

D. Dancing for
Diamond



K-lee Klein

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Love's Landscapes

An M/M Romance series

DANCING FOR DIAMOND

By K-lee Klein

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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Photo Description

A Spanish or Latino man with wavy hair to his shoulders. He's wearing eyeliner, has well-shaped eyebrows and is bare-chested with his arms crossed. His head is cocked to the side and he has a serious but sensual look on his face.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

I'm still dancing to the beat of the cumbia while returning to the dressing room. It has been a great night, the rest of the dancers are out taking advantage of the momentum that I always leave in the stage—and making extra bucks out of it. My business partner follows me with that smile I know could lead to trouble, as I kick my high heels, he tells me all about the offers we have for private lap dances. We, is too many people, I remark, because I'm the one they're requesting. Night after night it's the same thing; some patrons are willing to pay for getting close to me. Being older than me, my friend manages part of the club and we let most people think, he owns it too. But I call the shots and run the business. While my performances are the main attraction, I don't do striptease or lap dancing. Tonight's offer is extraordinary, my associate reminds me of the pending bills. Yes, the offered amount is that high. I don't remove the makeup just in case I decide to accept. Who is paying that much? Somehow, I know before I got the answer. My enigmatic devotee is behind the tempting offer. I've been waiting for months for this person to show more of himself, but he simply seats on his table at a side of the stage, alone in the semidarkness, and he seldom smiles or applauds. But when he does, he inspires me to perform wilder nearly driving me nut. And when I dance near him, he undresses me with a single look. Now, I'm excited, intrigued and scared. Who is this mystery man?

Sincerely,

Naaju Rorrete

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: performance arts, sweet, non-explicit, slow burn, personal growth, overcoming the past, disabilities

Word Count: 17,197

Dedication

Dedicated to Naaju for being patient and understanding when the prompt took a little different turn. And to Karrie for her awesome work on the cover, as well as having so much love for this story and Max that she had one of the lines tattooed on her arm. <3

DANCING FOR DIAMOND

By K-lee Klein

The club was hopping, the music loud in between sets, and the noisy crowd was restless. Fernando Diaz tugged the silky, black shirt over his head, smoothing it down the sides as he checked himself in the mirror. The other dancers were huddled in the corner, waiting to go on after his intro. They tended to leave him alone before his performance, something about him being a bossy bitch when he was nervous.

Nando's long hair was pulled back and up into a classic man-bun at the nape of his neck. His boots were polished and shiny, the deep V of his clingy shirt pointed exactly over the center of his waistband while his signature and namesake bellybutton stud peeked perfectly out the bottom. He nodded at his reflection, drawing in a big breath to settle his nerves. He was the first to admit he still had pangs of performance anxiety even after so many years of dancing, just not the kind that was usually associated with that phrase. But then again, since that particular *activity* hadn't been performed for quite some time except by his own hand, how did he really know if he was good to go or not?

Dating, relationships, even sex for the sake of sex weren't things he was interested in—been there, done that, and he had the scars and bruises to prove it. His life was nice now, calm, relaxed, quiet, and he rarely needed anyone outside the people who worked for him, and even then in the smallest ways.

The only exception was Domingo Martinez, but seeing how Dom had a man of his own now, Nando rarely saw him outside of club hours. They'd been through thick and thin together, inseparable cousins who'd escaped the unforgiving streets of Madrid—kids to adults, tricks to careers, poverty to comfort, so it was good that Dom had found that perfect someone to spend his life with.

There were times when Nando was jealous of Dom's ability to trust so completely that he had not only fallen in love but pledged his entire being to Bruce. And that wasn't to say that either Nando or Dom had been down an easy road, rocky and treacherous were more accurate terms. But they'd gotten through it with only each other to lean on, and stable happiness was a good

thing. At least Nando assumed it was. He was happy to dance, entertain, make people dizzy with his long-practiced skill, and make a living while he was at it.

“Nando! Are you scaring the other dancers again, *hermano*?”

Dom walked into the dressing room like he owned it, and in truth, he did—forty-nine percent at least—but backstage was Nando's area of expertise. They were partners, but while Dom was the public face of the club when it came to management, Nando was the real attraction. He was the one who drew the people in. Dom dealt with the daily grind of the business: customers, orders, advertising. In addition to headlining, Nando handled the money and accounting. He liked numbers. They soothed his reeling mind when his body was at rest, and he was content to let people think Dom was in charge of everything. He preferred to stay in the background, to simply be the face and body of the place.

“Didn't I ban you from backstage? Does your husband know you spend so much time with half-naked boys?” Nando slipped elegantly into his make-up chair, gently thumbing some concealer under his eyes as he tried to smother his half-grin. Too many late nights spent with his nose in a book, plus not taking any days off, definitely showed on his face.

“*Carajo*, Nando! Well-played threat or should I say attempt at a threat. Too bad Bruce's bouncer role affords him the same half-clothed views. In other words, um... your point's not valid.”

Dom chuckled, and Nando joined in. He looked at his cousin hovering above him in the mirror. Admiration and respect washed over him. Dom was one of a kind. Even though he was never the most attractive man in any room, he exuded a confidence that Nando only found when he was on stage. Despite how much the two of them had been through together and their familial ties, they were as different as night and day.

Dom's husband, Bruce, was one of the sweetest and most passionate men Nando had ever met—all big muscled, granite-jawed, extroverted lug with an equal-sized heart to match. He also came with baggage, but the loveliest baggage possible in the form of a red-headed imp of a little girl he had part-time custody of. Nando adored her and melted just a little when she called him *Uncle Nando*.

Dom had made a nice life for himself.

“Cat got your tongue? Your silence is almost frightening.”

But he was also annoying. It was the same, night after night, the little dance between him and Dom. Sometimes it was before the show, or often times after, or even both. It was bitchy banter and sarcastic teasing that settled some of the pre-performance twitching Nando suffered. He was sure Dom also knew the snark covered up the loneliness Nando felt, the loneliness he took home to his apartment above the club every night.

And it wasn't as if he couldn't find company, he just didn't require an abundance of attention. At least, not unless the bite of loneliness turned to something more urgent—meaning he was too horny to take care of it himself. He preferred to spend time on his own, or as Dom liked to put it, brood like some dark-souled vampire. His cousin was a barrel of laughs.

Nando had never tried relationships, never suffered any sort of *feelings* for the faceless bodies he'd been with over the years. He just might envy Dom every so often, but only in the tiniest of ways, and only on the nights he would allow such recriminating thoughts to seep into his quiet time. He had a lot of quiet time, a lot of time to think, which wasn't necessarily a bad thing unless his brooding had reached maximum proportions.

That's when he would seek out a release of the most slutty kind—the cheaper the thrill, the less chance of wanting to do it again. It was partly a trust issue, but mostly a personal vendetta against his own heart. He'd relied on others before, mostly out of need and no other option, but he'd not do that again.

"I'm on in five minutes. Do you have a reason for interrupting my prep time?"

"Your friend is back."

"My what?" Nando reached for his kohl liner as he pondered his own question. "*Dios mío*. Why do you insist on keeping me apprised of this man's whereabouts?"

He knew exactly who Dom was talking about—close-cropped blond hair, gray or brown suits, and a sweet smile that Nando wanted no part of. He was handsome, not too big but not too small either, never clapped too hard or too loud, never heckled or drew any unnecessary attention to himself. He was a regular to Nando's shows, and completely forgettable. Except for some unknown reason, he stuck out in Nando's mind.

"I only keep you informed because he asks about you every time he comes in."

Nando blew on the end of the eyeliner, then carefully framed his eyes. He smudged it in a little, just enough to give him a less polished look and more of a bad boy style. "Which has developed into stalker proportions," he continued Dom's sentence.

"No, he's not that type."

"And you think this why? Because he wears suits instead of T-shirts, loafers instead of sneakers, parts his hair to the side?"

Dom snorted out a chuckle. "I've met your stalkers before. This man is too classy for that. He asks how you are, not how big your dick is or whether you like to top or bottom."

"I think that would be less weird."

"Bullshit! He just wants to buy you a cup of coffee." He tapped Nando's arm as he adjusted the laces on the sides of his soft leather pants.

"You and I know that's the oldest pickup line in the book."

His cousin leaned against the wall beside Nando's dressing table. "I don't think so. The slutty guys want to buy you a dozen drinks to get you hammered, not coffee."

"And you told him..." Nando fluttered his eyes dramatically. "No, right?"

"I said I'd pass along the message, nothing more and nothing less. Just because he's not your type—"

Nando laughed out loud, almost poking himself in the eye with the eyeliner. "Type? I think type implies I have any sort of sex at all."

"And whose fault is that? Bruce and I have tried to help you with that."

"I keep telling you, I don't need to be set up." Nando waved his hand towards the door, but his grin remained. "*Vamos muevéte*. You're throwing shade on my preparation."

Dom ruffled the top of Nando's head, but dodged away before he could do anything more than gasp.

"You sure you don't want to take a chance on the guy? He looks normal."

"And why would I want normal?"

"Drama queen."

"*Pendejo*."

Nando took the stage with his usual flare, chest puffed out, muscles taut and ready to impress. He started the show with his back to the audience, both arms raised over his head, fingers pointing to the ceiling as his backup dancers fanned out to reveal him. He stiffened his spine before jutting out one hip, slowly rolling his belly while he turned to face the front of the stage.

Cocking his head to the side, he narrowed his eyes then took one purposeful step forward. He slid his hands over his hips seductively, letting the beat take over. His body moved to the music—unencumbered, lost, fabulous.

Dancing had always been his freedom. Even when it had been the only enjoyable part of his life, when he'd done it for a mere pittance just to keep himself fed and clothed. It hadn't been flamenco then, but the choreographed movement of his body in the sexiest way to make the *customers* happy. He'd learned bits and pieces of the dance through the years until he'd perfected it with his own twist.

