

LOVE'S LANDSCAPES



Don't Read in the Closet 2014

RAISING CADE

Jonathan Penn

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Love's Landscapes

An M/M Romance series

RAISING CADE

By Jonathan Penn

Introduction

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

What Is Love's Landscapes?

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

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

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

Words of Caution

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

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

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RAISING CADE

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Photo Description

We see a living room with tan walls, the drapes in burgundy and gold. A burgundy leather armchair rests on a Persian carpet. Sitting on the floor in front of this chair, is a muscular man with short-cropped hair. We see only his arms, his splayed legs, and the upper half of his face. The rest of him is obscured by the pale back of the slender young man who straddles him, holding on as if for dear life.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

My name is Cade (back to camera). When I was eighteen, I was raped and beaten by my boyfriend, Eric. I was a virgin. It may be old fashioned, but I wanted to save myself for the man I would spend the rest of my life with. And that wasn't Eric. Now I'm twenty-two. I never thought I would be able to trust another man. Then I met Alan (facing camera).

Sincerely,

Lori

Note: No BDSM or paranormal, please. Would prefer contemporary and definitely want a HEA.

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: bear/twink, college student, ex-military, hurt/comfort, prostitution, age gap

Content Warnings: graphic violence, rape, PTSD

Word Count: 38,444

Dedication

For Lori, whose creative spirit gave the world these two wonderful men.

Acknowledgements

I greatly appreciate the boundless compassion showered on me in the course of composing this story. My deepest thanks go to Ofelia Gränd, David Guy, Michael Lepard, Guillaume Loup, Debbie McGowan, Nick Pageant, Alexis Woods, and to my best buds Jaye, Kaje, and Leah.

Profound gratitude to David and Leah for generously sharing their knowledge regarding the psychological dynamics of rape victims and the physical manifestations of PTSD.

I'd also like to heap all possible praise on the moderators and volunteers at the M/M Romance group. Their tireless efforts on behalf of authors and readers alike is a source of great inspiration.

RAISING CADE

By Jonathan Penn

*Books have the same enemies as people:
fire, humidity, animals, weather...
and their own content.*

—Paul Valery, French critic & poet (1871-1945)

Prologue

Friday, April 4, 2014

1:40 a.m.

I must be crazy!

I can feel the concrete and gravel of the alleyway grinding little rips through the knees of my new Roberto Cavalli jeans.

Why didn't I think to wear something practical?

I look up, in an attempt to ascertain how much longer I'm likely to be here, but I see that he is elsewhere. His head is tossed back and he's muttering something I doubt I could make out... even if I was interested.

His hips buck a little to the left, and his rhythm falters momentarily. I think he must be close, but he resumes pumping down my throat as if his life depends on it. It's not the biggest dick I've ever sucked—not even close to Eric's—but it's certainly somewhere upward of the ninetieth percentile.

He fucks my mouth relentlessly.

The stench from a nearby dumpster is overpowering, but it's breathe through my nose, or not at all.

Fingernails dig into the nape of my neck.

Now, his rhythm shifts. He seems to put more emphasis on each inward thrust—shoving in fast and hard, then letting it slide out at its own rate.

He cries out a name... or something.

He steps back and sprays thick, white ropes of cum over my face. I can't avoid inhaling the tangy, hot aroma as it dribbles down my cheek and plops onto my pink Façonnable polo. I reach up to wipe away some jizz that's a little too close to my left eye, and notice there's a glob glistening on the face of my Rolex.

I rise and extend my hand.

He reaches into a front pocket.

I take his forty dollars and walk away.

Chapter One

Friday, April 4, 2014

5:00 p.m.

“Is this really the last of it?” Elliot gasped as he and Alan carefully maneuvered the hulking burgundy leather armchair through the entryway and into the great room. Alan grunted and nodded his affirmative. He was thankful the builders had kept the freight elevators when these old tobacco warehouses were converted to condos. The chair landed with a loud thud when they dropped it in the center of the room, on an old Persian rug that had been Alan’s grandmother’s. Elliot collapsed into the chair. “I can’t believe how much shit your sisters put in storage for you when they sold your folks’ house!”

“Yeah, when you get that many Troxler women in one room, you never know what’s gonna happen.”

Elliot’s gaze wandered among the stacks of boxes and pieces of furniture scattered around them. “I always wished I had siblings. I thought you were lucky. I was jealous, in a way.”

“Seriously?” Alan was amazed. “You have no idea what you were wishing for. It was hell! Not just being *the baby*, but with eight years between me and Rachel, and her and the other three all about a year apart... I grew up as an only child with one dad and five moms!” Alan was relieved when Elliot laughed. Elliot was the funny one. When Alan tried to crack wise, it usually went over like a lead balloon.

“Well,” Elliot said cheerfully, appearing to have recovered from his efforts, “I’m just glad it’s all finally moved.”

“I couldn’t have done it without a friend to help.” Alan flashed a warm smile.

Hopping up, and taking a step closer to Alan—like he was about to let him in on some conspiracy—Elliot arched an eyebrow and asked, “Do you know the difference between a ‘friend’ and a ‘true friend’?”

Here it comes, Alan thought. *Another one of Elliot’s trademark corny jokes.* He always had at least one on stand-by for any possible situation.

“A ‘friend’ will help you move. A ‘true friend’ will help you move a body!”

Even as the last word was leaving his lips, Elliot flinched. He let out a tiny squeak and covered his mouth with both hands. “Mm so srrry,” he mumbled through his fingers.

Alan saw tears welling up in his friend’s eyes. It took a few seconds to process what had suddenly made Elliot so upset, but then he got it.

“How could I make a joke like that,” Elliot whined, “with all you’ve been through the last twelve years?”

“Elliot, it’s okay.”

“No! It’s not!” The tears started flowing. “I’m here to be *supportive*... to get you settled into your new life, and what do I do? Dredge up the old one just so I can be, hmph, ‘*funny*’.” Elliot hung his head. “I am so sorry, Alan!”

Alan took his friend’s shoulders gently in his hands. “Elliot. Look at me.” Elliot didn’t move a muscle, except to roll his eyes upward and look at Alan over the rims of his glasses. Alan couldn’t have stopped his smile if he’d wanted to. This was classic Elliot, and it reminded Alan’s heart just how deeply he had once loved this man. “Elliot. Come sit down.”

When they were on the sofa, holding hands, brushing knees—and when Elliot’s breath had returned to normal—Alan did his best to explain. “Elliot. I understand why you don’t want to remind me of my past, but I need for you know how I feel about things...”

Elliot nodded his head, and Alan could tell, from the look in his eyes, that he was actually paying attention now, not just fretting over his “mistake.”

Alan squeezed both of Elliot’s hands, then let one go so he could lean back a little. “When we were sixteen, there were so many things about you that attracted me... At first it was because you were really, really cute, and you didn’t seem to know it. And the way you were shy around some people, but kinda ballsy around others. I just had to get to know you, ’cause I’d never met anybody like you before. And then... when we fell in love... well, that’s not my point here. What I’m trying to say is... out of all the wonderful things that made me fall for you—and made me stay in love after we were apart—the one that ended up being the most important was your sense of humor. You could always make me laugh, no matter what was going on, or how bad things were. Between having to hide who I really was, and all the nerds calling me a dumb jock... I used to tell people, ‘If it hadn’t been for Elliot keeping it light, I never

would have made it through high school.' After I was deployed, you being funny was even more important. Every letter you wrote made me laugh. Other than your letters, I bet I could count the number of times I laughed over there on one hand."

Elliot turned away with a distant look in his eyes. Alan worried he might be thinking about the "Dear John" letter Elliot had eventually sent—not very funny.

Whatever had made Elliot's attention drift, Alan wanted to snap him back. "Hey!" Elliot looked at him. "Here's the point. A lot of guys come back from over there messed up. But, not everybody. The shit I saw over there, some of the things I had to do..." Alan needed a second or two to get his thoughts together. "In one way, you're right. I did have to move a lot of bodies..." Elliot started to turn away again, but Alan squeezed his hand harder and held eye contact. "Elliot, I'm not messed up. I'm not broken. I really am okay. And, I don't want you pulling your punches around me—especially when it comes to the one thing I love most about you. I want you to go on being funny, because... that's who you are to me."

"Okay." Elliot nodded his head. "I get it, Alan. And, I'll try. But, whether it's you, or anybody else, I think I'll try to lay off the corpse jokes." He formed his lips into a grim line.

Alan chuckled, "That one really is pretty funny, but, maybe you're right... everybody's got somebody they loved once, who's gone now—might not be the best way to get a laugh."

Alan knew the subject was closed when Elliot started looking around the room, like a man on a mission. "This place is going to suit you so well. I was lucky to find it with only a few weeks' notice you were moving back home." Elliot got up and walked over to the window-wall. "All this light is great. I don't know what the view will be like in the winter, but for now all you really see is treetops, unless you come right over here and look down." He looked down. "I wasn't sure how you'd feel about being right across from our old school." Elliot rested a hand on the glass. "Lot of memories over there..." he said, wistfully.

"Yeah," Alan agreed, "it's almost like we were two different people back then."

"Did you know it's not a 'regular' high school anymore?" Elliot made air quotes.

“What do you mean?” Alan joined Elliot at the glass wall and looked down on their alma mater. “It looks just like it always did.”

“A few years after you left, they turned it into the Durham School of the Arts.”

“You mean, like, they do plays, and stuff?”

“Well, yes, it’s still a public high school, but it’s for kids who are in performing or visual arts. So, yeah, theater, but also music and dance, painting, sculpture, photography, even writing.”

“Well, either way, I’m gonna need some curtains.” Craning his neck to take in the whole expanse of glass, he added, “Some really big curtains!”

Elliot stepped away, twirled around, and made a sweeping gesture with his arms. “It’s a good thing you have your very own, personal Thom Filicia!”

“Who?”

Elliot looked shocked, and maybe hurt. “Interior designer?”

Nothing.

“*Queer Eye for the Straight Guy?*”

“Oh,” Alan finally responded, “yeah, I’ve heard about that show... wasn’t exactly the kind of thing they played on Armed Forces TV.”

“You poor darling,” Elliot commiserated, coming back over and wrapping an arm around Alan’s waist. “I keep forgetting you’ve been in a pop culture black hole for the last decade.”

“It wasn’t *that* bad! I can tell you everything you want to know about *The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills*.”

Elliot lowered his chin and looked at Alan over the top of his glasses again. “You just did.” He turned his attention back to the space around them and scanned each area as he walked toward the kitchen, which was separated from the great room by a big, long bar... or, island... or, whatever folks called those things.

“I don’t suppose you’ve got much of a budget for decorating?”

“Not really. Or, at least... not right away. When you told me about this place, I wasn’t sure I’d be able to afford it, but, between the pension and disability, plus what Dad left for each of us, I’ll be okay as long as I find work in the next few months. But, uh, *extras* are gonna have to wait.”

“Have you decided what you want to do? Does your... condition limit what you can consider?”

“Not in the long run. For now, they want me to take it easy on all my upper body muscles, especially my chest. The cardiologist would probably shit his pants if he'd seen me lugging that chair.”

“How bad is the damage... to your heart?”

“They say once all the tissues are fully healed, I'll be nearly as good as new. They also said if that piece of shrapnel had been a quarter inch to the left, I would have bled out in about a minute. One of the docs had this theory I was saved by the scar tissue left behind from the bullet that went straight through in '04.” Alan saw Elliot wince. “Said he thought the scar tissue added a layer of protection on that side of my heart.”

Elliot must have felt he'd gotten all the details he needed. “I'm just so thankful you're alive... and back in *my* life. We were so good together... I mean, I know we were just teenagers, but I was never more certain of anything. I knew we were destined to be together. Sometimes, I still can't believe I just let it slip away.”

Alan walked over and took Elliot by the hand. “Not just you, we both changed. All those years, and being on opposite sides of the world...”

“And then Vince came along,” Elliot interrupted, shaking his head, but smiling. “It still strikes me as bizarre. I swear, if you look up Alan Troxler in the dictionary, under antonyms, there's a picture of Vince!” Alan laughed. Glancing at his watch, Elliot added, “Oh! Speaking of Vince, he should be done at work by now. He's picking me up here.”

A goofy grin crept across Elliot's lips, and Alan knew why. “You're really crazy about him aren't you?”

“Crazy enough to fly up to Massachusetts and marry his ass, yeah.”

“You know I don't mean insane-crazy. I was watching the two of you at dinner last night. It was obvious how in love you both are... even though he seemed a little distracted by how much he loathes me. Hell, I had to keep sliding my chair back so I didn't get tangled up in the footsie!”

“I am sorry about the things he said to you last night. He's not usually bitchy like that. It's because of your being in the service. You know, he's a... well, I like to say, he's an active pacifist.”

The sound Alan let out was somewhere between a chuckle and a groan. He made the mistake of trying to join in the fun, “Yeah, I noticed the Birkenstocks with dark socks. He doesn’t actually hug trees, does he?”

Again with the look over the lenses—Elliot was not amused. “No.” And, after a moment, “Maybe he’s not the only one who’s been *bitchy* lately... or have you developed a cynical edge in the years we’ve been apart?”

“No, you’re right, I have been kinda... I dunno... cranky... for a while now...”

“When’s the last time you got laid?”

“Elliot!”

“I don’t want details, I’m just trying to get the lay of the land, if you’ll pardon the pun.”

“Let’s just say it’s been a while.”

“Right. Well. Since there’s no budget for decorating, this now becomes Project Numero Uno!”

A worrisome tightness crept into Alan’s chest. “Uhh... what ‘*project*’ would that be?” It was his turn for air quotes.

“Why, finding you a man, of course!” Elliot looked almost gleeful. “I want you to be happy, Alan, and there’s nothing more happy-making than having just the right hunka-hunka-burnin’-love to hold you all night long!”

Alan groaned. He might have been away for twelve years, but some things never change, and he was sure Elliot hadn’t changed when it came to his projects. *Once he sets his mind on something, he’s like a dog on a bone.* Alan pardoned his own internal pun.

“We!” Elliot threw his arms open wide, “are going *out* tonight!”

“Oh, Elliot... I don’t know if I—”

“You!” Elliot poked an index finger into Alan’s shoulder, “have nothing to say in the matter, young man. This is Friday night, and The Bar is the hottest spot in town, and it’s only five blocks from here. You will meet me there at ten p.m.”

