lashes remained stubbornly down. "There's no home to go back to."

The spidery fringe slowly raised, his head becoming lighter in my hands.

I leaned my forehead against his. "I sold almost everything, and moved up here hoping... Anyway, I've applied at a few places in Kelso and Astoria, but I haven't heard back yet. So after tomorrow, I'm just a bum without a job."

Wide, dark eyes blinked. "What were you hoping?"

I shook my head, battling a smile. "I don't know what I was thinking. It was just an idiotic teenage fantasy." His eyes warmed, and I wanted to kiss him so badly, knowing he'd taste like caramel, vanilla, and coffee. Propriety won out, though, and I settled for running my thumb over his full lower lip, feeling the silkiness my lips couldn't. The cowbell on the door clanked. Reluctantly, I released him and stepped back.

His finger stroked along my ribs. "I have one of those, too." With his lip trapped between his teeth, he turned to his customers, then threw over his shoulder, "Sora's in at four. I'll cook."

"You don't have to. I'm not a pauper yet."

The sharp-edged, carnal look he threw me had my pants tightening, and me backpedaling. "I love your cooking. Four, then. Yeah, I'll be here. Okay, then." I shot out the door, fanning my face ineffectively. *Whoa*. Yeah, never seen that look before.

I spent the rest of the day tidying up any loose ends, sweating over Taz's look, and trying to hide my semi that refused to go down. I should have worn a longer coat.

Chapter Six

Arriving at the coffee house, I could feel the tension pulling on my bones, but I wasn't panicky. Not yet, anyway. Since the shop was still open, I went through the front door, so Taz wouldn't have to disarm the alarm and unlock all the locks on the rear door.

Sora glanced up from the magazine she was reading. "He's in the apartment." She popped her gum and went back to her magazine. As I cleared the storeroom, she yelled, "Don't forget we're open until six-thirty, so keep it down." What did she think we were going to do? Oh, sex, right. Maybe she knew something about Taz, I didn't? Now, I was anxious.

Taz had his door locked, so I pushed the buzzer and waited, juggling the wine I had brought back and forth between my hands. The door flew open. Taz was wearing a "Kiss the Cook" apron over caramel skin. Well, he had pants on, but still. Despite the red gingham—red always looked good on him—and the ruffles, the thing was sexy as heck. His naked appraisal of my snug jeans and cardigan—which, without an undershirt on, showed a healthy expanse of chest along with a splash of mousy hair—might have been contributing to my desire to kiss him senseless. He took hold of the wine as I took hold of the front of the apron, tugging him to me.

"God, this is..." My lips crashed down with more force than I intended, knocking our teeth together. Taz's free hand fisted the side of my cardigan as he melted into the kiss, his back arcing into me. After annihilating his lips, and in a surprising twist, my anxiety, I pulled back, disengaging my hand from the apron, and smoothing it against his chest. "Sexy."

He sucked on his kiss-swollen lips, his chest rising and falling rapidly beneath my hand, then Taz cleared his throat, a smoky smile playing in his eyes. "I'll... mmm... yeah... maybe." He blew out a slow breath. "It used to be Nana's," he finally blurted.

"You haven't mentioned her for a while. How's she doing?" I felt like a cad for not having asked about her over the past week.

"I think she's going to be okay. When I called her two days ago, she didn't have time to talk to me because I'd make her late for Wednesday night bingo. I took it as a really good sign." His eyes twinkled with relief, and I kissed his cheek, knowing the toll worrying about her had been taking on him.

“Maybe I can meet her someday.”

He smiled at that. “I’d like that. Just don’t tell her you used to work for the sharks. She’d probably club you to death with her cane.”

I chuckled. “Good to know.”

I watched him while he cooked—that damn apron too much of a distraction to pay attention to what he was doing at the stove. His muscles bunched and slid smoothly beneath his swarthy skin, and the tantalizing view made me salivate more than the rich smells his cooking produced.

“Ow, damn.” A finger flew into his mouth, his cheeks hollowing as he sucked on the appendage, and one of my appendages jerked hard, wanting to be that finger—without the burn, of course. He glanced at me over his shoulder as I came up behind him. “I’th yur falth,” he mumbled around his finger.

“How so?” I huddled against him, giving my body a taste of what it craved. Retrieving his finger from his mouth, I squinted at the tiny white line on the pad.

“Because you keep staring at me.” He yanked his hand away, and flipped on the faucet, sticking the tiny burn under the stream of cold water.

He squirmed when I licked his neck. “I stared at you for years... and you never burned yourself.” My lips clamped onto the smooth skin beneath his ear, sucking gently. I wasn’t sure who this person was with his lips latched onto Taz, but I didn’t dislike him, not one bit.