It had been the only thing he'd had control of back in the day—the way he strutted, pranced, writhed, and wiggled his way across the stage. He'd been the one calling the shots, the only one in charge of his body, and what he could do with it. No one could grab or grope him, force him to gyrate on their lap or fall to his knees at their feet, at least not until his performance was done. And the things he'd been forced to do after the show became just wisps of discomfort as he threw everything he had into his dancing. It was his first love, the only thing he looked forward to in starting another day in the life of a boy for hire.

But thankfully, those days were in the past, gone and buried. He and Dom never spoke of those times, the pain and regret too painful to dredge up with the only other person who could relate. The present was a better place all around, and Nando was doing exactly what he'd always dreamed of doing. There was no time for regrets or dwelling, and that's not what the new part of Nando's life was all about.

It was about controlling his own destiny, having the power to do what he pleased and not letting anyone push him into anything he didn't want to do. He'd spent the better part of his life fighting off the advances of men who only wanted to use him—struggling against them or giving in because he had to. That would never be the case again.

Once he was halfway through his second number, he made a point of looking in the direction of the man Dom called his *friend* as he glided across the stage. His steps started out feather-soft, but increased to pounding and

tapping out the perfect rhythm to the flamenco beat. He stopped abruptly, his hips gyrating as his body rotated. Clapping his hands, he focused on the table to the side.

Mr. Businessman looked to be in his late thirties, though that was always a tough call when he himself was often mistaken for a man in his twenties. At thirty-three, Nando was ten years older than most people thought, youthful in face and body, blessed with Spanish genes carrying the fountain of youth.

The man appeared to have pride in his body, to take care of himself, even though Nando had never seen him doing anything but sitting at the same table at the side of the stage three nights a week. If he didn't look so normal, it might have been creepy. Or maybe that was a good indication that he *was* creepy—the regularity of an average Joe in a suit hanging out in a gay-oriented Latin club without doing anything inappropriate or untoward.

Nando purposely moved to the right when his predetermined steps had him centered on the stage. He arched backward as he twisted in a slow circle, his body fluid, sensual, as he went through the motions. And that's what he was doing—simply performing, his curiosity getting the best of him as he failed to lose himself in his dancing as he usually did. Instead, he remained distracted by his growing interest.

It wasn't as if *Mr. Businessman* was doing anything out of the ordinary, at least for him. His eyes never strayed from Nando's performance, the familiar soft smile curling the corners of his mouth, recognizable and awkwardly comfortable. Nando wasn't sure when the man's face had become *familiar* at all, and he certainly didn't know why he was so drawn to him. But there was so much that roused his curiosity—the history behind the gentle grin, the nervous tap of his fingers on the table, the whiskey he sipped. His eyes sparkled bright blue-green under the spotlights in the club, or perhaps that was simply a trick of illumination behind the wire-rimmed glasses he wore.

The enigma surrounding him could have stemmed from the fact he hadn't tried to pick Nando up since his coffee invitation the week before, sending no cryptic messages through Dom at all. Yet, he had continued to come to the club in his regular pattern. Strangely enough, he hadn't propositioned any of the other dancers, at least to Nando's knowledge.

Nando was accustomed to followers and fans. Many seemed to believe that because he danced in a club and put his sensual nature on display, that meant he was also available for purchase or for whatever other whims they saw fit. He

wasn't, never would be again, and though he tried not to take it personally, not to be offended, he still struggled with the darkness of his past and the things he'd had to do in the old days.

During his third routine, when the lights dimmed for effect, he approached the right side of the stage again, squinting to see if Mr. Businessman was still there. He was, the same sweet look on his face, presumably the same amber-colored drink in front of him. His expression never changed as Nando lingered in one spot. The man was truly a mystery, and Nando had no idea why he wanted to solve it.

Nando raised his hands to the sky again, and with a sharp toss of his head, a clump of his long hair came loose from the tail and whipped across his face, then over his shoulder. He fanned out his fingers while he tapped his heels harder against the floor. Five stutter-steps took him back to the center of the stage, his focus regained once the spotlights drowned out the crowd. Three claps had him to the rear. The music heightened until the thundering beat abruptly stopped and Nando with it.

He hesitated before leaving the stage, accepting the applause with a sweep of his arms to the sides and a gentle bow of his head. After that he didn't linger, just turned on his heel and strutted backstage.

"You all right?"

Nando twisted around at the sound of Dom's voice, pausing his fingers on the laces of his pants. "Why wouldn't I be?"

"You were a little disjointed out there."

"Coming from someone with absolutely no rhythm, that's not really an insult."

Dom dropped into the chair at Nando's vanity. "It wasn't meant as one. Just wondering if something's on your mind."

"It's payday. I'm always distracted when I have to give away money."

"Why do you have to be so difficult?"

"What's that Lady Gaga song called? 'Born This Way'?"

"I've known you since you were born, and you're definitely a lot snarkier now." Dom sighed as he looked down at his clasped hands. "He wants to buy you dinner."

Dios mío. “Are we back to that again? Now it’s dinner instead of coffee? That’s called escalating, you know? I do watch Law & Order.”

“Oh spare me, *pendejo*. Just say hello to him. He’s a fan or follower or whatever you’re calling them these days. That’s called being friendly, Nan.”

“What’s up with you and this guy?” Nando eyed Dom curiously. “Is he paying you to be a nuisance to me?”

“Stop being paranoid. Even Bruce says he’s a nice guy and he’s talked to him more than I have. Admit it, you’re curious.”

“How do you know he isn’t a serial killer or a deranged psychopath?”

“I don’t.” Dom paused, cocking his head to the side, one eye squinting down at Nando. “Okay, I get it. I’m pushing too hard. I’m sorry. He just seems different than the guys who usually want to get with you. How about we forget I said anything and I shut up about it from now on?”

“Deal.”

“Cool. Okay, Bruce and I are heading out for a late dinner. Theo will lock up when everyone’s gone. And you, my workaholic cousin, don’t stay up all night balancing the books.”

“You know I like balancing.”

“Yeah. See you tomorrow.”

Nando watched him saunter out the door then continued to undress. He peeled the sweaty shirt over his head and tossed it in the basket in the corner before going to work on the laces of his leather pants again. He loved the damn things, but they were more high maintenance than anything else he owned.

He crossed to the sink in the corner, leaning over as he let his hair spring loose, then removed his makeup. His thoughts floated to what Dom had said. Nando did have an unnatural obsession with knowing more about Mr. Businessman, so maybe taking a moment to make things clear about his advances would quiet his curiosity.

He dressed quickly, leaving his dirty clothes until later since he had no plans to leave until payroll was finished. The music was still blaring in the bar, but the majority of the patrons had cleared out. The regulars knew the one a.m. closing time was carved in stone and generally abided by Dom’s wishes, with a little help from Bruce if necessary.

As Nando tugged his ball cap more snugly over his out-of-control curls, he scouted the room for Mr. Businessman. It was late, and he had no idea how long the guy usually hung around after the show, and maybe that disappointed him just a little. When he rounded the corner toward the stage, his disappointment turned to anxiety, and he considered turning back around since the man was still sitting at his usual table. He'd drained his drink, and his wallet lay in front of him. He yawned wide as Nando neared, but didn't seem to notice his stealthy appearance.

"Still wanna buy me dinner?" Nando asked as he slid into the chair opposite him. "Because this is how I really look."

He was, of course, referring to his lack of make-up, the frizzed-out state of his long hair, and the threadbare retro rock T-shirt and ragged jeans he'd thrown on. He was anything but stylish and glamorous in his street wear, and totally expected the guy to run in the opposite direction. Nando had always been worshipped for his body and looks, and surely the smattering of blackheads, uneven skin tone and added scruff weren't finely etched to match his stage name.

Mr. Businessman looked up, surprised, but smiling softly. "Diamond. Wow, you finally decided to make an appearance after all these months of me hounding you?"

He was upfront. Nando had to give him that. "I'm not sure you can consider it hounding if you've never done it in person."

The guy's smirk was refreshing. Not sly or sleazy like Nando was accustomed to, but amused and casual. Nando slumped farther into his chair as the man reached across the table, his hand outstretched in front of him.

"I'm Max. Nice to meet you, Diamond."

It took a few moments for Nando to register just what he was supposed to do, but eventually he did shake Max's hand. The name suited him, and Nando liked the hint of accent in his words. "You can call me, Nando. Diamond's only for the stage."

"Matches your belly button though." Max grinned again, his voice carrying deeply over the loud music.

Nando involuntarily slipped his hand over his stomach, his fingers ghosting over the piercing beneath the thin material. It was the ultimate reminder of where he'd come from and how he'd managed to turn his life around for the better. The first thing he'd ever bought himself with untarnished money.

“Fernando?”

“What?” Nando leaned forward, wondering if he'd missed something important.

“Nando is short for Fernando?” Max repeated.

“Yeah, but that name is a lifetime ago.”

Max simply nodded, his eyes holding Nando's in a steady soft gaze. “I enjoyed the show tonight.”

“Um... thanks.”

“I mean you're great every time I see you but—”

“Dom said I was off a little.”

Max shrugged in a non-committed way. “Well, I'm not an expert, but maybe you seemed a little disconnected in a few parts. I just thought you were tired.”

Heavy silence suddenly engulfed the room between the time the music cut-off and Theo announced closing time over the loud speaker. Nando wasn't even aware that he was still holding Max's hand until his own was squeezed.

“Did I say something wrong?”

Nando pulled away, tucking his fingers beneath his bottom as he forced a smile. “You're not what I expected.”

Max arched an unkempt eyebrow. His eyes were really blue-green—Nando's favorite color. “What did you expect?”

“Pushy. Loud. Obnoxious.”

With a frown, Max dipped his head. “*Cachu*. Is that what your friend thought I was? I swear I never meant any disrespect.”

“No. Dom never said that, but when you're in this business, it's a common thing.” Nando searched Max's face, the slight reddening of his cheeks amusing him. “Did you just say *cachu*?”

“Did I?” Max chuckled, his long fingers wrapping around his empty glass. “Sorry. Old habits are hard to break sometimes.”