“But all this moving, I’m so tired...” Alan didn’t like the card he was about to play, but he had to try. “Aren’t you worried about... my ‘condition’?”

Elliot really had the whole peering-over-the-rims-of-his-glasses thing down to a science. This time, he reached up and slid them down to the tip of his nose for even more of an effect. “Don’t even try it, Mister. If you’re that tired, you’ve got four hours to take a nap.” Elliot reached up and gently patted Alan on one cheek. “Not that *you* ever needed beauty sleep.”

Alan pushed his hand away. “What if Vince doesn’t want you going out tonight?”

“You leave Vince to me.” Elliot slid his glasses back into place and wiggled his pinkies in Alan’s face. “I have two little fingers, and he’s wrapped around both of them.”

Alan didn’t realize no one had gone back to shut the front door, until Vince came strolling through it, big as you please. Alan made the mistake of trying to be lighthearted. “Well, speak of the devil.”

“*I’m* the devil?” Vince snarled. He crossed his arms over his chest, his eyes shooting daggers at Alan, before saying, “I’ve never *killed* anybody.”

Alan wasn’t surprised to hear a comment like that from Vince, but he was shocked when Elliot’s voice, deeper than he’d ever heard it, boomed out, “Vincent Erwin Ramsay!”

Vince cringed, and obviously dialed it back a notch as he turned to appease Elliot, but he was still bristling. “It’s no secret how I feel about the military.”

“Honey,” Elliot said in a level tone, stepping close and resting a hand on Vince’s shoulder, “Alan’s not in the military anymore.” Elliot leaned over and bussed a light kiss on Vince’s cheek.

It looked to Alan as if Vince softened for a second, before stiffening again.

Elliot kept up his offensive. “And, if he hadn’t joined up when he did...” Elliot nuzzled his nose into Vince’s ear, then whispered, “there’s a good chance you and I would never have met.” Elliot started alternating his treatment of Vince’s earlobe, flicking it with his tongue and taking little nibbling bites.

This time it was clear—Alan watched Vince melt, all the tension draining from his body as a dreamy look came into his eyes. Then, all at once, he straightened up and looked over at Alan, smiling. “Good night, Alan.”

Alan had only met Vince two days ago but, so far, that was the nicest thing he’d had to say. “Good night, Vince,” Alan replied as pleasantly as he could.

Vince turned back to Elliot and leaned their foreheads together. "I'll be in the car, puddin'." He shifted his eyes sideways at Alan, then back to Elliot. "Don't be too long." With a peck on Elliot's lips, he turned and walked out, closing the door behind him a little harder than he needed to.

"So..." Elliot exhaled, "that went well."

"Don't worry about me and Vince. I'm comfortable with who I am, and what I've done with my life. His words aren't going to hurt me and, like you said, he doesn't believe in sticks and stones."

"Still, there's no call for being so nasty to you. I don't get it. He always treats people with respect, no matter who they are—and no matter what he really thinks about them."

"Didn't it occur to you he might be jealous?"

"Oh." Elliot looked surprised.

"I don't know how much you've told him about our years together, but he knows enough to feel threatened."

"Well how stupid would that be? I joke about having *him* wrapped around *my* finger, but really, that shoe's on the other foot. He knows he's got nothing to worry about."

"He might *know* that, but I bet he doesn't really believe it. If I wasn't a threat, he wouldn't be trying to take me down in front of you."

Elliot slowly shook his head a few times. "You, my friend, seem to have picked up some wisdom in your years overseas."

"I don't know about that, but I know what Vince means to you and I'm gonna do my best to win him over. I also know you'd better give him lots of extra attention till he gets used to me."

Elliot pondered for a moment, then nodded. "Yes. I'll take your advice on that. And, speaking of advice, what are you going to wear tonight?"

"Jeans?"

Elliot pinched his own chin, slowly shaking his head from side to side. "Not the ones you wore last night. Too baggy. Do you have anything that actually fits?"

Oh, God! Alan was pretty sure he didn't like where this was going, but figured it was easier to play along. "Yeah, I've got a pair of lip readers."

Elliot guffawed. “Excellent! Now you’re getting in the spirit! I don’t suppose you have any guyliner?”

“Any what?”

“Never mind. Just be sure to brush your teeth, and put some lotion on your face. Let me see your fingernails.” Elliot reached for Alan’s hands.

Alan stepped back. “Do us both a favor and don’t keep your man waiting.”

“You always were smarter than me.” Elliot gave Alan a quick peck on the cheek, and headed for the door. “I’ll see you at The Bar at ten o’clock. Don’t you keep me waiting.” He stepped into the hall, turned and blew a kiss, and then snicked the door gently shut.

Alan stood, staring at the closed door, giving his feelings some time to settle. Seeing Elliot again was wonderful and painful at the same time. He thought about how in love they had been... and how young they’d been.

Leaving had been so hard; it had nearly torn Alan apart. The day he was set to head off to South Carolina for basic training at Parris Island, he and Elliot had snuck off to their special “alone place”—the roof of an abandoned heating plant between Duke’s East and West campuses. They had both sworn that nothing would ever change how they felt about one another. They’d promised to write every week, and for the first year they had. It didn’t matter now who had been the first to miss sending his weekly letter, or how long it had taken for the flow to dwindle to monthly... and eventually to every few months.

If he lived to be a hundred, Alan would never forget the day he got *the* letter. It was right before Christmas of ’04. He was lying in a hospital bed at Landstuhl, recovering from surgery to fix the little hole in his chest—and the bigger one in his back—where a bullet had torn through him during the Second Battle of Fallujah. He’d been laid up for a few weeks and had been meaning to write home because he didn’t know if word of his injury had gotten there yet. Elliot’s letter must have gone halfway around the world to Iraq and then halfway back to Germany before it finally got to Alan. When he opened it, he saw it had been written more than two months earlier. Elliot had started by apologizing for not writing, and then apologizing for letting himself get too busy. Next he apologized for all the time he was spending getting ready for his mid-terms—he was a semester away from getting his degree in interior design. Alan had started to chuckle wondering what Elliot would apologize for next, when his eyes fell on the words “...in love with someone else...”

The feeling that hit Alan was like nothing he had ever experienced. It was like all of a sudden his head and his heart weren't on the same team anymore. His head told him he should be shocked. He should be hurt. He should feel like he'd just had the rug pulled out from under him. But... he didn't feel any of those things. He knew it was strange, he knew he shouldn't be feeling it, but he did—he felt... peaceful. As he leaned back and stretched his neck against the crisp white pillowcases, he felt a smile pulling at the corners of his mouth. It totally surprised him, but he felt... happy for Elliot.

He'd laid there, trying to figure out why losing the love of his life hadn't ripped his guts out worse than the bullet, and eventually he decided it must have something to do with Elliot's future. Alan could see that his own future—if things went like he expected—would never provide the life Elliot deserved. He hadn't known he'd been worried about this until the letter showed him it had been in the back of his mind for a long time.

Just as he'd been torn up over leaving Elliot three years before, in the weeks since a bullet had put him out of commission, he'd been torn between wanting to get back to active duty as soon as the docs would let him, and knowing he might be able to use the whole thing as an excuse to go back to a nice, comfortable life at home... with Elliot. Now, it was a lot easier to justify how badly he wanted to get back to the front lines. Easier, but not really easy. Part of him wanted to get away from anything to do with guns, and bombs, and death. But something else always seemed to rule out those wants. It wasn't just about patriotic duty—he did feel that way, but if patriotism had been the only thing driving him, he might never have enlisted.

He thought about how simple and happy life had been before lunatics took down the towers in New York, and how violently he'd reacted in those first few days. A week later, he was in the Marine Corp recruiting office enlisting. His friends were all talking about the attacks in terms of “us good guys” against “those barbarians”. For Alan, it had much more to do with the fact he hadn't been able to sleep.

Through that long, awful September, thirteen years ago, Alan had lain awake, night after night, his mind churning. It wasn't thoughts of flag and country that had grabbed hold and wouldn't turn him loose. It was the families. He didn't feel right drifting off in a comfortable bed when he knew there were so many children who would never see their mom or their dad again. Sisters, brothers... maybe worst of all, parents who had lost a child. His father had always said the worst kind of grief possible was losing a child—and his dad

would know 'cause he was a minister and spent plenty of time caring for grieving members of his congregation. No, eighteen-year-old Alan hadn't gone off on some testosterone-fueled revenge mission to kill the bad guys who had hurt America. He had gone off to try and do his part to stop it from ever happening again.

He hadn't been in-theater long before he began to question who the real barbarians were. He decided it was probably everyone with a gun, but he had taken an oath of service to his country—enlisted in the branch of that service where “Always Faithful” really meant “Always Faithful!”

He looked around the room taking a deep breath, and the twinge in his chest reminded him he had been just that—faithful until a second wound had left him too battered to return. He checked out the mess surrounding him, and told his battered self to quit mooning over what might have been, and start working on all those boxes still waiting to be unpacked. He sighed. He walked over to the built-in bookcase wall and slowly ran his index finger along one shelf of CDs after another. As a teenager, music had been the most important thing in his life—well, after Elliot. The boxes and boxes of discs he'd put in storage before shipping out had been the first things he'd unpacked yesterday. Alan's finger stopped on the spine of a disc. He took it out of the case and popped it into the player.

He drew in two soothing breaths in time to a series of piano chords, and instantly felt better when Bob Seger started singing the praises of that old time rock and roll. He picked up the next box from a nearby stack, carried it over to the old burgundy chair, opened it and began to rummage through the contents. He pulled a small wooden box with a glass lid out of the carton and looked around, wondering where he should put it.

Chapter Two

Friday, April 4, 2014

8:00 p.m.

Cade clicked the 'X' to close his Manhunt window, and then double-clicked on Adam4Adam. He hadn't had much success finding guys online who wanted to fork over a minor fee for something they figured they could get for free—well, okay, there were plenty of guys ready to pay, just not guys who Cade would touch with a ten-foot pole, let alone his mouth. Still, he had found one or two this way, so he tended to check in most days to see if there was any fresh meat on tap. He surveyed the newest listings, and sighed. Apparently, the only thing on tap for tonight would be another trip to The Bar.

He almost started scrolling through the endless posts on Craigslist, but then winced at the bitter awareness of how often he'd sworn he was going to cut this crap out.

He heard a key in the front door, and quickly folded down the laptop screen. The last thing he needed was to explain *that* to Sabrina. He leaned his desk chair back, swiveled to the left so he could see their tiny vestibule, and watched as she swept past.

"Honey! I'm home!" wafted back from the living room in her lovely, lilting drawl.

He knew how lucky he was to have a friend like Sabrina in his life, even if he did lose perspective sometimes and wish he had a place of his own.

He heard her putting down her things, and then she came bouncing into his room, glancing at the lowered computer screen. "Working on a paper?"

"Just some math exercises." Hadn't he been counting the number of new posts since yesterday? He didn't lie to Sabrina unless it was absolutely unavoidable.

"So... how's statistics coming along? You ready for the final?"

"I'll be fine." Cade looked out the window, but he could feel her giving him the eye.

"You're out at night so much I don't know how you get any studying done. Come to think of it, why do you go out every night? You don't even drink."

Now, Cade gave *her* the eye, along with a big smile. “I’m young, I’m gay, and I’m hot. It’s what we do! I just suck when it comes to numbers, okay? And, it’s not *every* night... maybe twice a week?”

“Suck at numbers? Excuse me? What was the lowest grade you ever got in high school? Oh, yes. I remember. Senior year, you got that A-minus in calculus. You totally suck!”

“Thanks, Mom.” Cade tried his sheepish grin.

Sabrina shook her head and gave him her best ‘*I-don’t-think-so*’ glare. “Speaking of sucking... you’ve been here two years and you still haven’t found Mr. Right. You go out every night—”

Cade shot daggers with his eyes and opened his mouth to interrupt.

“Oh, fine! A lot. You go out a lot, but it doesn’t even seem like you’re really looking.”

He couldn’t think what to say to avoid this conversation. “Maybe I’m not ready for love...”

Was he? He’d been ready for love since he was thirteen, since that day at the lake with Max. They’d been best friends since kindergarten but that day—something about the way the sun was glinting off the water... its shimmering reflection in Max’s eyes... it was the moment he’d first understood he was different from other boys. He’d leaned in and given Max a tender kiss on the lips, but Max pushed him away with a wild look in his eyes and stormed off. From then on, he avoided Cade like the plague, and before the new school year started his family had moved away.

That was nine years ago and Cade still hadn’t found “*The One*”. After Max’s abrupt disappearance, he’d spent the next three years looking—stealing furtive glances at every handsome face, evaluating each as a “*The One*” candidate. Then, just into his junior year, he thought he had found it. Eric! The dream hadn’t lasted very long. The sex did, though. He’d spent the next two years regularly and frequently blowing “*Mr. Not Quite Right.*” Looking back, he could see that had been all about release—raging teenage libido. It hadn’t been about building a life with someone.

Four years ago, the search for The One had come to a grinding halt!

“...or, do you think it has more to do with the professor?”

Cade was startled out of his reverie and realized he had no idea what Sabrina had been talking about.

“I mean, how can you ace calculus and then have a hard time with statistics?”

She hesitated. Then she got this look on her face. Sabrina was always so bubbly that Cade had been unaware, until this moment, that she was capable of knitting her brow.

“Are you sure the problem isn’t related to...”

Cade’s glare must have been enough to at least slow her down. He knew exactly what she wasn’t saying. He knew Sabrina loved him, so he couldn’t understand why—in the two years they’d been rooming together—she’d never felt she could talk with him about this. He wanted, maybe expected, more from his best friend. He could understand the way other people thought of him as damaged—walked on eggshells when certain subjects came up. But, the fact that she had never broached the subject, well, that just seemed messed up. If Sabrina thought of him as broken, then he truly must be. Had she finally decided to treat him like an adult? Suddenly, he was certain he wasn’t ready to be treated like an adult.

Sabrina sat down on the corner of the bed and looked out the window. “You know... after it happened... I was... kind of in shock.” She was taking the plunge. Apparently Sabrina *was* ready.

“When they wouldn’t let me go to the hospital to see you, I had, like... my own private freak-out at home. I just sat in my room for days, thinking about you... praying for you.”