His head fell back onto my shoulder. “Oh God, why does that feel so good?” Strong hands found my thighs, and fingers flexed into the back of my legs. My teeth nipped, and he practically purred, his throat vibrating against my lips. The slightly acrid scent of food threatening to burn tickled my nose, taking me out of the moment. That was more like my anxiety-riddled self, damnit.

I squeezed his waist. “I don’t think you’d forgive me if I made you burn dinner.”

He sighed. “Probably not.” Running his hands down my thighs one last time, he turned his attention back to the stove. I tugged on the waistband of my jeans, and when that didn’t help, a kick of my leg, and shove with my palm, straightened out my problem.

My hands trembled as I set the table, sweat trickled down my back, and every nerve was aware of Taz a few feet away. It had been two years since I

last attempted sex with a real live consort, and my body seemed to be berating me for that. But this was Taz, the man my mind had put on a sensual pedestal, conjuring up scenes of total wicked abandon that left me shaking in my bed, damp with sweat, and sticky with cum, long before I knew what sex really involved.

The hand on my back startled me as Taz leaned around to set a platter of shrimp linguini in the center of the small maple table. The smile he gave me was soft and reassuring, and I wondered how much he thought he knew. And could he feel the nervous perspiration hiding in the knit of my sweater?

“Sit. I’ll turn the heat down.” *I guess so.*

After piling my plate with linguini, he handed me the bread basket. “How was your last day?”

I shrugged, adding two pieces of cheese bread to the pile. “Blissfully uneventful.”

He laughed, spooling noodles onto his fork. “No more creative fuck-you art?”

My eyes rolled divinely as I chewed. Taz felt life was too short to eat crappy food, but if he kept feeding me food like this, I was going to have to buy bigger clothes. “Nope, and let me tell you how nice it was not to have to hit the car wash on the way home.” I filled my mouth again with creamy perfection. “*Sooo good...*” I said in a bad Homer Simpson impersonation.

Taz bumped and slid against me while we washed dishes, letting me know sex was definitely still part of his intended menu. When had we gone from heated groping and grinding to the point in our relationship where actual sex came into play? With everything going on, I realized our relationship *had* marched forward without my knowing it, and the desire, the need, the want for something more was there. Although anxious, I could feel it resting in every part of me. His hands traveled suggestively up my thighs, his hard-on pressing into the seam of my jeans. A plate clattered into the sink, splitting into three pieces. “Shit... sorry,” I muttered.

Taz let out a throaty laugh, his thumbs brushing the sides of my stiffy, sending sensual jolts straight up my spine, and leaving my dick straining against the confines of my tight jeans.

“Do you want to see my bedroom?” The whispered question was accompanied by a hand palming my jerking boner. I pushed against it, breathing out an obscenity or two. He could take me right here against the kitchen counter if he was so inclined. The reverberation of a groan shook my chest, and I couldn't even find any shock when I realized I was humping his hard-pressed palm.

“I'm taking that as a yes,” Taz breathed against my neck. A moment later he was dragging me through the green-beaded curtain at the end of the short hall, and up a dim, narrow stairwell. It took every bit of my concentration not to stumble on the steep stairs.

The stairs ended at a snug bedroom, the queen-size bed taking up over half the space. A long, narrow window cast the room in peach and lilac light from the setting sun, the shimmering horizon barely visible from up here.

My back hit the wall, a picture toppling off a corner shelf across the room and onto the slate carpet. Taz ignored it. His mouth landed on mine, hot and insistent, while his hands fought to shove my sweater up. *Jesus*. Somehow his ass ended up clasped in my hands, our crotches grinding against each other. God, this was so similar to my dreams. So wild, so out of control, so—*Dear God*. Taz's calloused thumbs grazed my nipples again, and my head hit the wall, my hips bucking forward. “Damn,” I muttered. He chuckled against my throat, but thankfully, slid his hands down, leaving my oversensitive nubs alone. I left my head there while the muscles in my back untwisted.

Taz took advantage of my dazed state to wrestle me out of my sweater. As he moved, the ties on his apron brushed my fingers. Grabbing hold, I yanked, and the bow unraveled. I watched as I slid the checked straps off his broad shoulders, exposing the ink across his chest. Impatiently he shuffled the rest of the way free. His sex-ramped eyes studied my face, his throat working as his hands explored my chest. My own hazel eyes fell, watching, as my fingers languidly traveled across his torso, mapping every muscle and cut.

Intent on my task, I didn't realize he was in a losing battle with my jeans.