“Welsh habits?” Nando had experienced the displeasure of knowing a Welshman once... not such a nice man but one nonetheless.

“At one time, yes. I lived in Wales until I was eighteen, then came here.” Nando nodded, unsure why he was still sitting there hanging on Max’s every word. “So I guess you came to tell me your answer is no?”

“What?”

“Coffee? Walk in the park? Dinner?”

“I never heard about the park.”

“I just thought of it. Would it have changed your mind if I’d asked that instead?”

“No.” Nando pondered his answer for a moment, peering past Max at Theo, who was trying to subtly get his attention. Nando nodded at him. “I came over here to tell you that you were wasting your time.”

“Okay?”

Did the guy accept a little too quickly, or was it a question? “But... I’ve had a change of heart.”

“Okay?” Same answer, but Max seemed to immediately shine with nervousness, or perhaps it was the lights that suddenly lit up the club. “Care to elaborate?”

“I’m quick to jump to conclusions, so I thought I’d give you the benefit of the doubt. I’m off on Wednesday. Care to join me for coffee?” He actually had Tuesday off as well, but somehow Wednesday seemed safer, or at least it gave him more time to chicken out if he chose to do so.

“How about I cook you dinner instead?”

Nando tried to force his voice to not squeak but failed. “Did you say cook? You want to actually cook for me?”

Max’s laugh was genuine. “I spend too much time eating take-out because I can’t be bothered to do it just for myself. You could come to my place, or if you’re more comfortable, I could come to yours.”

“I don’t have much of a kitchen per se.” He wasn’t completely comfortable with accepting Max’s dinner invitation at his home, but he was also a big boy and could take care of himself... he hoped. “What do you do for a living?”

“I’m in sales. Does that have some bearing on my cooking?”

“Not really. I’m just trying to get a line on you and whether I can trust you or not.”

“Ask me anything.” Max’s expression was almost comical in its honesty. “I’m an open book, and you can bring your friend and his bouncer boyfriend if that makes me seem less intimidating.”

Nando unsuccessfully hid a smile. “Husband actually, and no, I think I can handle you.”

“If it’s any consolation, I’m probably a little soft because I don’t workout, so you’d have no problem beating the crap out of me if you chose to. Of course, that doesn’t make me sound all that appealing as a date, does it?”

“It makes you sound just fine. Seven o’clock? Eight, Wednesday night?”

“Seven’s better because Thursdays are early meeting days.” He stuttered a few chuckles as he paused. “Wow, I just get better and better, don’t I?”

“Why don’t I give you my number? You promise you’re not a stalker or serial killer?”

“I can just call you here, if you’d rather.”

“You’re a nice guy, Max, but that was the number I was giving you anyhow. Well, my personal office number. I’m not so used to that—the nice part I mean. Grab your phone and I’ll program it in.”

Max nodded as he dug in his pants pocket. His iPhone lit up with a picture of a very pretty woman and adorable blond-haired boy. All arrows now pointed to the guy being married, something Nando had been duped about before.

“My sister and nephew, if you’re wondering.”

“I was.”

There was a pause as Nando dipped his head to work the buttons on the phone. “Have you had a lot of not nice?”

The question was a tad personal, but he wasn’t put off by it. It sounded sincere coming from Max’s lips, and not like there was some cheesy pickup line to follow. “I seem to attract it.” As he handed the phone back, Nando was confused by the soft look of concern in Max’s eyes. “Did I say something weird?”

Max shook his head slowly, more-teal-than-blue eyes lowering behind his glasses. “I was just thinking how wrong... I’m sorry. Never mind.”

“No, go ahead. You were thinking what?”

Nando waited as Max licked his lips. "How wrong it would be to take advantage of a man like you."

Nando leaned back in his chair, his fingers automatically rubbing over his belly again. It was a nervous habit he'd picked up so many years ago, and had tried almost as long to break. Sometimes he didn't recognize his anxiety until the action began—like now. "Man like me?"

With a sigh, Max tried to tuck some invisible strands of hair behind his ear. The gesture failed, and his face appeared to flush under the bad lighting of the club. "I didn't mean it that way."

Now Nando was curious, or more curious, if he was honest with himself. "Go on."

"I don't want to sound cliché or like I'm trying to sway you." Max grunted and leaned forward, elbows resting on the table. "You're just beautiful, Diamond. I mean, Nando."

"You can't possibly think I'm beautiful right now?" Nando swept a hand through the air, motioning to his natty shirt and ball cap.

"Why not? You came to talk to me when you didn't have to. You told me your real name, gave me a number where I could reach you."

"Don't get that a lot then?"

"I don't ask a lot." Max seemed to battle some unknown force inside him when the silence between them thickened. "Can I be upfront? Would that make you uncomfortable?"

Nando didn't answer right away. Instead, he took the time to concentrate on the irritating hangnail on his thumb. Did he want that—someone to be honest rather than play games? Maybe. Yes. He nodded his acceptance, peering at Max beneath the brim of his cap.

"Okay. If I pass out from the pressure, call me a cab, yeah?" Max joked but there was still tension wavering in his tone as he continued. "Truth is, I don't go out much. This is really the only place I go to. I found the club strictly by accident when I moved to town, almost four months ago, and I just can't seem to keep myself away."

"Because of me?"

"Mostly, yes, but it's more than that. Your club feels familiar and kind of comforting to me. Like an old pair of shoes that fit perfectly."

“Is that meant to be a compliment?”

“Yes, oh *cachu!* I did it again.”

Nando surprised himself by laying a hand on Max's arm. “I'm just kidding. But you said you were in sales, right? Doesn't that mean computers and stuff?”

“Yeah, but I haven't been doing it long.”

“Then why—?”

Max cut him off, the hand that Nando wasn't holding against the table moving to lightly brush over his. “Come to dinner and I swear I'll reveal my whole life to you.”

“I'm not sure I want that in-depth of an analysis.” They wore matching grins as Nando continued. “You sure you're not a serial killer?”

“Swear on my nephew.”

“That's big guns in the swearing department.”

A sturdy nod preceded his reply. “Because I mean it. Dinner, a glass of wine if you drink it, sparkling water if you don't. I promise to get you home in one piece, and I won't lay a hand on you.”

“You sound like Rhett Butler.”

“I love that movie.”

It could have been a line, but something inside Nando didn't think so. “Funny, so do I.”

“Second date maybe?”

“How about we get through the first *first.*”

“Then I haven't scared you away.”

Amusement quirked Nando's lips. “Not yet. Seven o'clock Wednesday?”

“Want me to program my address in your phone?”

“I don't have a cell phone actually.”

Max just shrugged, the information completely indifferent as opposed to the reaction some people had to—gasp—a cell-less man in 2014. He reached for his jacket, neatly folded on the chair beside him, and pulled out a pen. The unused cocktail napkin in front of him became the perfect writing surface as he scribbled on it.

Nando sat quietly, watching. Observing and studying were better words, because this man definitely intrigued him. Even after talking to him for an unbelievable fifteen minutes, he still hadn't gotten a handle on him.

Usually it took far less time, and nowhere near as much enjoyment, to tag the guy in question as fuckable or not fuckable. But Max was different. Nando would never openly admit it, but he was attracted to the quiet calm Max seemed to radiate, and the normality he portrayed. Nando was by no means past being cautious, but he had a good feeling about Max. A good feeling and an unusual excitement bubbling inside about spending a little more time with him.

"There you go. Do you want me to give you directions?" Max handed over the ink-covered napkin, stuffing the pen in the front pocket of his white dress shirt. "Or if you want, I can pick you up? Of course, I don't have a car."

Nando laughed out loud, and it felt good, comfortable, relieving actually. Max was surely one of a kind, and so far, that was working out just fine for Nando. He wasn't exactly sure why it had been so funny, but once he'd regained his control, tears burned his eyes from his possibly inappropriate belly laugh. He flashed an amused grin at Max. "I'm pretty good at navigating, but for now, I have a date with a mound of books and payroll."

"Fair enough." Max rose from his chair in sync with Nando's movements. He flung his jacket over his shoulders then looked at Nando. "Is there anything you're allergic to or don't like?"

"Not really."

"All right. I'll see you Wednesday or, well, probably sooner than that, right here in the same spot."

Nando couldn't believe his ears. "You're still going to come watch me dance?"

"Of course. Is that strange?"

"I guess not." He cocked his head to the side. "Maybe we could have a drink tomorrow night, if you're still around when I'm done?"

"What do you drink?"

"Passion punch. Theo knows how I like it."

"It'll be waiting for you. Thank you."

"Don't thank me yet. You might have a horrible time."

"I didn't know you were funny, too."

Nando snickered silently. He had no words, for the first time he could recall in recent memory. He chose the coward's way out. "Um... good night then."

He hesitated, a sudden urge to kiss Max sweeping through him. Not a passionate kiss either, just a tender press on the cheek. Instead, he turned on his heel, tugging his ball cap farther down on his forehead.

"Hey, Diamond?"

He spun back around, not five feet from where Max had stopped by the door. "Yeah?"

"Thanks. I'll see you."

"Yeah. You already said that." Max turned away, but then it was Nando's sudden urge that made him call out, "Hey, Max."

"Yeah?"

"Are you lonely?"

"Yeah."

"I guess Rhett isn't all we have in common then."

He did have a drink with Max, and it was fine. It wasn't horrible or over-the-top awesome, but it also wasn't awkward as Nando had feared it would be. It only lasted thirty-five minutes, but it was the best part of Nando's day. To break any underlying tension, they agreed to reveal three random facts about themselves. He found out Max had been living in the U.S. for over a year, he was new at his job but didn't particularly like it, and he had been literally born in a barn.

"I've heard a lot of random facts in my life, but you've won the prize for *what the fuck*. What does that even mean?"

Max bit the inside of his cheek, stifling a laugh. "We lived in the country, just me, my parents, and seven sisters—"

Nando gaped at him. "You had seven sisters." Max nodded with a smug twist of his lips. "And let me guess, you were the youngest."