She giggled, sounding more than a little uncomfortable. “I’ll never forget this one stupid moment... I guess I was desperate—grasping for any kind of hope. I remembered how perfect you were when you played Matthew Shepard the year before. I told myself the reason you were so believable in that part was... you must have internalized some aspect of Matthew, and maybe, somehow, that would give you the strength you’d need to survive.”

Something was trying to well up inside of Cade. He took a deep breath and held it to make sure he didn’t find out what that something was.

Sabrina shrugged and swept her long blonde hair over her shoulder. “I had forgotten all about that day, until the email this morning from the School of the Arts. Did you get it? You’re on their list, right?”

“I saw it in my inbox, but I haven’t had time. What’s it about?”

"It's their announcement of next year's season. They're going to do *The Laramie Project*."

"Again?"

"What do you mean again?" she asked.

"Don't you remember? The same year we did it at Buncombe, there was an article in *Gay Asheville* about a production in Durham that got a protest visit by those crazies from Kansas."

"You mean the GOD HATES FAGS people?"

"Yeah them. Shit, they make me so mad!" Cade welcomed the anger—and the change of subject.

"They make me sad."

Yup, there's my Sabrina.

"All those people... I mean, God gave them perfectly good lives, and they're just throwing them away, when they could be out doing something worthwhile. Or, at least, enjoying themselves."

"Yeah, well, it was monsters just like them who enjoyed killing Matthew."

"I'm not making excuses for them! What they do is heinous, but really, what good comes from being angry about it? Getting mad's not going to change anybody's mind... or heart."

"Speaking of minds that need changing, I haven't seen your big, dumb jock the last few days. How's he doing?"

"Nice try, but, A) Ryan's not dumb—he's plenty smart once you get to know him, and B) we're not talking about him, we're talking about you... Don't you think maybe you should talk to... *somebody* again?"

"Well—Roman Numeral Three—you know I've already hashed all of this out, over and over, with that... *therapist*." Cade spat out the distasteful word.

"There's another thing I don't get, two years with the best shrink in Asheville and you're..."

"What?" Cade could feel the color rising to his cheeks.

Sabrina slipped off the edge of the bed and knelt next to Cade. She took his hands in hers and pressed them to her lips. "Honey... something's not right."

Cade looked away. "I think that's enough, Sabrina."

She persisted. "Growing up... you were the happiest person I've ever known. But, that's not you anymore. That part never came back." She pressed her cheek to the back of his hand. "Cade..." She reached up and gently took his chin, turning him to face her. "You put up a great front, babe. You joke and you laugh a lot... but you're not happy."

He riveted her with his gaze. "Could we *please* not talk about this?"

She sat back on her heels and crossed her arms over her chest, whipping her golden tresses over her left shoulder with a sharp toss of her head.

"Cade. I love you. I just want you to be okay."

Having failed at both avoidance and confrontation, he turned to his old standby—sarcasm—and pasted on a smile. "Which part of '*Enough is enough*' do you not understand? *Enough*? Or, *enough*?"

The doorbell rang.

Sabrina shook her head. Again. "Why am I not surprised? Saved by the bell," she said, springing to her feet, but still glowering at him.

Cade brightened. "Any chance that's Mario Lopez at the door?" He could see she didn't want to give in, but she only just managed to conceal her smile by turning and running out of the room.

She peered through the peephole and then opened the door. Ryan stepped in and closed it behind him as she stretched up on tiptoe to kiss his cheek. Reaching behind himself, he opened the door a crack, jiggled the knob on the outside, and then pushed it closed again. He scrunched down and planted a smooch on her forehead. "Ready to go to dinner?"

Cade sauntered into the living room. She had been dating this big jock from the lacrosse team for eight months, and Cade was still trying to figure out just exactly how stupid he was. "Does she *look* like she's ready? She just walked in the door."

Ryan looked suitably abashed. "I'm sorry," he said, glancing toward his wrist, "I must be early or something?"

"It's okay, Ryan, just give me a second to change my top." Sabrina gave him another peck on the cheek and turned toward her bedroom.

Cade saw a flicker of dread pass across Ryan's features at the realization that the two of them were being left alone. The dude was clearly uncomfortable. That suited Cade just fine.

“So, Sabrina tells me you’re smart.” Cade clasped his hands behind his back. “A regular brainiac.”

Ryan grimaced. “I don’t know about that... I’m not failing any of my classes—”

“What’s *that* supposed to mean?” Cade asked, caustically.

“Nothing.” Ryan’s cheeks turned pink. “Look, can we just...”

“Just what? Just *pretend* we like each other?”

“Would that be so bad, I mean...” casting a desperate glance at her closed bedroom door, “...for Sabrina’s sake?”

“I’m an actor, Ryan. I can pretend anything and make it damn convincing. But you? Do you actually think you can pretend you’re not uncomfortable around me?” Cade took a step closer to Ryan.

Ryan visibly shrank. “I don’t know if uncomfortable’s the right word...”

“Well, you don’t look very comfortable to me, Ryan. Would you prefer, ‘*ill-at-ease*’?” Cade took another step, and leaned into Ryan’s space. “Is there something about people like me that discomfits you, Ryan?”

“Ready!” Sabrina swept back into the living room, picking up her purse as she passed the coffee table.

Cade stepped back.

When Sabrina came to a stop, standing next to Cade, Ryan shot her a look—pleading for rescue? She looked back and forth between her men and then gave Ryan a shrug. Ryan said, “I’ll be in the car.” He turned and went out, closing the door firmly behind him. Cade opened his mouth to speak, but the door opened a crack, and a disembodied hand reached in and jiggled the inside knob.

After the door closed the second time, Cade turned back to Sabrina and asked, “How can you date a homophobe?”

Sabrina turned to face him and put her hands on her hips. “Homophobia is the irrational fear of gay people. Ryan is not afraid of gay people. Ryan is afraid of you!”

“Oh, please. That’s ridiculous. Five-year-old girls in frilly white dresses and starched petticoats aren’t afraid of me.”

“What-ever! I still say that’s what’s going on here.”

"If it's not homophobia, it must be plain, old, garden-variety stupidity."

"Why do you keep saying he's stupid?"

"Because he obviously has the IQ of a guppy."

"You know, Cade, I would never rub your face in it if you weren't being such a prick about him, but, last semester... he got better grades than you."

Ouch! That hurt. "Fine! So he's cool. *And* he's smart. What about his OCD?"

"Ryan is *not* OCD!"

"Not OCD? What do you call his little routine with doorknobs? If he's looking for a '*Do Not Disturb*' sign, I'm afraid, in his case, that ship has sailed."

"Oh, so now *you're* a shrink?" Sabrina pursed her lips. "What grade did you get in Psych 213?" Cade looked away. "That's what I thought. Well, I got an A in it, and I can tell you a few little quirks do not add up to a clinical diagnosis."

"A few quirks?" Cade snorted. "Please! His epitaph is going to read '*He filled in each oval completely, erasing any stray marks*'."

"Cade! Really?"

"So, what *do* you see in him?"

"Well, for a start, he's kind. I never hear him say an unpleasant word to anybody, except when you're goading him."

Cade chuffed, and Sabrina took him by the chin again. "It's a good thing I love you so much."

"Yeah," he agreed, nodding his head to pull his chin away. "That is a good thing."

She whisked out the door, and when it closed behind her, Cade looked down and stared at his feet.

He wanted to understand. Sabrina had been his boon companion ever since kindergarten. He'd always known the day would come when they would go their separate ways—have their own lives, their own families... But, this Ryan was so totally not what he'd ever pictured for her.

Last year, when he'd arrived as a freshman, and she was starting her junior year, she had taken him under her wing. He had moved in to share the condo

their parents had purchased for them two years before, and they had once again become inseparable as she'd shown him all the ins and outs of campus life.

This year had been a different story. They hadn't been back in Durham two weeks when she'd started going out with Ryan, and things just hadn't been the same since then. It wasn't like she'd cut him out of her life—she was always there for him when he needed her—but...

He tried to tell himself it would be different if she was seeing someone who actually deserved her. But this big lummoX, with his quirky little habits... it just got under his skin in a way he couldn't stand.

He took a deep breath and counted to ten.

Then, he turned and walked back to his bedroom. *Time to devise a wardrobe strategy for this evening.* He opened the closet and began shoving clothes around. He'd need to choose something practical, since there was no telling what the night might bring.

Stumble

Friday, April 24, 2010

11:27 p.m.

I flip through channel after channel, barely aware of either the movement of my thumb, or the images flashing before me. I know I shouldn't be indulging in self-pity. Sabrina says it's not a good look on me. But how am I supposed to feel—home alone on prom night? Thank God my parents aren't here. I couldn't stand to see the looks my mother would be giving me. I love my mom dearly, maybe almost as much as she loves me, but watch out if she detects even a hint of something less than ideal in my life—she won't rest till she's fixed it! In the rare circumstance where she can't make it all better, I end up catching her studying me with this stricken look on her face, like her heart is breaking.

Funny, I seem to have become quite the expert at pitying myself, but when others do it, I just want to scream! When she suggested canceling their weekend trip so I wouldn't have to be alone tonight, I actually did scream. Maybe that's why it didn't occur to her to invite me to join them. Sure, having me along might have put a damper on their romantic getaway, but I would have gone with them if she'd asked. Oh, yeah! Alone in Paris on prom night sounds a hell of a lot better than... hmph... this!

Spot jumps onto the sofa and nuzzles her cheek against my thigh, purring, then tries to push her head under my hand. I hate crying—it's not who I am, so I don't do it. But, tonight, I can't seem to find anything distracting enough to keep my mind from going over and over that night last week when Eric dumped me!

He said it just wasn't working—that we didn't have a future, and we should cut our losses. I must have looked hurt, because he tried to explain, saying, "I think you and me just want different things." When I alluded to wanting someone who was capable of forming a grammatically correct sentence, he got ticked off and told me that even though he'd meant "girls" I had just reminded him that finding someone who'd be nice to him was pretty high on his list, too.

Had I been unkind to Eric? I didn't want to admit it, but looking back over the last year or so, as it became more and more apparent that he was not Mr. Right, my little bon mots probably had been getting more prickly. I've always

thought of it as clever. I mean, incredibly fucking funny comments are constantly popping into my head! Am I supposed to not say them just because some idiot who can't tell I'm joking might get all bent out of shape?

Not that Eric is stupid. With the occasional, odd exception—like pronoun selection—he has that rare combo of athletic ability and brains. It's one of the reasons I put up with his bullshit for two years, and succeeded in ignoring my growing disillusionment for so long. Still, I had known fairly early on that Eric was not The One. I don't know if it's all the old movies I watch, or seeing the way my mom and dad are always fawning over one another, but I turned out to be one hopeless romantic. I want a man who's big and strong—someone who'll sweep me off my feet and whisk me away on his powerful white charger, off to some hedonistic neverland where we'll peel grapes for one another and fuck like bunnies till the sun rises. Eric is exactly not that guy. Now I regret all the time and energy I put into convincing myself he might be.

As usual, with three hundred fucking channels in brilliant digital Technicolor, there's not one damned thing on that I can bear to watch. Each of the classic movie channels—my typical fallback when I can't find anything else—is showing something I've seen a hundred times. Why tonight for Christ sake? I thumb the green button.

After staring at the wall-sized black screen for a while, I pull Spot onto my lap and stroke a few lazy circles around her ear before rubbing my fingertips hard along her jaw line. She lives for this! I'm pretty sure the chin rub is the reason she consistently holds me in an esteem ordinarily reserved for someone with a can opener in their hand. Her purring deepens. At least somebody's happy... and in love. At the moment, I'm quite certain that "happy and in love" is not a part of my destiny.

I flinch at the sudden peal of our stately door chimes. Startled pussy claws dig into my thigh as Spot leaps to the coffee table and then beats a hasty retreat into the inner recesses of Chez Bishop. Who the fuck would come here at this time on prom night? It must be Sabrina. I was assuming she'd be out till all hours with Jimmy—going to the after-party, and then the after-after-party. Knowing her, she probably sent him on ahead so she could come by and check on me. God! Why must people insist on participating in my tragedy?

I don't think to check the monitor first.

I snatch the door open.

Eric!

There's a cigarette dangling from his lips and I smell beer mingling with the smoke.

Fuck.

Chapter Three

Friday, April 4, 2014

9:30 p.m.

Alan slid back the steamy door of the shower enclosure, stepped out onto the bath mat, and toweled himself dry. He walked over to the mirror and looked at his reflection. He couldn't help thinking of him and Elliot—about how different they looked now, compared to twelve years ago, when they were eighteen. Actually, Elliot still looked mostly the same, but Alan's looks had changed... a lot. *It must be what you experience that changes the way you look... I guess this is what two wars' worth of experience looks like.*

He ran his fingers lightly up and down, over the scars in the center of his chest. The hair had grown back about halfway, and it was starting to look like it might hide a lot of the damage eventually. He ran his hands over his pecs, enjoying the silky texture as his palm brushed over the hair. Even without his personal reasons for wanting a furry chest, he would never understand why some guys shaved or waxed. He looked back at the scars and traced a finger over them, wondering how likely it really was that he'd meet someone tonight who he'd be willing to show them to.

Alan left the mirror and went to the nearest closet. Most of his jeans were loose and slouchy, the way he liked them, but, heeding Elliot's earlier warning, he dug to the back of the closet and found "the tight pair". Then, he went to the other closet and took out his new pair of ASICS sneakers—the silver mesh ones with the teal stripes. No socks. Alan didn't know why anyone would want to wear socks—well, combat boots were an exception, of course. Painful experience had taught him you could end up with some really nasty blisters from those bad boys. But, why would anyone intentionally cut off all those fantastic sensations of skin meeting sneaker? It would be like wearing a condom to jerk off. He and Elliot had both been virgins when they first got together, so they had never used protection. The first time he had fucked with a condom, it reminded him of wearing a sock inside a shoe. He could tell he was in there, but damned if he could feel what was going on—robbed of the pure, lusty, intimate contact of the experience.

He went to the dresser and rummaged around till he found a T-shirt he knew fit tight enough to show off his pecs and six pack—he really didn't want to

disappoint Elliot. He opened another drawer and pulled out a gleaming-white Duke athletic supporter and wondered, once again, whether there was any relation between the jockstrap and the university. No reason to think there was, but after he had left Durham, he'd always bought this brand because it reminded him of home. Having gathered his clothes, he sat down on the edge of the bed and started dressing.