“Jesus, how the heck did you get these on?” He yanked at one side, and my jeans gave him the finger, staying stubbornly caught on my angular hips.

“What? Oh, I had to lie down on the bed.” Feeling his exasperated tugging, I laughed. “They weren't that tight when I put them on. I blame your cooking.” I hooked my thumbs into the waistband and began shimmying out of them. Damn, it took a lot of shimmying.

“And it would have nothing to do with that engorged piece of... of... of,” he stuttered, as my cock sprang free of the imprisoning fabric. I gave it a few strokes, working away the prickly sensation, and vowing never to wear those jeans around Taz again. “Okay...” Taz nodded, looking away. “Okay...” His hand clasped his forehead as he began pacing the small room, his mouth an O as he sucked air.

I kicked free of my jeans, and took a concerned step towards him. “Is something wrong?”

His head shook vigorously as his eyes faded back to my cock. “Perfect...”

I glanced down. “Actually it kinda kinks to the right.” Tugging on it, I let it go, showing the imperfection.

I heard the groan half a second before I found myself on the bed, a flushed and naked Taz on top of me. *Shit, how'd he get out of his pants so fast?* I didn't have time to ponder that. His kiss went from zero to scorching in a millisecond, his fingers digging into my ribs as his whole body slid against me. I felt his cock hot against mine, and groaned into his open mouth. Dream Taz disappeared in the wake of the real thing.

Taz rolled onto his back, propelling me on top of him, and I took advantage of my position. Drawing his leg up, I caressed the back of his thigh while my tongue and mouth played over every inch of him, every plain, every valley, every bit of ink as he writhed beneath me. When I suckled the pre-cum off his belly, he let out a squeak, and began panting.

Keeping my eyes on his flushed face, I nuzzled lower, completely enamored with the smoky color of his rigid cock. I always figured it would be the same color as the rest of his body, but no, the head was the color of soft coal, the slit a ribbon of mauve. The contrast was mesmerizing. My tongue flicked out, traveling along that tantalizing ribbon.

“*Ohhh, Go-hod,*” Taz moaned, wriggling onto his hip. He fumbled under his pillow, producing condoms and lube. He let all but one condom flutter away, then, with hand shaking, he passed them to me. *What?* Nooo... I stared at them as if I'd never seen either before.

“Taz, I... I'm not a top.”

He looked at me, dazed, then leaned onto his elbow, and reached down to touch my face. “Every time I've dreamt of you”—his lashes fell, the color deepening on his cheeks—“you were making love to me. And I, um... I can't

imagine it any other way.” His fingers traced my jaw, his thumb gentle across my cheek. “Love me, Eric.” I licked my lips and nodded slowly, hesitantly. I could do this. For him, I could do this.

Not willing to hurt him the way I'd been hurt, I used too much lube preparing him. I choked up on my dick in an effort to keep it from slipping off course.

With pulse-pounding anxiety, I carefully pushed my cock against him.

Taz hiked his knees higher. “You'll have to push harder than that, babe.” Kissing me gently, his hand carded through my hair. “You're not going to break me.”

I knew I wasn't going to break him, but I didn't want this to be like the fucks I'd experienced. My hips flexed more forcefully, sending my head through the tight opening and inside Taz. He hissed a breath, his face contorting with discomfort. I went slowly, slipping in inch by agonizing inch, my natural instinct wanting me to drive into him, but knowing how much that fucking hurt. I swear I was breathing like a woman in labor, as I watched Taz's expression closely.

Taz's eyes flashed open, his head pushed against the pillow, and his hands dug at the skin on my back. “More... not... almost,” his hips thrust, and mine answered with a kick. Taz grunted, and bit down on his lip, hard. His body tensed, his ass clamping down and locking me into place.

Sweat broke out across my back. With Taz wrapped around me, I understood why some men were the way they were. Why they were so driven towards their own culmination. Yet as I felt the emotions surging through me, felt my heart beating for him, I knew I'd never be one of them.

Delicately, I kissed his neck, stroking my tongue against the corded muscles there, sucking them into submission. My hands softly caressed his sides, his thigh, his hip. I felt him uncoil, releasing his hold on my shaft. I kissed his mouth, tasting him, teasing him, until he opened for me, greedily sucking in my tongue. My buttocks flexed, sending my cock the rest of the way home. Taz stalled, his eyes going wide, then they floated shut, and his mouth began feasting on mine.

The feel of sweat rolling down my back, the shivery ache of his nails biting into my skin, his full lips under my control, the tightness of him... the muscles corded in my back, a sound rumbled up my throat as my hips began to move.

Short, tentative explorations turned into long, satisfying strokes. He moaned, his head rocking on the pillow, and my kiss deepened along with my thrusts.