"I was. Dad wanted a boy to carry on the family line. It didn't work out so good for him." Max held the smile, no apparent disappointment or angst on his

face. "But after seven babies, my mother figured she had time to milk the cows before I decided to spring into the world. She was wrong."

Nando's laugh was full-bodied and would have rattled the rafters had they been in a barn. Max snickered along with him, taking tiny sips in between chuckles. "Your turn."

It took a moment and a gulp of his drink sliding down the wrong pipe for him to answer. "Dom is my only living relative. I don't like any kind of green vegetable, and um... I'm originally from Madrid."

"I've never been to Madrid. Is it nice?"

"Not for me."

Nando hadn't meant to be so terse, but the look on Max's face and the way he quickly changed the subject was proof enough that his reply had come out sounding harsh. But Max was a gem at putting their conversation back to carefree again.

"Did I mention that the only thing I know how to cook is a broccoli casserole with brussels sprouts and a spinach salad on the side?"

Nando nearly spit out his drink. He certainly wasn't showing any delicate personal hygiene habits, but the tension had been broken nonetheless. The rest of the time, they casually discussed the weather, old films and what sorts of things Max actually did cook. It was easy and unobtrusive, the first conversation Nando had had with a man that didn't involve topping or bottoming, his dick, or the quickest way to get him off.

The urge to kiss Max's full, sultry lips had again invaded his thoughts when they parted, but *again*, he'd smothered the desire. He didn't know why, and by the time he reminded himself he was a grown man who could kiss anyone at any time that he pleased, Max was gone.

He'd even talked briefly to Dom about the *date*. And even though his cousin had been the one to encourage him to talk to Max in the first place, he hadn't been happy about Nando going to Max's place.

"Are you out of your mind? You told me you weren't interested at all, but now you're going to some stranger's apartment?"

"He said you could come along." The joke soared like a lead balloon. "Look, Bruce liked him. You said it yourself."

“That doesn’t mean you should—” Dom huffed out a frustrated breath, and Nando couldn’t help being just a tad amused. His unflappable cousin was, well, flapping. “Fine. You’re taking my cell phone with you though.”

“How can I call you if I’m being murdered?”

Dom’s expression instantly switched to horrified. “Not funny, Nando.”

“Fine, I’ll take it and call Bruce’s phone if there’s an issue. Is that what you want?”

“Call me when you get there and when you’re leaving. Bruce could pick you up—”

“Relax. *Mierda!* I thought I was the paranoid one. It’s just a date. Don’t you remember dating before you met your Prince Charming?”

Dom snorted comically. “You don’t date. What’s changed?”

“He’s... different. I think I like him a little.” Nando was surprised at his own words, but he quickly covered his tracks. “You’re always telling me I should get out.”

“Just be careful and call me if you need—”

“I know and I will.”

“Bruce and I actually have no plans that night. When did you say it was again?”

“You’re being so lame, man.”

Nando thought the two short conversations with Max led to the bits of confidence that tingled inside him when he knocked on condo number twelve of Westmount Place. It was a simple complex, slightly worse for wear, but well kept and clean despite its obvious age. In truth, he’d never been on a date before, let alone had someone actually cook for him. He was still skeptical, unsure of the implications of what he was walking into, yet there was a thread of excitement that he couldn’t quiet. It was foreign, but almost fun.

Max opened the door as if he’d been waiting with his hand on the knob. Nando didn’t even try to smother the grin that cracked his face when he saw the blue, ruffled apron Max wore over his black dress pants. The top three buttons of his white long-sleeved shirt were undone, and a burgundy tie hung loose around his neck. There was even a smattering of light hair peeking out from underneath.

“Hey,” Max said with an identical grin. “Right on time. Come on in.”

“Thanks.” Nando stepped past him, handing over the bottle of wine he’d grabbed from the club. “I wasn’t sure what you were serving so I brought red. Not that I know much about wine anyhow.” The last part was added as an afterthought, mostly out of self-recrimination. It was true, wine wasn’t his thing, but he’d asked Theo to pick out a good bottle.

“It’s fine. You didn’t have to bring anything. It’s only pasta, but red will go perfectly with it.”

Nando nodded as he eased into the small kitchen. It smelled delicious—tomatoes, garlic, maybe a hint of lemon. It was homey, warm, just like the feeling Nando had about Max. “Nice apron. You didn’t have to dress up for me though.”

Max set the wine on the counter, then returned to stirring something on the stove. He chuckled under his breath but there was no hint of embarrassment on his face. Nando liked that. He rarely met a man who could laugh at himself. It was refreshing.

“I got home late. Didn’t want to stain my best shirt, did I? Have a seat or feel free to snoop around.” Max waved his arm toward the short hallway. “Some things are still in boxes, but you can get a good sense of me in the junk I’ve already unpacked.”

“You’re a strange man,” Nando said with a smirk.

“Is that good or bad?”

Nando shrugged as he turned his back. “I’m not sure yet.”

“Well, let me know when you figure it out.”

“I’ll do that.”

“Hey, Diamond... I mean, Nando.” Nando twisted his head to look at Max again. “You look nice. You should wear your hair down more often.”

“Um... thanks.” Nando reached up to finger his long curls, suddenly self-conscious.

It was a random comment, especially after Nando’s about Max’s apron. This time he stifled a smug grin, or at least hoped he’d turned away in time. He rarely wore his hair down, feeling like it called too much attention to him. But it had still been damp when he’d left for Max’s, so he hadn’t put on a hat. He didn’t like the feeling of wet hair plastered to his head.

The living room was bright, considering the time of day, and two cream-shaded lamps also burned needlessly in each corner. Max had been right, there were a number of sealed boxes by the window along with a scattering of pictures posed haphazardly around the room.

Nando peeked over his shoulder before slipping nearer to the framed photos. Max had said to go ahead and *snoop*, but it still felt strange—as if he were prying into Max's private business. Things like that didn't usually bother Nando, but his heart pounded a little harder as he studied a black and white shot of a male dancer. The man's back was bowed, his arms stretched long and toned over his head, his shoulder-length, light hair swept back like it was being blown by the wind.

A closer look revealed Max's face—a younger version, but Max nonetheless.

“Discovered my secret, did you?”

Nando startled, his body automatically straightening from its leaned-over position. He stuttered out his response. “I-I- was just, just—You dance?”

“Danced is more like it.” When Nando looked down at the picture again, Max moved to stand beside him. He grabbed a different photograph from the side table. “This was the last time I really performed.”

“Great form.” Nando was dumbfounded as he held the photo. He took in the beauty of Max's sleek figure. The body was the same, the face a little older, and the hair only falling to below his ears. “Latin?”

“Yep.”

“When was this taken?” He slid a thumb over the glass, enchanted.

“Almost two years ago.”

Nando handed it back then crossed his arms over his chest. “How old *are* you?”

“I never tell on the first date.”

“I'm thirty-three. Your turn.”

“Thirty-four.”

“I thought you were—”

“Older?” Max snorted, and it was kind of adorable. “I get that a lot. I think it's the suit.”

“Not saying that’s a bad thing.” Nando rested his backside against the arm of the green recliner by the door. *More and more curious.* “Why’d you stop? Or did you? You said you were working in sales, right?”

Max quirked his head to the side, motioning Nando back to the kitchen. That was when he noticed the limp, very prominent on the left side, Max’s whole body seeming to shudder and give him pain as he hobbled away.

“Dinner’s ready. You mind if we sit here? My fancy dining room is indisposed.”

It wasn’t the right time to ask, so Nando played it cool. “Indisposed?”

“Meaning I don’t have one.” Max laughed, and it was musical inside Nando’s head. He tried not to glance at Max’s lower body as he shuffled past, flopping into the chair at the far end of the table. “You can ask, you know? It’s not a secret.”

Nando disregarded the remark as he settled into the hard wooden chair. “We’ve got time. Smells good. You like cooking?”

Max nodded, setting a big pot of spaghetti in the center of the table as the sauce continued to bubble on the stove. He added a green salad and plate of garlic toast before he responded. “My grandmother owned a little Italian place when I was growing up. I liked to help her.”

“Italian?”

“On my mother’s side. Welsh on my father’s.”

“Interesting combination. Guess that explains the *cachu*.”

“Haven’t lived there in a long time, but my dad’s still there. He must rub off on me when we talk.”

Max turned back to the stove, switching off the burner and giving the red sauce one last stir. “You want the sauce on the side or...” He motioned to the pot then the spaghetti.

“Pour away.” Nando couldn’t remember the last time he’d had a home-cooked anything, because toaster ovens and microwaves certainly didn’t count. “You know, I’m not really sure why I’m here.”

With a look of surprise, Max stopped what he was doing. “Dinner?”

Nando smirked, easing forward so he could tuck one leg beneath him. “No. I mean being here period. I don’t do *this*.”

“Are you uncomfortable?”

“No.” Nando reached for Max’s hand, just a light brushing of fingers over the soft skin of his wrist. “Just the opposite, which makes me a little suspicious.” He pulled his hand back, fingering the fork beside his plate.

Max sat across from Nando. “Anything I can do to help?”

“A glass of that wine would be a start.”

Once they were both equipped with wine and heaping plates of steaming pasta, Nando returned Max’s smile, and they settled into a relaxed meal. There was a little small talk but nothing more substantial than the neighborhood, musicals and new movies that were out but neither of them had seen. They had a lot in common under their opposing exteriors, mostly quiet evenings spent at home when they both weren’t at the club for different reasons.

Nando had never shared just how much of a homebody he was with anyone but Dom. Never invited anyone to his place above the club either, so his special stash of romance novels and historical fiction had always remained safe. His little buddy was also still a secret. No one really needed to know that his second best friend was a Siamese fighting fish anyhow.

“When I was young, we used to play a game at the dinner table. Wanna try?”

“Should I be scared? It’s not one of those weird Italian initiation things, is it?”

Max sputtered, then coughed when he started choking on his mouthful of wine. Nando had the urge to throw himself across the table to help, but the noise quickly settled.