The jockstrap made him think again of Elliot. Over the last month at Walter Reed, every time he had thought about coming home he'd been a little worried about how things would be between him and Elliot—and Elliot's husband. But, when Elliot met him in baggage claim at RDU, and they melted into one another's arms for the first time in twelve years, Alan had felt like he was truly *home*. He still loved Elliot with all his heart, but the love was different from before. He was so relieved when he felt no sexual energy between them. He'd been worried his feelings might get in the way of them staying best friends—not to mention what it would mean to Vince! But holding Elliot in his arms had felt like home, not like sex.

Strap and jeans pulled up to his thighs, he slipped a naked foot into a sneaker, smiled, and laced it up. He did the same with the other foot, then slipped the tee over his head and stood up to complete the process. He pulled his jock up into place and adjusted the straps. Then he wiggled the jeans over his hips. He tried to button the fly, but it was a no go. He had to lie down on the bed and exhale with all his might each time he tugged the next button into place. He sat up, and then stood slowly, afraid he might hear fabric ripping, or a button might pop and take an eye out. Standing seemed okay, so he tried turning, and bending, and then squatting just a little. Nothing bad happened, and he noticed he could almost breathe normally. He walked over to the mirrored sliding doors of the closets and checked himself out. *Oh, yeah!* Elliot was going to be very pleased.

He went to the dresser and took three twenties out of his wallet, folded them, and forced them into the tiny sliver of one front pocket. Then he took his driver's license and the key card for the condo and slipped them into a back pocket. He went back over to the mirror to double check the rear view. *Nope*. That would never do. There was a phantom rectangular outline in the middle of the otherwise perfect bubble of his right cheek. He transferred the cards to the other front pocket and headed for the door.

He walked down the hill, along the wall of the ball field, toward The Bar. Everywhere he looked, he felt the tug of nostalgia. This hadn't been his

neighborhood growing up, but it was only a couple of miles away. His childhood summers had included lots of nights here, at the DAP—that's what everybody called the Durham Athletic Park, where the Bulls played. He hardly ever got to go to their away games, but when the Bulls were at home, Alan was there to cheer them on.

At the bottom of the hill, he turned the corner and looked down the block to the old fifties-style, walk-up sandwich shop where he'd eaten countless meals of burgers and fries in his youth. It was hard to believe the place was still in business, but there it stood in all its red and white glory. He chuckled when he realized that in one of those boxes back at the condo, he still had an old shirt from this place. Red ink on a white tee, it showed the DAP to one side, and the shop to the other, with a baseball sailing through the air. Below the picture, it said, "Come watch the flies at King's Sandwich Shop." Alan didn't know much about marketing, but he thought they probably wouldn't try anything like that these days.

As he walked, his mind wandered back to his younger days when the DAP was the only reason middle-class people dared to come to this neighborhood. So many unfortunate souls used to live on these streets. Now, the neighborhood had gentrified and there were plenty of middle-class folks around, but it bothered him there were still homeless people, too. Once he got settled in and found a job, he'd check into volunteering. Alan firmly believed that every person had the right to a place to lay their head down at night, especially if they were in his own damned neighborhood!

He found The Bar, paid his cover charge, and got his hand stamped. He went in to look for Elliot and spotted him sitting at the bar—the bar at The Bar... he wondered if that was supposed to be funny.

Elliot's face lit up when he saw Alan approaching. "Darling! You look *fabulous!*"

Alan tried not to blush when several heads turned their way. He stepped into the empty place next to Elliot's bar stool and tried to make himself as small as possible. "Thanks for helping me make a subtle entrance, buddy."

"Subtle," exclaimed Elliot, "is not what we're going for tonight, my dear. We're here to hook you up, so there's nothing wrong with people taking notice."

Apparently the bartender had taken notice because he came right over. Alan ordered a Bud Light and dropped his change from the cover charge on the bar. He turned his attention back to his friend.

Elliot's smile was infectious, but the whole setup gave Alan butterflies in his stomach. It kinda pissed him off that, on the one hand, he could charge through a hail of bullets and shrapnel to reach an objective, but just the thought of making small talk with a stranger—who might or might not be interested—made him feel queasy.

“You know... I've never really done this before...”

One of Elliot's eyebrows shot up. “Done what?”

“You know, tried to, like... meet guys, or...” Alan groaned. “...hook up in a bar. Or *date*. I mean, there wasn't anybody before you, and then, my first three years in the service, I lived like a monk... I never cheated on us.”

Elliot smiled. “I can't even *imagine* going that long without sex! How on *Earth* did you do it?”

“Well...” Alan sighed. “...reading helped keep my mind off it. You know me, always with my nose in a book. It got to the point where the guys in my unit started calling me *'The Professor'*.”

“*Oh! My! God!*” Elliot screeched. “That is *too* hilarious!” Alan's confusion must have shown on his face, because Elliot said, “Don't you remember how we both had the hots for Russell Johnson. Remember how we used to rush home from school to catch *Gilligan's Island* re-runs?”

“Yeah, well, I couldn't exactly share that with my buddies, could I? I hated having to sneak around, but sometimes I felt like I'd go crazy if I didn't get some. So, after we broke up, I started looking for, you know... opportunities. Did you know they have Craigslist in Iraq and Afghanistan?” Elliot looked surprised, but Alan was on a roll; it felt good getting this off his chest. “So there were some one night stands, well, more like one hour stands. I hated that kind of thing, but it was there, and I couldn't find any other alternative. Well, one time, on leave in Kuwait... before I went, I'd gone online and found this guy who was a hooker. That was—” Alan noticed Elliot was looking a little green around the gills. “Oh, sorry! Too much information.”

“No,” Elliot said, sighing and reaching up to rest a comforting hand on Alan's shoulder. “I understand. I'm glad you told me. I should have thought about how this might be for you. I never would have thought my big, strong Marine would be nervous about chatting up men.”

“I'm okay.” The last thing he wanted was for Elliot to feel bad about trying to help. “I just need to get used to the idea of maybe meeting someone who... you know... where it might be more than just sex.”

The phone laying on the bar lit up and started playing Green Day's "21 Guns".

Elliot grimaced. "Vince's ringtone." He picked it up.

"Yes, pumpkin?"

"Uh-huh.

"*What?*"

"But, Vince, we just got here a min—

"Hmph.

"Right.

"Okay, *okay!!!*"

Elliot pushed the *End* button and tucked the phone in his pocket, a bleak look on his face.

"Don't tell me. Mr. Self-Sufficient can't live another minute without you?"

"He says it's urgent. Guess I'll find out when I get home."

"I'll head out too."

"Alan! You will do no such thing! I know this isn't easy, but I want you to promise me you'll talk to at least one guy before you leave here. Okay?"

Alan crossed his fingers behind his back and nodded. "Okay, okay."

Elliot slipped off his stool and gave Alan a peck on the cheek. "At least one guy," he said, sternly.

"Yes, Mother, I promise." Alan smiled, but Elliot arched a suspicious eyebrow before turning and heading for the door.

Alan turned back to face the bar, leaned against the rail, and went to work on the rest of his beer. He was disappointed his friend had to leave before he'd even had a chance to scope the place out. There was no point staying; without Elliot there to prod him, he knew he wouldn't do anything tonight. He wasn't ready to put himself out there and, now, he sure as hell didn't feel like striking up a conversation.

Downing the last swig from the bottle and setting it on the bar, Alan turned to go. As he swung around, he found himself suddenly face to face with a man—they almost bumped chests, but each of them stopped just in time to avoid the collision.

The guy was an inch or two shorter. He had a saucy grin and a twinkle in his brown eyes. "Hey, good-lookin'!" the stranger said. Alan rolled his eyes as he turned his head and blew out a long silent whistle. It had been a long time since anyone had been this far into his physical space, let alone a hot twenty-something with a sweet face that looked like trouble.

"Uh-oh," the young man drawled, a playful pout pulling Alan's attention back, "I think somebody's in desperate need of a good time."

Was he? Desperate? It had been a long time since he'd felt another man's arms around him. Was Elliot right? Had he been a little bitchy lately because he wasn't getting any? Could it all really be that easy?

Alan hesitated. "Maybe you're right." He let the corners of his mouth turn up a little.

The guy's grin turned into a great big smile. Maybe it all could be this easy.

"I'm always right. Your place, or mine?"

Before Alan could think, the words were coming out of his mouth. "Mine's just the other side of the old ball park. We can walk."

Chapter Four

Friday, April 4, 2014

10:00 p.m.

“I’m Jist a Girl Who Cain’t Say No” from *Oklahoma!* blasted from the top-of-the-line stereo as the sleek black Mercedes whisked Cade into the darkness of nighttime downtown Durham, and toward the club where he was confident he’d find an easy mark in short order. He glanced down quizzically at his right hand when he discovered he had been absentmindedly stroking the creamy tan leather of the passenger seat, back and forth in fond caresses. What was that about?

He looked up as he made the right onto Rigsbee, and then yelped when the front tire barked the curb. A moment later, he jumped a second time when the back tire followed suit. He hated this car. It always felt like he was driving around in a Sherman Tank! Images of his parents came to mind. Llewellyn Bishop had been adamant that the only son of the world’s biggest Green Energy magnate should drive around in a Tesla. Marilyn Bishop had been equally adamant that “her son”, if he had to drive at all, would be surrounded by something that would protect him in case of an accident. Much to Cade’s chagrin, Marilyn had won the argument, though they’d compromised and gotten the biggest German hybrid available. He knew he should be grateful she hadn’t insisted on a Hummer! He loved his mom, even when he didn’t get his own way. Even in victory, she never stooped to acting victorious, she simply moved on quietly in pursuit of her next conquest. As accommodating as his father was, it still sometimes astonished Cade how hopelessly in love those two were after all these years.

In the two years he had been living in Durham, he hadn’t seen much of it, other than the campus and the gay bars, a couple of which were in the neighborhood where he was headed. As he crested a hill, the north side of downtown lay spread out before him. He’d been told that as recently as a few years ago, this area had been a wasteland of abandoned warehouses and derelict storefronts. The old ball field was to his left. They said it had been abandoned too, when the local farm team moved to new digs a couple of miles the other side of the hill. Now it was home to the baseball team from N.C. Central—the historically black university.

He spied his objective, and began looking for a parking space. Even though the neighborhood boasted lots of new restaurants, bars, and shops, he still felt a tad nervous every time he came to this part of town. They'd cleaned up the buildings, but quite a few of the bums—who had no doubt been far more plentiful in years past—still roved the streets. *Panhandling, at best!* Cade thought as he pulled up alongside an empty parking space. He angled in backwards and then began the lengthy process of driving a few feet forward, a few feet back, then forward, then back again, ad nauseam, until he finally gave up. As best he could tell, his car wasn't protruding too far out into the street. *That's alright, he told himself. It's not too long a walk to the curb from here.* He stepped out, closed the door, and pressed the button on the key fob. He felt a blip of reassurance from the staccato bleep of the horn, verifying activation of the ruinously expensive alarm system his father had insisted on. Okay, maybe he didn't hate everything about the Merc. In some situations, a tank was a good thing.

He walked a half a block and turned the corner. The bar was across the street. Every time the name of this place came to mind, it niggled at Cade. He considered the decision to name a bar "The Bar" to be a case of dullardness, posing as creativity. He showed his ID to the bouncer, paid the fee, and stepped inside to scan the room. Same old faces. More of them than he'd admit were attached to bodies with dicks he'd taken the measure of—one at a time, with no repeat performances, though several of them had pleaded. Cade chuckled to himself when he thought of Hermione Gingold's haunting voice on his *Side by Side by Sondheim* CD. Like her character, he never did anyone twice!

The place wasn't packed, but the bar was entirely surrounded, with the exception of one vacant stool. He wended his way through the crowd, moving quickly to grab the seat before someone else did. As he made his approach to the bar—*the bar in The Bar. Sheesh!*—he noticed the guy standing next to the empty stool and knew he'd spotted his target for the evening. The man had massive shoulders and a broad, beefy back. Even from this angle, he exuded that intensity of machismo Cade took great pleasure in reducing to a weak-kneed, inarticulate blob of jelly. Just as he reached for the stool, the guy wheeled around on one heel and nearly plowed into him.

The guy was tall, a good two inches taller than Cade's six feet, with dark hair in a buzz cut. As Cade looked up in surprise, his usual assessing scan of a potential trick's facial features was arrested and held by the man's eyes. He had never seen eyes like these before. They were black. Jet black. He couldn't make

out the irises. If this guy's pupils were blown with lust, would anyone be able to tell? For a fleeting moment, he thought he might even do him for free, just to see it... but, no, that was *not* how this worked.

He affected his best come hither drawl, "Hey, good-lookin'!" The man glanced away and chuffed. Instead of stepping back, Cade held his ground. He could tell he was well inside the boundaries of the man's comfort zone, but that was fine—whatever kept a mark off balance long enough they didn't get a chance to think with the head upstairs. This guy was so hunky, it was a good bet the upstairs was sporting a "Vacancy" sign.

Best set the hook before this one gets away. He put on a playful pout and said, "Uh-oh. Looks like somebody's in desperate need of a good time."

The man turned slowly back and looked at him with those black eyes.

"Maybe you're right," he said, cocking his head to one side and almost smiling.

What was it with this guy? He wasn't acting like Cade's usual tricks. Not that he cared, as long as the dude had the cash. Flashing his winning smile, he straightened and said, "I'm always right. Your place, or mine?"

"Mine's just the other side of the old ball park. We can walk."

Stepping out into the chilly night air, the man nodded to his left, and Cade followed. He slowed his steps, though, when he realized their path would take them right past one of the neighborhood bums. Gentrification still had its work cut out for it. *Why can't the city do something to get people like this off the street?*

As they approached, the tall, crusty old man, wrapped in a smelly blanket, extended a gnarled and quivering hand. Cade was taken aback when Mr. Hunky stopped and slipped a hand into a front pocket of his jeans. Didn't he know giving cash to these people only served to maintain a vicious circle?