His legs came around my waist, his feet digging into my ass. He whimpered, and I rose onto my hands to look at him. He began panting, his eyes screwed tightly closed.

“Look at me,” I said, and his eyes fluttered open. I drove into him, watching his eyes widen with each thrust. God... so good... so tight... so fucking beautiful.

“Ahhh... mmm.” His legs trembled. I glanced down where we were joined, watching as my cock slid back into him. *Oh, damn, that's beautiful.* I couldn't take my eyes off the contrast as I fed my cock in and out of him.

My pale hand kneaded his dark haunch. “God, you're beautiful,” I said, and he blinked up at me, appearing stunned by the compliment. “So beautiful.” I dropped onto my elbows, and claimed his kiss-swollen mouth again.

His arms and legs cinched down around me, hugging me tightly, as his pelvis rocked up to meet my thrusts. A high-pitched whine rose from his throat, and he wrenched his mouth from me, burying his face into the crook of my neck and shoulder.

I felt the muscles in my back bunch, the nerves at the base of my spine tingle. His cock let out a few happy jerks, tapping against my stomach.

“Eric... Eric... ahhh... it's... I'm...” He shook around me, holding on for everything he was worth.

I forced my arm between him and the mattress, so I could hold him. His hips twitched, then went still as he let out a faint curse against my shoulder. Taz's dick jumped, decorating my stomach with his warm cum. His ass clenched around me, over and over, trying to milk my orgasm right out of me. Goddamn, if it wasn't working.

The scent of Taz's sex mixed with that of our sweat hit my senses, forcing a groan out of me. The first wave hit me hot and hard. I grunted, burying my face into Taz's neck, and driving deep into him. I pushed my pelvis against him, shuddering uncontrollably as I came.

Through the lusty haze, the feel of Taz stroking my back came to me first, then the soft brush of his lips against my neck, the rise and fall of his chest beneath me, the feel of his heart against mine. I lifted myself onto my elbows and gazed down at him.

He extricated one of his arms, and brushed a mousy tendril of hair from my eye. "Welcome back."

"Are you okay?" *Please tell me you are.*

He shook his head slightly. "Why wouldn't I be?"

I brushed my lips against his. "No reason."

His smile was soft and wondrous. "I never imagined..." He stretched languidly beneath me.

"You doubted my abilities?" I teased.

His smile brightened, and the flush on his cheeks darkened. "No. I just... I never got around to it." His eyes darted off for a moment before coming back to rest on mine. "I think I was waiting for you."

I blinked, confused, flabbergasted, shocked. "You've never?" I asked, receiving a shrug. "I was your first?" It came out a surprised whisper. He sighed, and nodded. "Well, say something before I freak out."

He grinned, his eyes gleaming, full of mischief. "I think I'm in love with you, Eric Houge."

I grinned back. "Wow, I must have been good."

He rolled his eyes. "I had no idea you were conceited. I'm afraid that forces me to retract my prior statement."

Reaching down, my fingers dug into his ribs, causing him to yelp. "Yeah? Well, I was an idiot, stupid really..." My hand flattened against his ribs, then trailed down his side. "And I'm sorry, but I just can't accept your retraction. Because I've been crazy in love with you since I was seventeen, and there is no way I can walk away from you again. So I'm afraid you're stuck with me."

He turned his head away, his eyes squeezing closed. The breath he took shuddered in his chest. With a slow nod, he turned glossy eyes back to me. "I guess I don't have a choice. I'll have to find a way to put up with your ego then." His arms came around my neck, pulling my mouth to his. Our smiles merged, and melted beneath the sweetest of kisses.

Floating in the blissful afterglow of another round of lovemaking, the revelation hit me. Passion was real. And for me, it lived within the amazing man I held in my arms, and even though I had missed all that time with him, I

wasn't sure I could have appreciated him or what we had together, until now. I drew Taz tighter into the protective cradle of my body, knowing what we shared was rare and precious, and needed to be protected.

The End

Author Bio

Tara Spears is rooted in the damp PNW, calling slugs her friends, and letting moss take over her yard. She had a rather wild youth and now has quieted considerably. However, you wouldn't know this by her books.

She clicks out tales of realism, fantasy, and young love. Her works include; The Darker Side of Trey Grey, Six, and a currently dormant serial: The Gift.

She has several due out in 2014, including: Trey Grey; Out of the Dark, her Love's Landscapes story for the MM Romance Group, as well as a YA romance: You're Always In The Last Place You Look. (And she hopes to get back to that serial!)

She has been called evil and sinister, as well as a seriously skilled new author with a fresh voice.

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