“Sorry about that. Didn’t know you were beautiful and witty.”

Nando shook his head. He eased back in his chair, gnawing on his bottom lip. “I’m not sure why you say things like that.”

A slight flush crept into Max’s cheeks. “I don’t mean to make things awkward.”

“It’s not that. Well, maybe a little.” Nando paused to get his thoughts together. He was aware that the compliment made him feel warm inside, but that wasn’t always a good thing. “Most times I’ve only heard it when someone wanted something from me.”

“What’s your favorite color?”

With the cock of his head, Nando narrowed his eyes. “What?”

“The game. Tell me your favorite color.”

Worst question ever. He was tempted to lie, but Max’s eyes were his favorite color. “Turquoise.”

“Okay.” One side of Max’s mouth curled up as he leaned back in his chair, leisurely sipping his wine. Nando would have sworn he fluttered his eyelashes behind his glasses. “Your turn.”

Nando hesitated, to search Max’s face, but there was nothing but honest curiosity in his light eyes. “Favorite color?”

“Purple. Dark, like amethyst.”

“Interesting. Do you always wear suits to work?”

“Yes. Do you have any pets?”

“No.” Nando fidgeted in his chair, circling his finger around the rim of his wine glass. “You?”

“A Siamese fighting fish.”

Nando automatically shifted to the edge of his chair. “No way. What color?”

“Turquoise.”

“To match your eyes.”

Max laughed. “He has more pink highlights than me. Why do you seem so surprised?”

He considered it a moment. “Mine’s bright green. Yours have a name?”

“No kidding? You have a—his name’s Charlie. Yours?”

Nando bit down on his lip before answering. “I’d prefer not to say.”

With another chuckle, Max reached for the half-empty bottle of wine. “That bad?” He tipped the bottle in Nando’s direction. “More?”

“Sure. Promise not to laugh?”

Max quirked an eyebrow as he filled the two glasses. “I can promise to try, but if it’s called Baby or Honeydew—”

“Rhett.”

“That’s so ador—”

“Don’t say it.”

“—able.” There was a forced silence where Nando drained his glass then reached for the bottle, not taking his gaze from Max’s the entire time. Max smiled sweetly at him before finally breaking the deadlock. “Okay, my turn. Have you ever done any other kind of dancing?”

“Sort of.” Nando left his answer purposely vague and moved on quickly. “My turn. Tell me about your dancing.”

“All right. You’ve shown fabulous restraint. That question must have been bugging the crap out of you.” Max looked sheepishly smug when he pushed his chair away from the table. “Why don’t we sit somewhere more comfortable?”

Nando followed Max from the kitchen and down the hall. He reminded himself to help clean up later as he concentrated on not looking at Max’s leg. He sat down at the other end of the cushy green couch from him, folding his leg underneath again.

“That other photo was taken in New York. I toured with a Latin dance company for five years. That was after my partner and I won the World Salsa Championship.”

“Are you serious?” Nando knew his mouth had dropped open with awe. “That’s incredible. You danced with a female partner?”

A nod from Max, then, “I don’t think the world recognizes two men dancing together, yet.”

Nando considered the explanation. Some of his employees danced together, but he’d never checked to see if there were such partnerships in the outside world. “I’ve never danced with a partner.”

“You don’t need to. You’re perfect on your own.” Nando’s cheeks heated up, but Max continued before he could be called on it again. “Everyone thought we were together in other ways. Karrie was my best friend.”

“And now?”

“We lost touch after she got married. I started dancing solo then, she moved... and, you know, things change. I haven’t really talked to her since I was in the hospital...” The sentence trailed off, the words softer as Max averted his gaze.

“Does it make you uncomfortable talking about it?”

Max smiled sadly, meeting Nando's gaze again. His eyes matched his expression perfectly. “It's just a fact now. You don't want me to go into the whole sad story, do you?”

“How about the condensed version?”

After a deep breath, Max shifted so he faced Nando on the couch. “I was driving home from rehearsal late one night. I was tired, so maybe I wasn't as alert as I should have been.” There was a heavy pause, Max's bright eyes turning dark as he gazed out the window behind Nando's head and nibbled on his bottom lip. “The guy in the other car was twice the legal limit. They don't know if he fell asleep at the wheel or he just swerved into my lane for no reason.”

“Jesus. He hit you dead-on? Oh, fuck that wasn't the right word—”

“Relax, Diamond.” Max moved closer on the couch then slid a hand over Nando's knee.

Nando didn't call him on the name slip. In truth, he kind of liked it, and he tried to relay that fact by covering Max's hand. It didn't seem right, Max comforting him instead of the other way around. “We don't have to—”

“The driver of the other car was in critical care for a few days and then he died. At least I only ended up with a limp.” He smiled, but it was melancholy again.

Nando didn't know how to phrase the question he wanted to ask, so he just blurted it out. “Can they do anything to, you know, fix your leg?”

“They did. They saved it, at least, except now I've got more metal than skin and bone in my hip, thigh and calf.” Max dipped his head, eyelashes flitting against pale skin. “Losing my dancing is nothing compared to not walking, right?”

Before his brain caught up with his body, Nando had leaned over and kissed Max. It lasted for only a moment of sweet tenderness before Max pulled away.

“You don't have to do that,” Max said. “I'm not... I don't need you to feel sorry for me.”

“What if I'm doing it because I want to?”

Max wound his hand behind Nando's neck, tugging gently until they were knee to knee. “Then I won't stop you.”

Nando gripped the sides of Max's shirt as he closed the distance even more. He pressed his mouth to Max's, tasting sharp bites of tomato and wine and garlic on his tongue. It was gentle at first, but quickly became desperate and needy. How long had it been since Nando had kissed someone and felt it all the way to his toes? Or maybe he never had.

They pulled and tugged at each other—tasting, touching, wanting—before Max pulled back one more time. He licked his lips before he spoke. “You—this isn't what I intended.”

“Some things are better unplanned,” Nando replied. His lips quirked up in an amused grin, his heart doing the samba against his ribs as he leaned in again. But Max splayed his palm over Nando's chest.

“I just...” Max seemed upset. He sighed before continuing. “It's not what I want.”

Nando eased away, all contact lost as he tensed from head to toe. How had he gotten it so wrong? “I don't understand. How can you say that when you invited me here?”

Max released his grasp on Nando's T-shirt, threading his fingers through his short hair. “I'm not saying I don't want to. I feel like I know you, at least a little. But I really want you to get to know me before things move too fast.”

“What?” Nando felt the urge to leave, despite the happy dance his body had been doing only moments before. He restrained himself. “Because you've watched me dance?”

“It's not just that, more like what you said that first night.”

Nando searched his memory, but too much blood had been lost to his groin. “What?”

“You said we had more in common than just Rhett. The real one, not the fish.” Nando didn't react to Max's tease. “Loneliness, right? Can't we take a little time to see if that's true?”

Seemed like a load of crap, just another line Nando had heard in one form or another more times than he cared to remember. But considering it had come with rejection rather than sexual innuendoes, Nando found himself taking the offer seriously. He rubbed a hand over his face, shoving curls out of his eyes, his other hand fidgeting with his belly button stud.

“You know how weird this is?”

“Slow is unusual for you?” Max stroked across Nando’s leg, but his touch didn’t linger.

“I told you. I’ve never dated anyone. Isn’t that what dating is? Slow.”

“Why?” Nando wrinkled up his nose in confusion, so Max continued. “Why don’t you date?”

“Never been asked.”

“I find that hard to believe.”

Nando leaned to the side, resting his shoulder against the couch. “I know you’re more intelligent than that, Max. Sex isn’t dating, right?”

“Is that all you want, Diamond? Meaningless sex and loneliness, with only a fish to keep you company every night?”

“Well, the sex isn’t often, and Rhett is... familiar and comfortable.” He wavered before finishing his reply, his mind wanting one thing but his heart thudding in the other direction. “But this was nice, too. I guess I could try it again.”

Max’s smile was brilliant, and Nando was quite pleased with himself.

“Want me to cook for you again?” Max asked.

“What I’d like is to kiss you again, maybe feel you up a little. That allowed?”

“I’m persistent, not crazy.”

He moved quickly, grabbing Nando by both arms and pulling him closer. Nando was careful when he straddled Max’s lap, worried that he’d cause some damage or pain. But since the hardness that brushed against the inside of his thigh definitely wasn’t Max’s left knee, he went with Max’s wishes.

Their kisses fell back into the previous pattern, slow at first, tentative, and close-mouthed. But heat pooled quickly in Nando’s groin, and he finally pushed Max against the back of the couch, deepening the kiss, prodding the seam of Max’s lips until they willingly parted. Max groaned into his mouth, firm hands gliding up Nando’s thighs, over his hips then resting on his backside. He wrapped his strong fingers around Nando’s buttocks, and it was his own whimper that tore their mouths apart.

“Am I hurting your leg?”

“Nothing I can’t handle. I’m of sound body and mind, I assure you.”

Max's deep chuckle vibrated through Nando's insides. He thought he might just start vibrating all on his own. "Think we should move somewhere comfortable?"

Max nipped at Nando's lower lip then licked over the sting. "I'd like nothing more." Another quick nibble followed as he clutched Nando's butt. "But, I think it would be wiser to stay here. That okay with you?"

Nando edged backwards on Max's lap. "You're lucky you're hot."

"I am?" Max scrunched up his nose, and Nando had a strong urge to lick it. Fortunately, or unfortunately, he wasn't that far gone.

"Sexy man in a suit. What's not to love? I mean, you're an attractive guy, and you have a great personality."

Max groaned and clutched his chest. "Ouch. I was batting a thousand until you said that."

"You want me to be blunt? Basically, I'd just like to jump your bones."

"You're halfway there. At least you're on top of the situation."

"That wasn't witty at all. So you want to talk or make out like teenagers?"

"Do you play Scrabble?"

"You're kidding, right?"