"This is all I've got on me," his trick said as he handed the cash over to the bum. Cade was astonished when he saw it was a pair of twenties changing hands. *He'd damned well better have a couple more of those at home!* Although... there was something intriguing about this guy... He had that same weird thought again, that he might consider... No! *No pay, no play!*

When they reached the next corner, they took a right and headed up a long, gradual slope toward a row of old tobacco warehouses that had been converted

into condos. The hulking frames of the buildings loomed dark against the night sky. Their walk up the hill took them along the side of the old ball park, neither of them saying a word. Apparently, Tall, Dark, and Handsome, was also Tall, Dark, and Silent. *Fine by me*, he thought. *No need to mix pleasure with business*. At the top of the hill, they cut through a parking lot and approached one of the buildings.

The man pulled a card from his pocket and held it in the direction of a panel on the wall. A red light turned green, and he heard the clunk of a magnetic lock releasing its hold on the large glass door. They walked past a giant freight elevator and climbed two flights of stairs. As they approached the far end of the corridor, the man held up the card again. Another click admitted them to a small foyer which opened onto a gigantic great room.

The man kept walking, but Cade paused at the edge of the foyer, taking in the room which was strewn with cardboard boxes, some taped shut, and others open with varying amounts of stuff in them. Was this guy moving in, or moving out?

He never varied from his pattern, but there was something about this guy, and it bugged him that he couldn't quite put his finger on what it was. He was also uncertain about the guy's cash-on-hand situation, so just to be sure things were spelled out in advance, he said, "It's usually forty, but for you... how's twenty sound?"

The man turned to face him with a look that was both curious and amused. "Twenty what?"

Fuck.

"Dollars?" Was this guy as thick as he looked? "Hello? For a blowjob?"

It seemed like the guy was finally putting two and two together. "You mean... you're a—"

"Hey, good-lookin'? Wanna have a good time?" Cade wiggled his hips and gave an exaggerated wink, along with a self-mocking grin.

He watched as a parade of emotions marched across the man's face in a matter of seconds. First, sudden surprise, followed by dawning realization, and then perplexity. Cade couldn't quite make out who was waving from the last float as it approached. From a distance, it looked like disgust, but as it came nearer, he thought it might be sympathy. Then, it started to look a lot like pity.

“Look,” the man said, discomfort obvious in his voice, “I’ve been out of circulation for a long time. I’m sorry if I didn’t pick up on things I should have.” The guy looked around his apartment as if he were at a loss, then back at Cade. He walked toward the kitchen area, saying, “Hang on a sec...” He heard a sound like coffee mugs clinking together. The man emerged from behind the breakfast island with a ceramic cookie jar in one hand and two twenty dollar bills in the other.

“It’s not, like, a moral thing... or anything... it’s just that... I just don’t feel right about paying for it.” Extending his hand, the man went on, “But you should take this if you need it—”

Cade’s body went stiff; his fists clenched at his thighs. He felt the heat rising to his cheeks as he inhaled slowly and deeply, gathering fuel for his rage. “You think I do this because I need the fucking money?” he screamed. Trembling, he glowered at the man, expecting his anger to be met with anger, expecting to be told to leave—if not worse—expecting to be told what a worthless piece of shit he was, and asked how he dared? Instead, the man visibly softened. He looked as if he were trying to solve a puzzle.

“Why do you do it, then?” the man asked in a calm, even tone.

He trembled harder. *What the fuck? Why isn’t he angry? I sure as hell am!*

“Fuck you!” he roared. He turned, rigidly, on his heel and made it to the door in three strides, jerking it open violently. He stepped decisively across the threshold, but as he turned to slam the door closed, his gaze fell on the man standing alone in the middle of the big room, all beefy and buff, yet looking like a lost puppy.

What the fuck do I care?

Cade shook his head and looked down at his feet.

He closed the door quietly and walked away.

Fall

Friday, April 24, 2010

11:39 p.m.

Eric takes a step into the foyer.

"If my parents smell that smoke, they'll be even more pissed at you than they already are," I warn him.

"Are they here?" Attitude has always been Eric's strong suit.

"Out of town for the weekend."

"Then fuck 'em!" he chuckles, taking a step toward me.

I take a step back and wish for the life of me I could remember what I ever saw in this guy.

"Eric, please."

"Okay! Fine... Fine!" He turns and flicks half of a Winston back through the open door. It lands on the front walk and lies there smoldering. He steps in further, shuts the door, turns, and looks me up and down. "Did you eat dinner?"

"Yes. Why?" I ask, not bothering to hide my irritation.

"Cause you look a little hungry. I've got something here I could feed you." He leers, rubbing his hand over the crotch of what's obviously a rented tux. It makes me crazy that he looks good in it—this selfish boy who denies his feelings for me, treats me like shit, and then has the nerve to turn up looking hot in polyester formal wear. My heart sinks as I realize I may never find a man I can respect. Why does it all have to be so difficult?

He takes a step closer, right into my space. "Eric, you're drunk. Why don't you go home and sleep it off?"

"Fuck that," he mumbles. He looks me right in the eye, and for a moment I see a trace of something elemental—almost... primitive—in his inebriated gaze.

"I'm not that drunk. Not too drunk to get it up," he says, grabbing his crotch again and wiggling his massive bulge at me.

This is all so fucking ludicrous! A couple more weeks and I'll no longer have to lay eyes on Eric, or any of the other jerks I've been saddled with through four years of high school. Just a few months, and I'll be walking the ivied halls of academia, where maybe there's a chance I'll meet a decent man. The allure in that siren song of freedom, contrasted with the pitiful farce of the horny boy now wagging his dick at me is more than I can stand. I try, but I can't help myself. I turn my head aside as a giggle escapes me.

Eric takes another step closer and, suddenly, I have no problem keeping my laughter in check. I turn my head back to look at him, and his face is way too close to mine. I want him to leave. "What happened to Sandy? Isn't that what you said you want, now? Why aren't you out fucking her? Did she have a curfew or something?"

Now, Eric looks away. "I put all the right moves on Sandy, but she is so fucking uptight." There's an edgy quality to his voice that makes me want him gone. Now! "She agreed that tonight she would finally blow me, but when I tried to hold her head, she panicked and almost bit the tip off. She was crying so hard, I had to take her home."

My stomach starts to churn. Even though I know, now, that my feelings for Eric were never returned, there was a time when I thought we might be falling in love. For a while, we had fun together. Picturing him huddled in the back seat of a car, forcing himself on some inexperienced girl, just made me want to cry.

Now Eric looks at me again and the fire in his eyes drills into me. "Prom night and I couldn't even get a fucking blow job!"

I see the color rising in his cheeks as he clenches his fists and his body starts shaking. Oh, fuck! I've seen Eric mad, but never anything like this.

He's only inches from me and he reaches out to grab my crotch. "At least you're always good for that."

"Not tonight." I try to step around him to open the door. "You need to go home."

He steps to the side and blocks me. I look up into his eyes, and I swear I see something snap.

"You think that's how this is gonna go, you little bitch?" he yells. "I wasted two years of my life on a faggot bitch who won't fuck? I'm getting laid tonight whether you like it or not!"

I start backing away, but he grabs my wrist. Hard. He squeezes and twists my arm—far enough that my only choices are to stay put, or dislocate something. “Christ, Eric, you’re hurting me!”

“So what! You think you’re too good to get hurt? You little shit! You don’t know what hurt is!”

There’s fury in his eyes.

I’ve read about rage. Now, I know what it looks like... and feels like.

My heart is pounding in my ears and I can’t catch my breath.

I calculate the distance to the panic button on the panel down the hall.

I don’t stand a chance.

Chapter Five

Saturday, April 5, 2014

11:00 a.m.

A chilly breeze cut through Alan's lightweight jacket as he roamed among booths stacked with veggies. One stand was all leafy greens, with piles of spinach and mustard and kale. There were even a few bundles in front of a sign that said, "*Arugula.*" Had he really been gone *that* long? When he'd left Durham, there'd barely even been a farmer's market. Now, it had its own huge, permanent structure—just a big roof, really, but still. And, apparently, there was now a market for arugula. Times really had changed.

He wasn't in the mood for cooking tonight, but he'd hoped maybe if he went to the farmer's market, he'd see something that would inspire him.

He carelessly tossed a bunch of carrots into his basket, turned to leave, and nearly bumped into—*Wow! Him!*

What were the chances?

"Hi," Alan said, wishing he was better at thinking on his feet. He watched as one emotion after another crossed the young man's face. Surprise, then recognition, then embarrassment, and then... something Alan couldn't read... maybe like the guy had a bad taste in his mouth? The man looked away, seeming nervous, and Alan felt a sudden need to make it better. "I'm Alan. Alan Troxler," he tried.

The young man slowly turned his head back and looked Alan in the eye, long enough for Alan to start wondering what he was thinking about. Finally, the guy spoke. "I'm sorry."

"Is that a first name, or a last name?" The man just stared at him. *Damn!* He cursed himself for having made it to age thirty without figuring out he was just not funny!

Finally, the guy grinned a little, and he extended his hand. "My name's Cade Bishop, and I'm not a screamer."

As he took the offered hand, he felt clueless and disturbed at the same time. "Excuse me?" he asked.

“Screaming? I screamed at you last night. Or yelled.” The man took a deep breath. “I was looking forward to forgetting that last night ever happened, but... here you are. I just want you to know, it’s not something I do on a regular basis.”

“No, I’m the one who should apologize...” He wasn’t sure what to make of Cade. Sure, he was drop-dead gorgeous, in a twinkish way. And he sold sex without a second thought. But there was also something... vulnerable? Maybe not fragile, but... something hidden behind those brown eyes. It fascinated Alan, and made him want to find out just what it was.

When Cade looked from Alan’s face, down to their joined hands, he realized he’d been standing, slack-jawed and silent, long enough that he’d probably been pegged as a little strange himself. Or, at least someone with no social skills. Or, worst of all, some dumb hunk of meat. He took his hand back and tried again to make a good impression. “So, what brings you here?” *Oh, God!* Had he really just said something *that* lame? They might as well stamp “*beefcake*” on his forehead.

“My roommate, Sabrina, sent me for veggies. She’s making dinner tonight for Ryan, the Jumbo Jersey Jock.”

“You got something against jocks?” He had thought that all the time and effort he’d put into studying and mastering his worries and fears had relieved him of this insecurity, but the feelings came in such a strong rush, he had blurted out the question before he could stop himself. He couldn’t remember the last time he cared if someone thought he was dumb, and he was surprised to find Cade’s opinion mattered to him.

“That would be a long story.”

This made him even more curious. He couldn’t figure out why a handsome young man who, judging by his clothes, wasn’t short of cash would be offering blow jobs for forty bucks. It didn’t add up. Or... for it to add up, there must be some missing pieces to the puzzle. What those pieces might be, Alan was suddenly very interested in finding out.

“I’ve got time, and a good ear, and...” he tried to put a seductive spin on it, flexing a bicep, “don’t be fooled by the muscles, I actually understand *most* of what people tell me.”

Cade smiled and looked around at the stalls of vegetables. “What about you, Alan, what brings you here?”

It was clear Cade wanted to change the subject. “Well,” he flashed his best warm-and-winning smile, “if you’ll recall where we were about twelve hours ago, you’ll notice my condo’s right around that corner over there,” Alan said, pointing.

Cade turned and looked. “Great! I’ve returned to the scene of the crime.”

Alan chuckled. “Look, I get the feeling neither of us made our best first impression last night. They say you don’t get a second chance, but I don’t know... how ’bout dinner tonight?”

“Wow! Seriously?” Cade looked surprised, but there was also something more. “I mean... after the way I acted last night, I mean... you seem nice, and I’d like to get to know you, but... there’s this other thing...”

The hesitation made him wonder if Cade was about to open up about how they met, but when he continued, that wasn’t the direction he took. “It’s this whole dinner with Ryan, thing. Sabrina wants me to like the guy, but I just don’t, and I never will. She’s throwing herself away on this jerk. He doesn’t deserve her—” Cade looked Alan up and down. “And, *not* because he’s a jock. Not even because he’s dumb, although, trust me, wow!”

Alan couldn’t help smiling, and he didn’t want to staunch the flow.

“See, he’s got this, this thing... about gay people. You wouldn’t believe the way the guy acts when I’m around. I’ve seen him with his teammates, and he’s all Mister In-Charge, but the minute I’m around, it’s like he’s a different person. I can’t stand somebody who’s two-faced. And I absolutely cannot stand a homophobe! And my BFF wants me to *like* him?”

“So... is that a, ‘Yes, I’d love to have dinner with you tonight’?”

Cade looked down as a blush rose to his cheeks. But he smiled.

He didn’t want to risk pushing too hard, so he said, “You know, the homophobes I’ve had to deal with, underneath, they’re more scared than anything.”

Cade’s face twisted as he took in a deep breath and then blew it out. “Peace, love, and understanding? Please! Why would I want to ‘*understand*’ this jerk?”

“It sounds like he’s kind of... an enemy, and, trust me, the more you understand about your enemy, the better off you are... if he really is an enemy?”

“Well, of course he is. He doesn't like me. Why should I like him?”

“I just think you should be sure you've got the whole picture. Like I was saying, it might be that he's afraid of something. I mean, is he, like, all sinister about it? Does he call you names, or something?”

“No... it's just the way he acts around me.”

“Well, people act all kinds of different ways when they're afraid.”

Cade looked up, with surprise on his face. “She said he was scared of me, and I laughed it off. It didn't make any sense. Now I hear you saying the same thing...” Cade sighed, and looked down at his feet. “I guess I'm going to have to give it some thought.”

He told himself it was time to fish, or cut bait. “So, about dinner?”

“Didn't I say, yes? Oh! I didn't. Yes. Yes! Oh! Wait... actually... there's a documentary I want to see tonight at Full Frame, it's about the people who fought Prop 8 in California.”

“Full Frame?”

“Oh, yeah... I thought your place looked like maybe you were moving in. Not from around here?”

“*That* would be my long story.”

Cade laughed. “Alrighty then, Full Frame Documentary Festival. They do it every year. Actually, Durham's a hotbed for film festivals. Nevermore was last month and Strange Beauty's coming up in June. Every August, just after all the schools are back, there's a Gay & Lesbian Film Fest.”

“I'll be looking forward to that. So, could we do dinner and the movie?”

Cade hesitated, long enough for Alan to wonder if his reasons had really been excuses. But then, Cade's lips curved up in a playful smile. “Sure, as long as we make an early start, the film is at seven-forty. So, where are you taking me for dinner?”

“Ah, part of my long story, I grew up here, but I've been away for twelve years. I wouldn't know where to suggest.”

“Okay, well, what kind of food do you like?”

“Meat.”

Cade snorted. “Lucky for you I left my coffee in the car, because that would have been a spit take! Seriously? Your favorite kind of food is *meat*?”

"It's what I always look forward to at every meal—the vegetables are just an excuse to get there. Maybe that's why I can't seem to find anything appealing here." Alan tossed the bunch of carrots from his basket back onto the stand and set the basket down on the gravel.

"Any particular kind of meat?"

"I'm not picky. As long as it mooed, oinked, or clucked not too long before its trip to my table, I'm good."

"I know just the place. And it's only a few blocks from here, down on Geer Street. It's called The Pit—if that gives you any indication as to the bill of fare. I'm no meat aficionado, but word on the street is it's the best barbecue in town."

His mind started wandering at the words, "*meat aficionado*", not because he didn't know what it meant, but it made him wonder all over again why a beautiful and clearly smart young guy would... He realized Cade was waiting for him to say something.

"So, where is this seven-forty movie playing?"

"Right up the hill at the old Carolina."

"Great, so we can walk from The Pit. What time does that make dinner?"

"Six-ish? To be sure we have plenty of time? I'd rather die than miss the opening credits!"

"Six o'clock is fine by me. Can I pick you up?"

"Why don't I meet you."

"Okay," Alan said, fumbling around in his jacket pockets till he found his phone. "I just got this thing yesterday, and I don't really know how to work it yet. I can save your number in here, can't I?"

Cade took out his own phone. "What's your number?"

Cade entered the digits as Alan said them, and then Alan's phone started buzzing. He looked down and frowned as it vibrated in his hand. Then he tapped the screen to answer. Cade took the phone and turned so they were standing shoulder to shoulder. "Here." Cade said, showing the screen to him as he tapped on several icons, typed in his name, and then tapped a few more, disconnecting the call. "If you want to call me, just go here," tap, "then here," tap, "then... oh, well that's easy—no list to scroll through—just tap my name."

Cade tapped and his own phone started to buzz. He disconnected the call and handed Alan's phone back.

"Thanks." Alan smiled as he slipped the phone into a pocket. He held out his hand, saying, "I look forward to seeing you there."

When Cade extended his hand, he took it and gave it a firm squeeze. It seemed like Cade might have twitched just a little at the contact, but he wasn't sure.

"Great. See ya." Cade pulled up his coat collar and turned toward the next stall of vegetables.

Alan walked off toward home.

Chapter Six

Saturday, April 5, 2014

6:00 p.m.

Cade pulled up on Rigsbee, alongside The Pit, and handed his keys to the valet. He pushed through the glass door and looked around the place. *Hmm*, he thought, taking in the décor. *So this is what happens when barbecue joint meets minimalist chic.* To his left, there was a long wall of windows behind a row of tall tables, each surrounded by barstool-height armchairs. He spotted Alan at a table halfway down.

As he walked over, it occurred to him that this morning, standing among piles of vegetables, Alan had looked a bit frumpy in loose sweats and a jacket—although even Frumpy Alan had still looked smokin' hot. Tonight, he was in those painted-on jeans again, his dark green Henley stretched lovingly across sculpted pectorals.

“Good to see you,” Alan said, as Cade took the seat opposite.

“I’m glad to be here. Very, very glad.”

“More trouble with Ryan?”

“Not exactly. I thought about what you said, so when he showed up a while ago, I actually tried being nice to him. That only seemed to make him more confused, so I just bowed out quietly.”

“Well, is that an improvement?”

“I guess, but I’m still glad I’m not spending the evening with them. Maybe I need to try taking Ryan in small doses?”

“Sounds like a step in the right direction. This morning, the thought of the guy had you riled up.”

“Yeah, well... it’s not like I’ve decided he’s okay, but, maybe I should give him a chance. *‘Live and learn,’* I suppose.”

“Goes right along with *‘live and let live’*.” Alan raised his glass of beer, and then realized Cade had nothing to toast with. “Let’s see if we can get you something.”

Alan flagged down the waitress.

“What can I get for you?”

Alan looked at him. “Wine list?”

“No, I’ll have a club soda, rocks, lemon please, *not* lime.”

“And are you ready to order?”

Alan touched the menus on the table and said, “I know what I want, but he just got here.”

“No,” said Cade, “I looked at the menu online. I’d like the barbecued tofu, please.”

Alan spit beer back into his glass. “The barbecued *WHAT?*”

“You heard me. A friend told me it’s delectable.”

“Okay then, tofu for him, and I’ll have the Big Boy Meat Combo with sliced, chopped, brisket, and outside brown.”

The waitress took the menus from the table. “I’ll be right back with your drink. Another Miller Lite for you, sir?”

“No, I’m good. Maybe I’ll try one of those sodas like he’s having.”

When the waitress had walked away, Cade said “I remember Downtown Julie Brown, but what on earth is ‘*outside brown*’?”

“It’s the outside of the meat, where it’s exposed to the heat and smoke. It’s gets all crispy and the flavor...” Alan looked blissful and Cade couldn’t help but smile watching how animated he got talking about meat. “Well... I’ve traveled all over and there is nothing in this world that can compare to the flavor of outside brown—if it’s done right. This place looks pretty swanky for a barbecue joint. I hope they know what they’re doing.”

He wondered if perhaps Alan had suddenly noticed his own enthusiasm, because he made a mild snort and promptly changed the subject. “But enough about *meat*, tell me about yourself.”

“Well...” he wondered where to start, “I grew up in Asheville.”

“Oh, wow! I love the Biltmore House!” Suddenly, Alan looked very excited. “Our folks used to take us all up there every year at Christmastime. All those decorations. It was so... I guess... opulent?”

Cade faked a yawn, and fanned his face with his right hand. "I never found it that impressive. I mean, it's not much bigger than my parent's house."

"Seriously?"

"No. Though my dad is breathtakingly wealthy. You said your parents took 'all of you' there. You've got siblings?"

"Four sisters. You?"

"Nope. Only child."

The waitress returned and placed two tall glasses on the table. A big, juicy slice of lime was hanging from the rim of each glass. Cade turned to the young woman and said, "I distinctly asked for lemon, *NOT* lime!"

She started to reach for both glasses, but Alan slid one of them closer to him, "I'm okay with lime."

Cade put one hand on his hip and used the index finger of the other to slide the glass, bearing its offending fruit, toward the young woman. "Well, I'm not," he whined, giving the air a haughty sniff.

After the girl was gone, Alan ventured, "You seem to be a little... um... pissed off over just a soda."

Cade put his hands on his hips and his nose in the air. "I happen to think that when you give simple instructions, even a simple person ought to be able to follow them. If that makes me a drama queen, so be it." He stared intently at Alan and was sure the man was fighting back a laugh.

"Speaking of queens, you seem to be really... um... 'out.' It was '*Don't Ask, Don't Tell*' in the Corps until a few years ago, but, even after that... Did you ever have to hide?"

"Never! I figured it out when I was thirteen. I talked it over with my mom, first. Both my parents had drilled honesty into my head all my life. So, I just told her, and she was fine. And then I couldn't see any sense in lying to people I cared less about than my parents. So, I was just... out."

"Wow. When I was in high school, here, nobody was out, and that was around the millennium."

"Well, even then Asheville was already pretty gay-friendly. Now, of course, it has a thriving *heterosexual* subculture!"

Alan laughed deeply.

It occurred to him that Alan looked like he could use a good laugh, and that surprised him because he wasn't actually accustomed to thinking about what life was like from someone else's perspective.

The waitress returned with a tray balanced on one hand and a glass of soda with lemon in the other. She smiled at Cade and put the glass in front of him. Next, she used her free hand to transfer a lovely looking plate of barbecue from the tray to the table before him. Then, she turned and put the tray down on the empty table next to theirs, and used both hands to maneuver a gargantuan platter, overflowing with meat, in front of Alan.

It was Cade's turn to laugh.

"Get you anything else right now?" the woman asked.

Alan looked sheepish. "I think this *may* be enough," he said. Cade chuckled as he wondered, facetiously, if there was any sheep among all the various types of meat Alan had ordered.

"What were you into in high school?" Alan asked as he sliced off a chunk, popping it into his mouth as Cade responded.

"Mostly academics—I was the brainy type, you know straight As. I was supposed to be Valedictorian, but it turned out I couldn't be there for graduation." Cade couldn't believe he'd just said that, and he was immensely relieved when he saw Alan's closed eyes and beatific expression as he chewed intently. "I take it that's the outside brown?"

"Mmm."

"They know what they're doing, then?"

"Mmm, hmmm!" Alan swallowed and returned his gaze to Cade. "So, you weren't into sports?"

"Not so much. Swimming. Got my lifeguard certification. But, no team sports. I was into..."

Alan slipped forward in his chair and rested his chin on his interlaced fingers, elbows on the edge of the table. "Into what?"

Cade hesitated. "Drama."

"You're into plays? Acting?"

"Well, plays, yeah, though given my choice... my first love is musicals!"

“You sing and dance?”

“Oh, hell yeah!”

“I’d pay to see that.” Alan leaned back, his eyes twinkling.

The comment had a sobering effect on Cade. The connection to what Alan would *not* pay to see was painfully obvious, but the way Alan was looking at him made it clear that the remark was innocent. “Yeah... well... it’s been a while since I’ve done any of that. I’m having a hard time with my classes this year.”

“You said your folks are filthy rich, so, I assume you’re at Duke?”

“Yeah... but, enough about me. You said you were in the service for twelve years. College first, or right out of high school?” Cade took the opportunity to try a slice of the tofu. It was delicious!

“High school,” Alan mumbled around a mouthful of pork. He swallowed and took a swig of his soda. “The Nine-Eleven Attacks were three months before my nineteenth birthday. I had just started classes at State, but I dropped everything and enlisted.”

“Wow. I had just started fifth grade. I remember a lot of the kids being traumatized, but, to me, it all seemed so distant... so unreal...” He wondered how the conversation had so quickly turned back to him. “But, I was asking you about school. So, one month of college?”

“Yeah...” Alan’s eyes took on a thoughtful expression. “I guess I’ll never know what I missed out on. I always got really good grades. I love to read. I just about lived in the library—I was either there or at practice.”

“Ah, practice. From your build, I figured you must have been one of the jocks.”

“Baseball. I was damned good, too. Our team went to state finals twice.”

Cade pointed his fork at his plate. “I can’t believe how good this is. You should try it.”

“Tofu? Isn’t that made from...” Alan scrunched his nose, “...soy beans?”

He speared a bite from his plate and held out his fork insistently. “Indulge me.”

Alan leaned slowly forward and touched the tip of his tongue to the sauce-covered blob while looking up and riveting Cade with a lascivious gaze. Then

he wrapped his lips around the bite and snatched it away. He chewed for a moment, cocking his head back and forth from side to side, a quizzical expression on his face. He swallowed and smiled. "That's amazing!"

"What?" Cade asked.

"It's really good! If you hadn't told me what I was eating, I would have thought it was meat."

The heat of the look Alan had given him a moment before, coupled with the idea of Alan "*eating meat*" cracked Cade's usually unflappable composure and he said, abruptly, "I don't want to interrupt this little '*getting to know you*' thing we've got going here, I mean... I do want to get to know you, but, there's something I need to ask you about... if you don't mind."

Alan scooted up to the edge of his seat again. "Yes?"

"Last night, and again this morning, I... I couldn't stop looking at your eyes. I've never seen eyes so dark. At first, I thought they were black, but then, I thought people don't actually have black eyes, do they? When I got home last night, I wasn't sleepy, so I Googled it—found all your typical, unreliable, contradictory opinions. Some say there's no such thing as true black—it's just a very, very dark brown. Some say there are black eyes. And, of course, there's the lunatic fringe who say not only are there people with black eyes, but those people are children of the devil. You're not Satan's son, are you?"

Alan laughed. "Well, my dad was a Lutheran minister, so I guess it depends on who you ask."

"Lutheran, huh?" He brooded for a moment over all the evil done in the name of religion. "I've always done my best to steer clear of organized religion, so I don't know much about it. Lutherans are pretty middle-of-the-road, aren't they?"

"Some churches marry gay and lesbian couples, if that's what you're asking."

"Well, good for them. Actually, I was just thinking that before we take this any further, I need to know that you don't, like, speak in tongues, or dance around with snakes."

Another twinkle appeared in Alan's eye, and then he winked. *He actually winked!*

"The only kind of snake I like to dance around with is one-eyed."

He was pretty sure that was the corniest thing he'd ever heard, and yet, coming from Alan, it was oddly... well... not entirely irritating. Alan was so charming. But it wasn't just charm. What was it? He seemed to be... at ease.

"You know, for a soldier, you seem totally laid back."

"Marine!" Alan scowled, playfully.

"Okay, maybe not so laid back." They both laughed. "But... it's not just laid back... it's like... you seem to know about people... what motivates them—stuff I wouldn't think of. Like with me and Ryan, I would never have imagined he could be afraid of anything. I'm still not sure you're right, but it's worth exploring. How'd you get to be so, I don't know... open?"

"Well, I guess I've been studying people my whole life. Growing up in a church, you get to see all kinds."

"Somehow I doubt that all preachers' kids are as perspicacious as you."

"Um... does that mean, like, judgmental?"

"No, more like, able to see people the way they truly are. Are your sisters as perceptive as you, or is there something beyond genetics and upbringing?"

"My sisters. Hmm... yeah, I guess a couple of them understand people pretty well. The other two, not so much."

"So, if it's not nature or nurture, what makes you different?"

"I don't know if I really am different, like you say, but maybe... The last few years, I've been kind of trying to... study myself, you know?"

"I don't know." He decided to try the elbows-and-hands chin rest thing, and he leaned forward gazing intently at Alan. "Explain."

"Well, I've read a lot of books about Buddhism. The guy who started Zen in Japan about eight hundred years ago said that the best way to learn about others is to study yourself. It's given me a lot to think about over the years. Some people say it's not really a religion, it's a philosophy, but I don't know... all those temples, and robes, and bells—it looks like a religion to me."

He was relieved that this guy was clearly not a zealot of any stripe, but his interest in the topic had flagged. "So, you weren't in the Army, you were in the Marines?"

"*Semper Fi!*" Alan toasted with his remaining club soda.

“Ha. I know some Latin too, you know.” Alan looked like he was game. “Are you familiar with, *Semper ubi sub ubi*?”