Nando was home at the respectable hour of midnight. He was in a perpetual state of arousal, but full to the brim with chocolate ice cream and warm fuzzy feelings, *and* he would have to practice extra hard the following day to get rid of all the extra calories. Max had also kicked his ass twice in Scrabble, but Nando was pretty sure he'd cheated.

He hadn't disliked the almost chaste intimacy as much as he would have imagined, and even though there hadn't been any actual fireworks going off, Nando had ended up having a very nice time. *Plus*, he'd managed to get a hand up Max's shirt and do a little fondling of his own. He'd particularly enjoyed that part.

It may have been the strangest evening, but it was also the most satisfying he'd experienced in longer than he could remember. He fed Rhett, briefly described the events of the night, then slid into bed with a light heart and a steady thread of warmth trickling through him.

Nando didn't see Max again until Friday night. He nodded in his direction when he took the stage but danced as he usually did. Well, perhaps he put a little extra effort into the performance—a little more stretch of his arms, a little harder clap with his hands, a little louder pound in his feet. And he definitely undressed faster afterwards.

“Fabulous,” Max said, rising from his chair when Nando had joined him at his table. “You were on fire, Diamond... I mean, Nando.”

“You can call me that if you want. I don't mind.” He sipped the drink Theo had immediately placed in front of him. “I'm kind of hungry. Do you have an early day again tomorrow?”

“Nothing important.” Max's grin was infectious. “I'm not sure I have anything in the fridge to cook.”

Nando almost snorted his Passion Punch. “No. I meant we should go out, or are you some kind of food snob?”

“Anything open this late? I'm not exactly a connoisseur when it comes to late night dining.”

“Nothing good, but the company should be.”

Max slung back the rest of his amber drink. “That was almost romantic.”

“Yeah, right. Is that a yes?”

“Drink up. I'm starving.”

It was little more than a diner that provided their evening meal, but it was a place Nando had often been to with Dom. They ordered quickly, sipping from icy glasses of water as they chatted about their days. A ball of heat settled inside Nando just as it had the last time they were alone together. He'd restrained himself from grabbing Max on the walk over but the urge had been there, and he made no promises to himself about the return trip.

Nando wondered if he had become de-sexed—if that was even a word—by Max's unassuming presence, or perhaps he'd suddenly developed a romantic side as Max had commented back at the club. As if to prove himself right, he reached across the table, circling Max's fingers between his own.

“I think you've damaged me in some way.”

Max looked up in surprise, his eyes wide behind his glasses. He entwined their hands before he spoke. “I'm not sure how to take that?”

Nando tilted his head, averting his gaze. "I'm not really sure either. You've caused a lot of firsts for me." Max raised an eyebrow, encouraging Nando to continue. "First customer I've seen outside of work. First date. First time I've ever, and I do mean *ever*, held a man's hand in public or anywhere else."

"Ever been kissed in public?"

"Does Dom count?" He teased and chuckled. His amusement was short lived when Max reared up out of his chair and leaned towards him.

Nando accepted the kiss, though it could have been much longer and deeper in its intent. By the time Max pulled away, they were both smiling like idiots.

They ate mostly in silence, the quiet comforting and already very familiar. Their pasts weren't areas of conversation, and Nando might have been responsible for the lack of both subjects. He didn't like to talk about things he'd rather forget, and he still wasn't sure just how much to ask Max about what had happened to him.

The night Max had cooked dinner for Nando, he'd grasped Max's knee in their passionate make-out session on the couch, but besides being a little firmer than he'd expected, nothing had seemed out of the ordinary. The limp itself didn't phase Nando when they walked alongside one another, but it still concerned him that Max might be in pain. But just from their brief time together, Nando suspected Max would admit if he was, so rather than dwell on it, he steered the conversation to something else.

"You asked me if I'd ever done any other kind of dance, right?" Nando said. "What about you? Done anything else?"

"I danced ballroom for a long time—Mambo, Tango, Samba, even the Paso Doble. But the Flamenco was always my favorite."

Nando bit down on his bottom lip as he pushed his plate away. "Um... I've thought about trying something different."

After setting his fork alongside his unfinished meal, Max bent forward in his chair, giving Nando all his attention. He took Nando's hand again. "So why don't you?"

"I dunno. Fear I guess. That probably sounds silly considering what happened to you."

"No." Max's tone was harsh, the single word forced out and louder than necessary. Nando tried to ease his hand away, but Max squeezed his fingers instead. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to shout."

“Did I say something wrong?”

“No, but do you mind if I make a suggestion?” When Nando nodded, Max went on, “I was afraid of a lot of things before the accident and I didn’t take chances. I’ve learned that fear is only an excuse for failure, and fear of failing isn’t as important as doing what you want to do.” He brushed his thumb over Nando’s knuckles, lowering his head to peer under Nando’s curls. “What are you scared of?”

“I don’t know if there’s any one thing.” Nando relaxed his hand in Max’s. He was really starting to like this whole public display of affection thing. “Responsibility I suppose.”

“For the club?”

He nodded but still didn’t meet Max’s eyes. “Dom and I have worked hard for what we have and, egotistical or not, I’m the big draw, at least for now.”

They slid back in their chairs when the waitress suddenly appeared at their table, their hands slipping apart. They assured her they were done, asked for the check, then waited until she disappeared again. Max reached for Nando’s hand again. “I don’t disagree. But you’re crazy if you think one night of something new will make anyone stop coming to see you.”

Nando shrugged, his mind of two parts—one half believing and the other thinking things could still go terribly wrong if he attempted what he’d been planning. “I dunno.”

“Does it involve taking your clothes off?”

“What? No.” Nando chuckled. “No more than usual.”

“Then do it.”

“You seem so sure about everything.” That surety gave Nando strength though, regardless of whether he felt it himself. It was odd how someone who was almost a complete stranger could put his mind so at ease. He liked the feeling—liked it a lot.

“I’m a good actor then. Do you know why I can’t *not* come and watch you?”

“Why?”

Max voice changed from determined to whimsical, his tone lighter and filled with sighing pauses. “Watching you on that stage feels like I’m the one

dancing. I may want you to get to know me better before we take any big steps, but your dancing makes me feel like we've already gone all the way."

Nando struggled *not* to jump across the table and attack Max. Instead he opted for a humorous reply to one of the kindest things anyone had ever said to him. "Frankly my dear... you say the sweetest things."

After the bill was paid, they walked back to the club hand-in-hand. Nando was twitchy with anticipation. He figured he would have been less anxious if he'd agreed to get sucked off in some dark alley than having Max chastely walking beside him. It was definitely another first, the sudden feeling that he could do anything he set his mind to. He didn't know how Max accomplished it or where his positive attitude came from, but it gave Nando huge respect for him. And of course, made him want to take things further.

He intended on inviting Max upstairs—luring him upstairs—the first person to ever set foot in his cozy apartment besides Dom and Bruce. Part of his anxiety stemmed from being so damn horny and seemingly hard that he could have hung a hat on his dick. It wasn't the best analogy but it worked, and made him feel even more pent up.

His plan was thwarted when, before they reached the club, Max halted their slow but steady progress. "There's still a bus running down the street and if I hurry I can take it instead of paying for a cab."

"I'll pay for your cab." Nando was hasty in his reply, heated disappointment surging through him.

"You already paid for dinner, but I do appreciate the offer."

"I thought you could, you know... come home with me tonight." As an afterthought, Nando again interjected some humor into the situation. "You're not a terrified virgin, are you?"

Max chuckled, then kissed him, wrapping him tight in his arms under the misty glow of the streetlight. Their heights were compatible. That was only one of the things Nando tried to occupy his mind with as his hormones threatened to rage out of control right there in the middle of the street.

When Max tugged his mouth away, he beat Nando to the punch. "I guess I sort of am. I haven't been... intimate with anyone since the accident."

"Oh fuck, I'm sorry. I didn't even think."

Max knocked their foreheads together, winding his right hand in Nando's hair while the other held him close to his body. "It's not a physical thing. All my other parts work just fine. It's a modesty thing I guess."

"Fear? Not taking your own advice?"

"I nipped that puppy in the bud when I asked you out didn't I? Look, maybe it is an excuse—"

"I'm pretty sure I won't like you any less because you have some scars."

"I appreciate that." Max tugged gently in Nando's hair. "How about we make a deal?"

Nando kissed him again before breathlessly answering. "I'm listening."

"You step out of your comfort zone first then I will."

"That's a big order on my part."

"Feels pretty big on my part, too."

Nando ignored the sexual nature that could be derived from Max's answer. Surprisingly, he took the grown-up route. "But you don't know what I'm even thinking about."

"I don't have to know. I can tell it's something you want, something you think you can't have, and that's good enough for me. I feel like that about you, too, you know? From the first time I came to the club, I thought 'he's so far above me I'm underground.' But here we are, right?"

What could Nando say to that? It was sweet and brave and brutally honest. And it was wrong, at least the part about Max being below him. "Can we compromise? The pants stay on, but I can still touch you." Max groaned into Nando's mouth when he was dragged back into his space. Nando leaned into him, deepening the kiss right there in the middle of the sidewalk. He rubbed unabashedly against Max, not feeling the least bit awkward or ashamed. He was trying to understand Max's reasoning and would play by his rules, but that didn't mean he couldn't let him know he wanted him.

"You're making this very hard."

"That's my intention."

"I'm going to catch my bus. I'll see you tomorrow night?"

"You know where to find me."

Another tight embrace then Max stepped back. Nando watched as he visibly took a deep breath of calm, then turned his back. "Hey, Diamond?" he said over his shoulder. He spoke in a formal accent, "You are no gentleman, sir."

Nando smiled so hard his cheeks hurt. "And you, Miss, are no lady."

"Extend, Nando. Farther. Now drop. Tighter. Up. Flex your feet. Nando! You're not flexing. No, no, no."

Nando sighed, falling into a crouch in the middle of the wooden practice floor. He sucked in big bursts of air as he watched Andreas flick off the CD player. His instructor was right, just as he'd been right in his entire criticism for the past half hour. It wasn't a good day to be practicing.

"Here." Andreas spoke abruptly, but his tone was kind, his steel-gray eyes focused completely on Nando as he tossed him a water bottle. He dropped down beside Nando, his spryness always a bit of a wonder considering his age. "Are we going to continue with this time-wasting flight of fancy? Or will you tell me the reason for your inattention?"

After taking a large drink, Nando swiped the back of his hand across his sweaty brow. "Maybe we should pick this up next time?"

"And *next time* will be another excuse or perhaps lack of excuse as is the case today."

Nando slid so he was flat on his backside, legs stretched out long and lean in front of him. He reached down to grab his toes, drawing in a deep calming breath as he blinked the sweat from his lashes. "Do you think I'm ready?"

Andreas tugged on the back of Nando's sweaty tank top. "You're talking to your toes. Perhaps they'll give you the answer you seek."

Some days Nando felt like he had his own personal Yoda. Other days he didn't know why he bothered Andreas and his treasured time, and certainly not when he couldn't focus or do anything right. His mentor was the best in the city, and Nando had selfishly pursued him until he agreed to take him on as a special student. There weren't many mixed-form instructors in the city, especially those who also specialized in flamenco. He dipped his chin to his chest, a silent plea for courage to broach the subject that he hadn't thought about for months.

"Do you think I'm ready to try?"

Andreas lay a gentle on Nando's lower back. "Look at me, Darling. How many times a week do you come to me?"

"Three."

"And how long have we been practicing the same dance?"

"Seven months."

Andreas pursed his lips as he nodded. "Yes, you have a good memory but poor skills of concentration this week. Is it simply the dance that shakes your steps or something else?"

"I'm just thinking it might be time."

"And the heavens rained down joyous light over the gray day!" Andreas tilted his face to the ceiling, long salt and pepper hair streaming over his shoulders. He was so dramatic. Nando adored him. "Of course, you're ready, but why now?"

"You're so dramatic, sensei." Andreas hated being called that. "I might have had a, um, a date."

Faking a gasp, Andreas lifted one palm to the ceiling and clutched the other to his chest. "The truth appears in the golden sun."

Nando snorted. "Oh, stop it. Do you want to know or not?"

"I know you do not date. Please, my dear, enlighten me about this fabulous creature."

"He's very ordinary but also extraordinary, and he used to dance."

"But no longer?"

"There was an accident. His leg was damaged."

"And your grand sexual connection has sparked your courage to rear its bashful head?"

"You're too much sometimes." Nando spread his legs, then leaned over to stretch. "I've only seen him outside the club twice, but he said something that stuck."

"Go on."

"He said watching Diamond dance was like being on the stage himself."

"Seems like a lovely sentiment. Do you believe him?"

Nando pursed his lips then continued. "He also said being afraid is only an excuse not to try."

"Sounds like you have a connection, and you want to dance for him?"

"No, I want to dance for *Diamond*."

Andreas tugged a loose curl away from Nando's face. "You often speak of *Diamond* as another person."

It took Nando a moment to gather his thoughts. It wasn't so much that *Diamond* was someone else, but since he'd used the name even before escaping from his old life, it was an important part of him. The diamond in his belly button had been a reward to them both for turning things around. But Nando didn't feel such an intense need to hide behind *Diamond* anymore, or at least not rein him in quite so hard.

"I think it's time he was allowed to show what else he can do."

There was a heavy silence before Andreas suddenly slapped Nando on the back before spryly jumping to his feet. "Then we have work to do, my brilliant gem."

Nando saw Max four times in the next week—coffee, dinner and even their pre-mentioned walk in the park that ended up being a visit to the zoo. That was another day of firsts for Nando. First time actually going for a walk during the day. First time seeing a man on a friendly basis during the day, and first time eating ice cream on a bench in the sunshine outside the gorilla pen. Of course, he'd also never been to the zoo or seen a real-life gorilla before.

He seriously felt like he'd been dropped into some old-fashioned love story where chastity and gentlemanly qualities still existed.

Despite his love of old movies and especially the over-the-top romantic classics, he'd never suspected he'd actually like to be wooed. His days as a rent-boy on the streets of Madrid had taught him to be wary and suspicious of any type of kindness. But Max... Max was seemingly from another world altogether.

He wasn't perfect by any means, and he wasn't shy about talking of his days as lead dancer with his old company. He described a pompous, egocentric jerk who drank and tossed men aside like soiled tissues after a dirty movie. Nando couldn't see the man of the past in the one who held his hand, presented

him with a single red rose after one of his performances, and didn't even try to cop a feel when they were lost in the heat of a passionate clinch.

"I'm surprised you ordered vanilla."

Nando flashed Max a numb-feeling grin. "Why? I don't even wanna know what's in that double fudge mint bubble gum rocky-road concoction you've got."

Max bumped his shoulder to Nando's, before leaning to the side and pressing cold lips to Nando's exposed collarbone. "One scoop rocky road, one scoop bubble gum, and one double chocolate. I never let myself have anything sweet, or good, when I was dancing. It was all about control and commitment, but now it's about enjoying the life I have."

"That's all very sweet, literally, but how do you not weigh five hundred pounds?"

"Maybe I do? Would that bother you?"

"I'd need my eyes tested and would congratulate you on wearing it very well."

"I think the gorillas pull it off pretty well, yeah?"

"They're definitely buff boys." Nando crossed his ankles and eased farther back against the hard bench. He'd never been an outdoors kind of person but damn, the sunshine, the furry people in front of him, and the company were excellent. "I think they're ogling your monstrous cone though."

"My monstrous cone, huh? Wanna taste?"

With a groan, Nando stopped mid-lick, his tongue rolling slowly back between his lips. "Are you being a cock-tease on purpose?"

Max's snorted and choked on a rolling chuckle, a dribble of bright blue ice cream sliding across his bottom lip. Nando couldn't help leaning over to kiss it away.

"Does taste pretty good. Thanks for sharing."

Nando flinched a little when Max slipped an arm around his shoulders, long fingers rubbing tiny circles over his skin. He snuck a peek at Max's relaxed body. It was the first time he'd seen him with anything but a long-sleeved dress shirt on, with the exception of that one time he'd managed to get all the buttons undone before Bruce had discovered them in a serious make-out session in the

parking lot of the club. It had been both embarrassing and exhilarating—especially considering Nando's apartment was barely a dozen steps away.

What he'd managed to see and touch on a few occasions had been taut, defined pecs and toned, smooth-as-silk abs. Max still had a dancer's body whether he thought so or not. It bothered Nando a little that his *boyfriend*—*damn, that was the word Dom had used*—was shy about Nando seeing his legs, or more specifically one leg. He didn't push it, but he hoped Max would soon become comfortable enough to take their relationship to the next level even if that only meant taking off his pants.

There hadn't been any actual hand jobs yet, but they'd both managed to come in their pants one night from simply rubbing and kissing. They'd been in Nando's office, and he was certain he'd never had that happen before, not even when he'd been young and inexperienced. So apparently, it had been yet another first in a long line of them.

"They really are like real people, aren't they? When I was young, my grandmother took me to the zoo in London. She used to tell me the apes and gorillas had better manners than the men who came into the restaurant."

"Is she still around?"

Max's shook his head, his expression indifferent, but a far-away look shadowed his light eyes. "I lost her five months after the accident. Didn't get to go to the funeral because I was too laid up."

Nando reached for Max's free hand, squeezing gently as he struggled for what to say. "I'm sorry." Obviously what he'd managed was lame. "Are you coming to the club tonight?"

"It's not my usual night."

He fidgeted with Max's fingers. Nerves rolled through him in waves of insecurity. What the fuck was his problem that even asking Max to come to the club made him as nervous as a new bride?

"Do you have um... other plans?"

Max smiled softly, thumbing over Nando's trembling fingers. "No. I just didn't want to seem too *stalkerish* by showing up more than three times."

"Never took you for a stalker."

Another laugh and he twisted to look in Nando's eyes. "Really?"

Nando returned as straight a face as he could, his eyelashes fluttering in a failed attempt at innocence. “No.” Max grunted like a gorilla. “Okay, maybe a little at first. But I’d really... I’d really like you to come tonight. And every night after that.”

Max kissed him again, wrapping his hand around the side of Nando’s neck and tugging him closer. It felt like the most intimate of their kisses—soft, slow, and close-mouthed, but sweet and lingering. He eased back enough to speak. “Then I wouldn’t miss it. Wanna give me a hint about your plan?”

Nando let the rest of the world fade away, ice cream dripping over his knuckles and onto his new shorts, the gorillas frolicking happily in their confinement, the people walking by and craning their heads to look at them. He forgot everything but kissing Max, feeling the coolness of his ice-creamed mouth, the sweetness of sugar on his tongue, the feel of Max moving their hands so they rested on his left leg.

“I’m dancing for Diamond.”

Anxiety was a regular part of Nando’s daily routine, at least pre-performance, but tonight he felt none. His stomach was calm, his nerves settled and controlled beneath his skin. He’d told Dom what he was planning but only in the vaguest sense. His backup dancers had been given their own time slot after him, and his dressing room was quiet and empty.

As he sat in front of the mirror, he contemplated his lack of uneasiness and the excitement that threaded through him like zaps of electric current. His hair was long and loose around his shoulders, just the way Max said he liked it, and the pants he’d had specially-made months before were soft and flowing against his skin. His body was ready, his mind clear and focused, and his heart encapsulated in a bubble of joy.

He’d invited Andreas, even asked Bruce to seat him with Max to ensure they both were in one spot when he took the stage. He felt confidence and brilliance course through him like never before. This was Diamond’s time to shine and there was nothing that could take that away from him.

“We have something special for you tonight. Please welcome our own fabulous gem to the stage. It’s Diamond time!”

Nando took his place behind the curtain, Andreas’ words and instruction thrumming through him as he crouched and bowed his head. When the stage

opened up to light and applause, he remained low, crawling, stalking with cat-like elegance to the center. The clapping stopped when he lifted his head, glancing to the side at the wall of mirrors. He tossed his mane of hair off his shoulder, his heavily kohl-lined eyes flashing intensive and aggressive in the spotlight. He was ready.