Alan shook his head, so he went on. “Well, you know *semper*.”

“Always!” Alan raised his soda glass again.

“And, ‘ubi’ is the question ‘where?’ as in, ‘Where is...?’ and, everybody knows ‘sub’.”

“Under.” Alan confirmed.

“Right. So...” Cade watched the wheels turning. Alan’s luscious lips moved ever so slightly as he puzzled it out. Ordinarily, Cade delighted in watching the victim of a riddle twist in the wind.

Alan’s brow furrowed. “Always where?” He frowned. “Under *where*?”

Cade’s glee proved fleeting; he realized he didn’t have the heart to torture this man. “Always wear underwear?” He winked, and then relished the smile that came to Alan’s face as it dawned on him. Something between a gulp and a burp erupted from him. Then his massive, sculpted chest began to heave. Then he almost fell off his chair he was laughing so hard.

It took Alan a minute or two, and several sips of soda, to recover from his fit. When he was finally leaning back in his chair and breathing normally, he looked at his watch. “Hey, it’s after seven. We’d better get going if you’re gonna see those opening credits.” Alan sat tall, waved at the waitress, and mimicked signing his name on his palm.

Crash

Friday, April 24, 2010

11:44 p.m.

“You precious little bitch!” Eric screams as he twists my arm further, his fingers digging into my wrist.

I have to do something!

I have to get away!

I yank my arm as hard as I can, and it slips free of his grip.

Eric looks up at me and before my brain can even register what's happening, his right fist slams into my cheek, and this weird fast-motion sweep of half the room flashes past my eyes.

Fuck! I'm falling!

Backwards!

My back crashes into a side table, and tchotchkes go flying across the carpet. As I sink to the floor, I see him coming at me.

I taste blood and start to bring my hand to my mouth, but he bends down, knocks my hand away, twists up the front of my shirt in his left fist, hauls me up and punches my face again.

The back of my head hits the floor, and I squeeze my eyes shut against the pain.

I feel blood trickling out of the corner of my mouth. I turn my head to that side and feel it dripping onto the carpet.

I open my eyes and I'm looking at a giant, blurry Buddha. It's one of my mom's favorite miniatures, but sitting serenely a couple of inches from my face, it looks huge.

Eric straddles my chest, and I turn to look up at him as he wraps his fingers around my throat.

I feel his thumbs dig into my windpipe, and the image gets blurry.

It dims...

It's dark.

Chapter Seven

Saturday, April 5, 2014

9:30 p.m.

The ending credits started, and Alan blinked when the house lights in the Carolina Theatre came up to a dim glow. People began gathering their things, putting on jackets, and leaving. He glanced over and saw an annoyed look on Cade's face. Then, a big man sitting a few seats the other side of Cade stood up and started side-stepping their way. Cade's body stiffened with irritation as he tried to pull his legs in to make room. Cade shifted from side to side and let out a groan when the man's tremendous backside blocked his view of the screen.

Once the man was gone, Alan grinned as he leaned over and slid a hand onto Cade's thigh. "Some people!" he whispered in Cade's ear, his smile widening.

Cade must have taken him seriously. He didn't look away from the screen, but rested a hand on top of Alan's and whispered back, "I know. It's so rude!" Gesturing toward the screen with his free hand, he said, "These are the people who just gave us this wonderful film. It's like walking out of a theatre during the curtain call!"

He had never given it much thought. In fact, he usually bugged out along with everyone else as soon as the credits started rolling. He was glad he hadn't made that mistake tonight. Actually, it gave him some time to think about the issues that were raised in the movie, and how he might use some of them to draw Cade out a little more about his past. He still couldn't imagine what could have caused Cade to start... turning tricks.

The credits ended, the music stopped, and the lights came up. They put on their jackets and headed for the nearest exit, Alan carrying his "*doggy bag*" from the restaurant.

"Walk me back to my place?" he asked once they were outside.

"Actually, my car's still at the restaurant. We could walk there, and I could give you a lift home."

"Okay," he agreed. There weren't any cars coming on the four lane downtown loop, so they jogged diagonally across and then turned north on Foster.

After they'd walked quietly for a while, Alan asked, "So, what did you think about the movie?"

He felt, more than saw, Cade bristle.

"I think that bigots piss me off!"

"You mean, like, people who judge others on something external, instead of who they really are?"

"Exactly."

He didn't want to upset Cade. Their evening had gone really well so far, and now they were heading to his condo. He hoped that meant sex, but he wasn't up for any stupid risks. He needed some history—especially considering how they met. But he couldn't think of a way to ask a guy how often he gives forty-dollar blow jobs, without sounding like he was judging him.

He took a different approach. "I know it's not easy, but I think that trying to understand other people's points of view is usually more productive than being pissed off at them. I mean, if there's ever gonna be a chance for peace in this world, we gotta start finding ways to get along with people we disagree with."

"You sound a lot like Sabrina."

The valet guy at the restaurant must have seen them coming and remembered Cade's car, because he disappeared around the corner at a run when they were still a block away. By the time they walked up to his stand, he was pulling back around the corner in the biggest, blackest Mercedes Alan had ever seen.

He wasn't sure, but he thought the bill Cade slipped the kid was a twenty.

"Hop in," Cade said as he went around and climbed in the driver's side.

He barely had time to take in the details of the plush interior and the dazzling array of lights and gadgets on the panel before they were pulling into his lot up the hill.

"Wanna park it and come up for a while? We could talk some more about bigots, and hating people." He flashed a grin and was pleased when Cade smiled back.

"Or, we could talk less..." Cade pulled into a space and cut the engine.

They made their way inside and upstairs in the same silence as the night before, but Alan felt an excitement he hadn't felt then. He figured the

difference must have been that last night he was coming home with a nameless stranger. Tonight he was coming home with someone he knew—not only knew, but really liked.

Once they were in the condo, with the door closed behind them, he walked over to the wall of CDs, ran a finger across the second shelf, pulled out a disc, and popped it into the player. He punched a few buttons and, with a thumping beat, Exile's "Kiss You All Over" started playing.

"I noticed those last night." Cade pointed to the wall of discs. "There must be thousands."

"One thousand, eight hundred and seventy-four, um... not that I'm counting, or anything."

"And... they're alphabetized?"

"Well... idle hands, devil's workshop, all that. You're already worried about my devilish eyes."

Cade grinned at the remark, and Alan couldn't fight temptation any longer. He took a step closer and put his left hand on Cade's right shoulder. Then he leaned in and pressed their lips together. He started rubbing his right hand up and down the front of Cade's jeans. Cade moaned. The sound, the vibration, and the little puff of hot breath that escaped Cade's lips shot straight to his cock, now painfully trapped between his left leg and the world's tightest pair of Levis.

He probed between Cade's lips with his tongue, trying to deepen the kiss. He started to slide his hand from Cade's shoulder up the side of his neck, but Cade broke the kiss and said, "Don't touch the hair!"

"Seriously?"

"No, I just like the sound of saying it." They both laughed as Alan went back to exploring Cade's lips with his tongue, taking a couple of quick, light nibbles at Cade's lower lip, encouraging him to open.

Cade's teeth parted, and he slipped his tongue into that wet, hot mouth, ignoring the lingering flavors of buttered popcorn and Milk Duds. He gave a sharp squeeze to Cade's rock-hard shaft, which was standing straight up and bulging under the denim at his crotch. Cade moaned again—deeper this time. He released his hold on Cade's cock, and pressed a knuckle into the denim at the bottom of Cade's zipper. He kept pressing hard as he slowly dragged his

hand upward, one long, slow, stroke along that ridge. Then, he popped open the button and grabbed the metal tab.

As he slowly lowered the zipper, he felt Cade's dick pop free from his jeans. Alan was surprised and even more turned on to realize that Cade had been commando all evening.

He broke the kiss and looked down to see what reward his hand had released. He wanted to make a connection with this man... something more than just a physical connection. He knew he was taking a chance, given how these things usually turned out with his attempts at humor, but he decided it was worth the risk. He slowly raised his eyes from Cade's crotch to his face. He raised one eyebrow and gave Cade the sternest look he could muster.

Both of Cade's eyebrows shot up, and he looked alarmed. "What?"

Alan glanced back down and then cleared his throat. "I see that you're not true to your own principles!" he said, gruffly.

Cade frowned and looked down. Then he looked back up at Alan. "You can tell that from looking at my dick?"

Alan looked down at Cade's dick again. He cracked a little smile when he looked up and asked, "*Semper ubi sub ubi?*"

Cade laughed and shoved hard against Alan's shoulder. "I'm always getting in hot water for correcting my elders but, dude, you should *never* make a face like that the first time a guy shows you his dick."

"Elders?"

"Oops."

They both laughed until Alan planted his lips back on Cade's. He wrapped his left hand around the back of Cade's head and plunged his tongue into his mouth. Cade responded beautifully, their tongues dancing together. He grasped Cade's cock again with his right hand and squeezed—the heat of the direct contact seemed almost scorching. He had forgotten just how hot another guy's cock felt in his hand. It was almost too much.

He kept up his squeeze on Cade's dick and the headlock that cemented the kiss, and took a step forward, pushing Cade back. He took another step and felt their thighs bump into something... his grandma's Queen Anne side table. He heard a small crash, and knew that one of her figurines that he'd put there earlier in the day had just bitten the dust.

Cade went stiff in his arms and then pushed off forcefully, both hands against Alan's chest, as he looked behind him to see what had happened. "Fuck!"

When Cade turned back, Alan saw a wild look in his eyes. "Hey! It's okay, it wasn't an heirloom or anything."

"I'm sorry," Cade mumbled, leaning further away.

"It wasn't even your fault; I backed you into it." He smiled, sure that Cade would relax in a moment.

Cade wriggled free from the embrace, took a step aside and started tucking his dick back into his pants. "No, not about that... look... I had a good time tonight, but..."

"What is it, Cade? Am I taking this too fast?" Cade zipped up his fly and turned toward the door. "You don't have to go."

"I do."

"We could just—"

"No, really." Cade grabbed the knob and twisted hard, jerking the door open. Then he bolted out, leaving the door open in his wake.

"Cade!" He followed a few steps, grabbing the doorframe on both sides and leaning out into the hall.

He watched as Cade ran down the hallway and disappeared around the corner into the stairwell.

He walked back inside and closed the door, looking down at the little ceramic lady on the floor. Her head now lay a few inches from her body. He remembered the day at his grandparents' house when he and Rachel had named this one Marie Antoinette—the first time he had knocked her off a table and decapitated her. He picked up the pieces and inspected them, assuring himself that she could be glued back together again as easily as before.

He stood there feeling a little numb. He couldn't figure out how a guy who sells blowjobs could go from sixty-to-zero in nothing flat over a broken figurine. There was something about Cade that stirred his imagination, but it also worried him a little. He wanted to be a boyfriend, not a therapist, and it was obvious that Cade had some issues to work on. Maybe a lot of issues. It might be better not to hook up with a guy who's unstable.

Then he thought about how much time and effort it had taken him to come to grips with some of his own feelings. He thought about the people who had helped him do it. He decided that anything worth having always came with some risk. He figured he hadn't risked all that much so far, and he needed to know more before making any kind of decision.

He turned and walked toward the kitchen with Marie in hand, ready to hunt through drawers for that tube of Elmer's he'd tucked away somewhere yesterday.

Chapter Eight

Friday, April 11, 2014

11:30 a.m.

Cade leaned back in his desk chair, looking out the window, and using his feet to swivel a little to the left, then a little to the right.

The gorgeous, blue-eyed hunk draped, shirtless, across the top of the Adam4Adam homepage gazed at him seductively, with just a hint of a smile.

It looked a bit forced, calculated—not like Alan's smile. He admitted to himself, reluctantly, just how much Alan had been monopolizing his thoughts over the last week. Alan seemed so different from other guys. He was sure it wasn't just the age difference that made Alan stand out. It was more his way of looking at things. He seemed calm, and self-confident—like he couldn't be bothered trying to pretend he was any particular way, just to please other people.

He started to wonder why he didn't feel quite so comfortable in his own skin, but then he reminded himself that introspection was *so* not his thing. Still, he couldn't help wondering what it would be like to be more... laid back?

He swiveled around to the desk and looked at the beefcake guy on the screen. No denying he was hot, but not hot enough to hold a candle to Alan. He snatched the phone off the desk, tapped through to Alan's number, and pressed *Call* before he had time to change his mind.

"Hello?"

"Alan, it's Cade."

"Cade! I'm so glad to hear from you. I've been thinking maybe I should call."

"No, I shouldn't have let a week go by... it seems like I need to apologize to you, again."

"Not really. I mean, it doesn't have to be a big deal."

"Still, I'd like to try and explain... um... there's some things I'd like to talk about... if you want to."

"I'd love it, Cade. There's stuff I'd like to talk with you about, too."

Suddenly, Cade wished he'd made a plan. "They said this morning the weather's supposed to hold up. Do you want to, maybe, go for a walk this afternoon?"

"A walk sounds nice. Hey, you said you live near campus, right? I used to love walking in Duke Gardens, but it's been such a long time. Could we go there?"

"Sure. My place is right around the corner, on Anderson, you know, the condos?"

"Oh yeah, by the tennis courts?"

"Those are the ones. I should be back from my last class by around four-thirty, why don't you come over at five. We can go for a walk, and then maybe get some dinner? A movie, if you like?"

"Sounds great!"

He remembered Alan fumbling with his new phone. "You got something to write with?"

"Shoot."

He gave Alan the address.

"Okay, great. I'll see ya at five."

"Cool. Thanks, Alan."

It happened so fast it was like a smile had come out of nowhere and plastered itself across Cade's face. He put the phone back down on the desk, leaned the chair back again, and pushed off hard with his right foot, spinning around and around... smiling.

Cade couldn't wipe the frown off his face. He couldn't believe his luck! Of all the days for Dr. Sharpinski to insist they meet after class...

He went bounding up the stairs of his building two at a time, hoping he wasn't too late. He rounded the corner at the top of the stairwell to see Alan leaning on the wall beside his front door. Even in his rush to apologize, he couldn't help noticing that Alan's jeans were a bit baggy, and his pale blue dress shirt was loose enough that it failed to ripple its way down his abdomen.

Still, Alan was the hottest thing he'd ever seen leaning outside his door. "I'm so sorry. I got held up. I would have called, but I thought I could still get here before you."