He danced like he'd never danced before—with abandon and freedom in his soul, in his floating and flying body, in his heart of hearts. He was a feral cat marking his territory, a wounded animal seeking his revenge, a rejected soul searching for peace and contentment. He jumped and twirled, his bare feet slapping against the wooden floor, his body writhing and interpreting exactly what he'd practiced—exactly how he'd always dreamed.

He never lost his focus, never even searched the crowd for the familiar table with the loving faces he knew were there. He caught a glimpse of Dom and Bruce at the side of the stage, partially hidden behind the curtain, their faces palettes of teary-eyed awe. The sensual music pumped through the club, echoing in the eerie quiet of the rows of tables, all conversation hushed as he shared his overflowing energy and passion with the crowd.

His steps were sure-footed, his torso stretching and twisting to perfection, his eyes sharp and focused as he dipped and exerted. His body buzzed with adrenaline, the sweat of hard work and fulfilled dreams sliding and dripping from his brow. He wasn't a Flamenco boy. He wasn't a one-trick pony who couldn't expand his horizons, or a man stuck in a life that ruled him instead of him being in control of his own destiny.

He danced like it was his last dance, his first dance, his only dance that would ever matter. He danced for the boy tossed on the street for being gay, for the cousin who followed him and protected him as best he could with what they had. He danced to prove he wasn't that helpless child taken advantage of by the cold streets and by faceless men who treated him as nothing more than a place to get off.

Dom was the first one to get to him after he left the stage breathless and grinning like a fool. His cousin wrapped him tight to his chest, seemingly unconcerned about the sweat soaking through his expensive shirt. He cupped the back of Nando's head, pressing nose to cheek as he whispered against his ear.

“When did you... what was... where did that come from?”

Nando smiled hard against Dom's shoulder, but even the steely sense of accomplishment and happiness couldn't keep his exhausted body vertical. His knees buckled and he slid to the floor, slowly taking Dom down with him.

"I'm so proud of you." Dom kissed Nando's cheek as he kneeled beside him. "There's no one else in the world I'd sit on the damn floor for, you know?"

After catching his breath, Nando tipped his head back. "How was I?" It was a redundant question considering how excited Dom seemed to be, but it was Bruce who answered.

"Outstanding. Standing ovation if you hadn't noticed."

"Don't think I was even conscious by the end." He let Bruce ruffle the top of his head, something he normally hated. "*Mierda!* I think I'm going to explode. I never thought I could—"

"But we all did."

The hushed words spoken by Max's warm, velvety voice, made Nando turn his head. Andreas was at Max's side, practically glowing, and their faces red and bright. Max held out his hand, a teary-eyed smile curling his lips as his spoke softly. "I'm not going to get on the floor with you but I can offer a hand up."

Nando wound his fingers around Max's forearm, willing his body to work again if only for a few minutes. Max dragged him off the floor and straight into his arms. His strength was impressive and there might have been an unmanly squeak of surprise on Nando's part.

"I've never seen anything like that," he cooed beside Nando's hair. A soft kiss was pressed to his ear then Max shifted so their lips touched.

Heat pooled in Nando's groin, his unashamed dick coming to life, and he was suddenly aware of just how thin and inappropriate his pants were for such an occurrence. Max pulled back but kept their bodies snug together. Nando groaned and glared back at his amused face.

"If I can interrupt this display of passion for a moment, I will congratulate you on a job well done with a dramatic side of *I told you so.*"

Nando smirked before he even caught sight of Andreas' wide grin. His mentor reached to stroke his cheek, his own streaked with tiny trails of emotion. "Very proud. Student has surely surpassed teacher."

Max relinquished his hold so Nando could give Andreas a sweaty embrace. “Definitely not. I have more work to do, sensei. This is a new beginning.”

The rest of the congratulations and conversations were nothing but a blur for Nando. The only thing he was aware of was Max glued to his side, his body hard and steady, supportive, against him. It wasn't until he pulled Nando closer, sealing a perfect evening with a perfect kiss before whispering, “Let's go upstairs, Diamond.”

He became immediately hyperaware of his surroundings. Max smiled angelically at him while his mind backpedaled for excuses to make themselves scarce. Dom saved him, not for the first time in Nando's life.

“You look exhausted. I'll take care of things down here. Why don't you get some rest?” He bussed Nando's cheek, winked, then fled the scene. After a rough hug, Andreas followed Dom, leaving Nando and Max alone.

“Comfort zone eliminated,” Max said as he twined their fingers together. “Think Rhett would like a guest tonight?”

Nando finally found his words, wasting no time in dragging Max down the hallway that led to the private staircase. “No doubt in my mind.” His heart pounded like Flamenco shoes on wood, heat rising and falling in waves, as anticipation took over his internal organs.

He turned back to Max after only one step up to his room. “Stairs are okay for you, right?”

“Stop fretting and get up there.”

Nando flipped on the light to his little kitchen, then reached into the mini-fridge for a bottle of water. He offered one to an exploring Max but was turned down.

“I don't have any pictures for you to snoop at,” Nando said before emptying the bottle in one long pull.

“Quite the collection of books. I had you pegged at being a hopeless romantic, didn't I?”

“I might be guilty.”

Nando tried to step in front of the poster of *Gone with the Wind*, but Max was already chuckling at his attempt. “I've always wanted one of these. Where's your roommate hiding?”

It took a moment of mind-swirling confusion for Nando to get the joke. “In the bedroom. You want to see him?”

“And you. I want to see you.”

Max took Nando's hand again, tugging him gently until he took the reins and led him into the only room he'd bothered to make comfortable and homey. “We have a guest, Rhett-darling. On your best behavior please.”

“I'm sure he's just as well-behaved as Charlie.” Max leaned down so his face was close to the tank. “He's stunning. I don't think I've ever seen one quite that color.”

The sight was too much for Nando to bear. He rested his chest against Max's back, wrapping tired arms around his waist and burying his nose in the collar of Max's shirt. “You smell good. I should shower. Promise you'll be here when I get out.”

Max covered Nando's hands on his belly. He straightened up, moving Nando right along with him. “I can't promise that.”

Nando tried to stifle the hearty rejection that suddenly pierced his heart. He was pushing again. He'd promised himself he wouldn't do that. “Do you want a drink before you go—?”

“I suggest you take me in with you if you want to be sure I stay.”

“Take you—you feeling a little dirty, Max?”

“I'm hoping you'll help me with that.” Max eased away from Nando's arms, but turned to face him. His expression was soft, one corner of his mouth quirked up in a grin while his eyes said things Nando really wanted to hear.

Max's fingers slid down to unfasten his dress pants. He kept his gaze on Nando as he slid them over his thighs and off his legs. He used Nando for balance when he stepped out of them before flicking them to the side with his foot.

Nando was afraid to move. He stood statue still and silent until Max circled his wrist. He suppressed a whimper when Max glided Nando's fingers down his clothed hip, pressing harder when his fingertips touched bare skin.

The feel of raised, battered skin didn't disgust or frighten Nando as he knew Max had feared. The scars were rough, puckered under his touch, but rather than being afraid of them, he needed to see the extent of what Max had endured.

He pressed a tender kiss to Max's lips then slowly dropped to his knees, gliding his free hand down Max's torso until it came to rest on his other thigh. The lines of incisions were red and sore-looking, but Max didn't so much as flinch when Nando touched them again. He moved closer, running his lips over the marks as Max buried one hand in his hair.

"Do they hurt?" he asked as he continued to track the scars. He huffed tiny bursts of hot breath against them when he noticed it made Max tug tighter in his hair.

"Haven't for a while, and most certainly not when you touch them."

"Should I keep going?"

"If they don't... bother you."

Max's voice was strained so Nando pulled his face away just enough to peer up at him. His efforts were rewarded with the gentle gaze of dampened light eyes, bright and beaming through the wetness of tears. He reached for Max's hand, then dipped his head again, trailing his lips down the jagged lines, pressing tiny kisses along the outside of Max's thigh all the way to his knee. Warmth and life surged beneath the ragged flesh but there was nothing ugly or unattractive about the scars.

How could something that was part of Max bother him when all he wanted to do was explore more, to know everything about Max, everything that made him happy and sad, insecure and contented? They both had scars, whether they were visible or not. They had imperfections and flaws, frailties, and hardships, but being with Max made all those things and everything else just slip away.

As he slowly rose to his feet, Nando saw an unusual wariness in Max's face, a sadness that he wanted to chase away for good. He kissed the tears from Max's eyes, licked teasingly at his nose and drew his bottom lip between his teeth for barely a heartbeat.

"Shower with me and I'll show you just how much they don't. Stay the night and I'll show you again in the morning. If somehow I haven't made that abundantly clear, I'll say it so there's no room for error. I want you, Max. I want you like I've never wanted anything else in my life, even more than what I did on that stage tonight. The bigger question is do you want me?"

The sweet smile returned to Max's lips, curling up the corners as a few extra tears slipped down his cheeks. "Yes, you know I do."

"Then stay?"

Max grinned and dragged Nando hard against him. They kissed until they had to fight to breathe, then eased away just enough to share their much-needed air.

When Max ghosted his fingers down Nando's back, hooking his thumbs in the waistband of his pants, he murmured close to his ear, "But what will the neighbors say?"

"Frankly, my dear, I don't give a damn."

The End

Author Bio

K-lee Klein has lived in one part of Western Canada or another for her entire life. She's a doting mother of three now-grown kids, and has had characters and plots running around her head for as long as she can remember. Her days consist of fighting off an abundance of fabulous gay men, large and small, bouncing off the walls of her skull, competing for their turns to tell their stories.

Among her favorite sub-genres to read and write are rock stars, cowboys, shifters, and opposites-attract relationships. But to be honest, she's open to almost anything if it involves messing around in the heads of her characters. She's also big on series—because she has a hard time letting her characters go—and is usually working on a handful of stories in various stages of completion all at the same time.

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