"It's okay. I've only been here a couple minutes." Alan pushed off the wall and moved toward Cade. "What happened? Is everything alright?"

"Oh, fine, it's just... my professor kept me after class. I'm having some trouble with statistics."

"Hey, math was my best subject. Maybe I could give you a hand?"

Cade felt his frown finally start to melt. "Hell, yes! That would be spectacular!" He opened the door to the condo, and Alan followed him inside.

"Make yourself at home; I'll just be a minute." He went into his bedroom and closed the door. He threw his stuff on the bed, shoved off his shoes, and squirmed out of his shirt and slacks. He grabbed jeans and a black button-down, pulled out some black sneakers, and started dressing.

When he came back into the living room, Alan was over by the wall of floating shelves looking at Cade's many rows of CDs. There were several hundred, but that was nothing compared to Alan's collection.

Alan turned and looked him up and down appreciatively. "A lot of these say 'Original Broadway Cast'," he said, motioning toward the shelves.

"Um... almost all of them, actually. If it was ever on Broadway and had a CD released, it's there. For the older ones, before CD, I've had a lot of them converted from vinyl. I still have a few hundred to go."

"So, when you said you like musicals, you weren't kidding!"

"I grew up with them. Marilyn—uh, my mom—was an actress till she married my dad, so all these songs were like... the soundtrack to my childhood."

"That's cool. I mean, I'm glad you're not into it just to fit the stereotype."

It was a good thing Alan laughed because, for a moment, Cade wasn't sure he was joking. "Yeah, well, I don't lisp or cut hair either. And my wrists are quite firm, thank you very much." He decided they could both use some fresh air. "How about we take that walk?"

"Sure, it's really nice now, but it's gonna get chilly when the sun goes down."

Alan led the way and Cade locked up and followed him down the stairs.

They walked down the street in a silence that felt comfortable. In fact, now that he noticed it, each time he had been with Alan he'd felt comfortable. They turned in at the entrance to the gardens and walked past the parking area, onto the main path leading toward the center.

Alan slowed his pace and looked around at the trees surrounding them. "I used to come here a lot when I was growing up. I love the big gazebo and the terraced flower beds—all the colors! My mom taught me a lot of horticulture. I was her right-hand man in her garden, being the only boy and all, but she taught me about flowers and trees and shrubs, too. She had a real green thumb."

They walked farther, and Alan looked over at a path branching off to their right. "This is new... well, new to me, anyway."

"That goes to the Asiatic Arboretum. I think it is kind of new—they're still working on parts of it."

They turned and headed that way.

Alan appeared to be lost in thought. "I used to come here when I wanted a place to think. Whenever something was bugging me, it just seemed to get better here... like the air was fresher, or something."

He stopped walking, and Cade saw he was looking at a small tree, covered with white blossoms.

"This must be some kind of dogwood," Alan said, "but I've never seen one like it. The petals on dogwood blossoms usually have little red tips, but these are pure white. The shape's exactly the same, though."

Cade bent down to read the placard sticking up out of the mulch beneath the tree. "It says 'Cornus Kousa—Kousa Dogwood' so, I guess Cornus must be Latin for Dogwood?"

"It's Greek to me." Alan's smile beamed from ear to ear.

Cade groaned.

Alan wiped the smile off his face. "I love the way these always bloom at the right time... I can't believe it's already Easter next week."

"Yeah, I'm not planning anything big." He raised an eyebrow. "So, you grew up Lutheran. Do you believe in, like... rising from the dead, and all that jazz?"

“Well... growing up, it’s drummed into you, ya know? I can still recite the Apostle’s Creed by heart, but... I guess, when you’re little, everything seems so black and white. First Santa is real, and then you find out he isn’t. You recite what you believe week after week, and never really think about it.

“The things I saw in Iraq and Afghanistan... not just war destroying stuff, but the people—the way they lived, the way so many of them died—right from the start it had me questioning what I really believe.”

“At dinner, you said you were into Buddhism. How’d you get there from Lutheran?”

“Yeah, well... you mentioned resurrection... I guess I’ve come to see that as, like, a symbol, more than a reality. To me, it’s about new beginnings. It’s a reminder that new things are coming to life all the time. When I think about it that way, sometimes it actually makes a difference. Whether or not something really did or didn’t happen a couple thousand years ago just doesn’t seem to matter.

“And, I guess that’s part of why I kept reading about Buddhism. I came across this one book by accident, and it was about waking up to the reality around you. Like, not just making a fresh start each morning, but making every moment fresh. Anyway, I was kinda hooked, and I got one of the chaplains to help me get more books.

“One of the things I like most is that there’s not really anything you have to believe in. The Buddha was a really practical guy. He talked a lot about pain and suffering, and I was up to my eyeballs, right in the middle of suffering. He said that pain mostly comes from outside us, and there’s usually not a lot we can do about it, but suffering is our response to it. You know, like, you can’t really avoid pain, but you can work on suffering.”

Cade had been listening in rapt silence, but he must have made a movement, or a sound, because Alan suddenly focused on him. “Wow. I’ve said a lot about *me*.” Cade found the blush rising on Alan’s cheeks delightful. “What do *you* think about *me*?” Cade barked out a laugh, and then Alan continued. “I guess all I was trying to say is, yeah, I believe in new beginnings, but, I don’t think they need the religious slant.” Alan took another look around. “The light’s starting to fade. Maybe we should head back and figure out the whole ‘*dinner-and-a-movie*’ thing?”

Cade smiled, wickedly. “I’m trying to think if there are any *meat* restaurants on this end of town.”

“I do eat other things, you know.”

“Ah, so you're omnivorous?”

“Omni? I don't eat *everything*.” Alan waggled his eyebrows at Cade.

Cade waggled his eyebrows right back at Alan. “What about Italian? Do you eat Italian?”

“If he asks nicely.”

Cade maintained a deadpan stare.

“Bah-dum, bump, CHING?” Alan mimed playing a drum set and then cocked his head to the side with a pleading grin.

Cade shook his head. “Don't quit your day job. Oh, wait! You don't have a day job, do you?”

Alan sighed. “I've been thinking a lot about that,” he said, as they turned and headed back toward the entrance. “I need to find something... but it's hard to figure out what. I'd really like to work with returning vets who had a rougher time than me. There are lots of groups doing really good work. I just heard about this guy, a former Marine, who's opened a coffee shop downtown. It's called Intrepid Life, and they have programs for returning vets. I'm gonna go talk to him—see what kind of jobs there are around here for a guy with a high school education. I just think I'll be happiest if I can do something that's useful to others, you know?”

That, Cade thought, sounded exactly like something his mom would say. He smiled at the thought that Marilyn would adore Alan. He pulled one corner of his mouth tight and rolled his eyes when it hit him that he was contemplating their meeting—*you've known this guy, what, a week?* He noticed that Alan was watching him, and he looked down at his feet as they walked.

“Penny for them.” He looked up. Alan's smile was so warm.

“Lots of things. Nothing specific.”

Alan put his hands in his pockets and appeared to turn his attention back to the gravel crunching under their feet. A breeze sent a cool shiver up Cade's spine.

When they got back to Cade's parking area, Alan said, “Let me grab my jacket.” He walked over to a rusty brown Civic hatchback and opened the passenger door. It probably wouldn't look so bad when it wasn't parked next to

a new S-550, Cade thought. Then, he noticed a scratched and faded bumper sticker on the back that simply asked, “*Got Hope?*”

Alan came back with his jacket and followed Cade as they made their way upstairs and inside.

When he heard the door close behind him, Cade turned around, grabbed Alan's hips, and planted a kiss on his lips. Alan responded, slipping his arms around Cade's waist, a low hum vibrating in his throat.

When Cade made an experimental foray with his tongue, Alan pulled back and broke the kiss. “What about your roommate, and her *irritating* boyfriend? Will they be coming home soon?”

“Nah. They've got an away game in Charlottesville this evening. Won't be back till tomorrow, or, at the earliest very late tonight.” He leaned back in because he had a whole lot more smooching in mind, but Alan resisted, pushing against his chest.

“Look, Cade... the last time we tried this, it didn't end up all that well. Can we just sit and talk for a while?” Alan took his hand and led him over to the sofa.

When they were seated, Alan raised Cade's hand and brushed his lips gently across the back of it. Alan looked into his eyes and smiled, but there was something else in his gaze as well.

Just as the silence was about to become uncomfortable, Alan spoke. “You're an intriguing guy, Cade Bishop.” Cade looked away, uncertain whether that was a good thing or a bad thing, but pretty sure he was about to find out.

“When I decided to come back to Durham, after being away for so long... I'll admit, I was hoping that I'd meet somebody... I just didn't think it would happen so fast.”

His spirits lifted, and he looked back at Alan. The smile was still there, but so was the something else, and it looked like the something else was about to take over.

“I really do like you, Cade. I want to get to know you in every way possible... but... there's a few things I need to know up front. I mean, the way we met...”

He stiffened when he saw where this was going. He should have put two and two together; should have known Alan would have concerns. It occurred to

him that this was probably as difficult for Alan as it was for him, so he decided to try and head him off at the pass. "If you're trying to find a polite way to say you've never been with a prostitute—"

Alan cut him off. "Actually, I have. But, it was only once, and it... Cade, you're nothing like that. You obviously don't do it for the money... so, there must be something else..."

He tried to think of some reply, but Alan continued, "Look, why you do what you do is really none of my business, unless you want it to be. But, what you do... I mean, if we're going to... you know, it could have consequences—health consequences."

He had never imagined himself in a situation like this—a total hottie sitting on his sofa, and him feeling like Lucy, with a lot of "*splainin*" to do. His whole, sorry sexual history played out in his head.

Fuck!

He couldn't tell Alan any of that.

He couldn't tell him about Eric, and the countless unreciprocated blow jobs he'd given him through the last two years of high school. He certainly couldn't tell him any of the shit that went down after that. No way was he going to admit to the long, twisted road he'd taken from years of celibacy to dropping on his knees before strangers. He'd rather die than let this clean, normal guy know how desperately he craved that moment of power, when the trick who'd just shot his load forked over cash for something he should have gotten for free.

But... he had to say something.

"I haven't been doing it all that long. Just this school year." He stared across the room, looking at nothing in particular. "It was kind of an accident, the way it started... I wish I could tell you why I do it..." He sighed. Then, barely above a whisper, he said, "I wish I knew, myself." He looked back at Alan and told himself he saw patience and understanding in his gaze. "I promise myself I'm going to stop, but, then it hits me, and it's... it's like I don't have any willpower."

He wasn't comfortable talking about this. "You mentioned practical concerns, and those I can address. I know what I do is risky, but I take every precaution I can to mitigate those risks. I have a regular testing regimen; I get a full battery of tests once a month and, as of a week ago, I'm clean. I have a copy of the results, if you want to see them. I go downtown to the public clinic

because, I mean, what would they think at Student Health about a guy who comes in once a month? The last thing I need is to—”

Alan leaned over, grabbed the back of Cade's neck, pulled him close, and covered Cade's lips with his own, holding him there briefly, and then releasing him and leaning back.

He just sat there, momentarily dazed. He couldn't help asking, “What was that for?”

“I've noticed, sometimes, once you get going, you have a hard time stopping. I thought I was helping you out.”

“So, you're not worried you might catch something?”

“Do I look worried?” Alan smiled, but only for as long as it took him to pull Cade close and reengage their mouths.

Alan's tongue darting around Cade's felt as wonderful now as it had a week before, and Cade thought he'd been pretty foolish to have missed out on a week of this. He also thought about how different this was from blowing some stranger. There was no dark will to power, no need to have Alan under his control. Two weeks ago he'd have called kissing an unwanted prelude. But this? This felt so right.

Without breaking the kiss, Cade reached up and started fumbling with the buttons on Alan's shirt. Alan's hands covered Cade's and squeezed. Alan pulled back from the kiss and, again, Cade saw something in Alan's eyes. It was different from before, but equally impossible to name. “Alan?”

“It's okay, Cade. I... I should have said something before, but...”

“But what? Did I do something wrong?”

“No, no. Nothing like that. It's my chest. I was wounded. I have some scars. I just wanted to warn you, before you have a look.”

“Are they bad?”

“They look pretty bad to me, but... well, nobody's seen them except doctors and nurses. You'll be my first non-medical opinion.” Alan unbuttoned his shirt and exposed his chest.

Cade's eyes widened. “Wow!”

“That bad?” Alan's mouth drew into a thin line.

“What? Oh, shit! Sorry. No. No! It’s not that, it’s... it’s the hair. I mean... oh, damn...” He felt like such a jerk. This was obviously something Alan was sensitive about, and he was sending all the wrong signals. Memories of the month he’d spent in the hospital flashed through his mind. They wouldn’t even let him have a mirror at first—said it was better if he didn’t see what he looked like.

“I’m so sorry, Alan. I know you’re worried about how your scar looks, but actually, I didn’t even notice it, compared to *this*.” He reached up with both hands and ran his palms over Alan’s pecs. “I’ve never felt a hairy chest before. It feels so good. It’s so soft.” He rubbed a little more. “This doesn’t hurt, does it.”

“No. You’re good.” Alan’s expression lightened considerably and there were tiny glints of light reflecting off the black discs of his eyes.

Cade took a closer look at Alan’s chest. “It doesn’t look so bad to me. I mean, it’s not gross, or anything. Will it hurt if I touch it? Or, would you rather I didn’t?”

“You can touch it. You’d have to press really hard for it to hurt. Mostly, it’s just numb.”

Cade gently stroked a finger down the middle of Alan’s chest. “It does feel a little weird. It’s kind of... lumpy?” Alan watched Cade’s finger as it traced the line. “You’re sure this doesn’t hurt?”

Alan looked up into Cade’s eyes and shook his head.

As he slid his fingertip back up the length of the scar, Cade discovered that it was, in fact, two parallel lines. It looked as if perhaps one was older than the other—smaller and less... intense. “How’d you get these?”

“Well, this one,” Alan ran a finger down the longer, more prominent scar, “I got a few months ago in Afghanistan. One of those roadside bombs.”

“Wow.”

“They’re usually homemade. Pipes, full of nails, and any other nasty stuff they can find to pack in there. A piece of shrapnel tore into me and almost hit my heart.”

“Jeez. So... it could have been much worse. I mean... you were lucky, in a way?”

“Oh yeah. A hell of a lot luckier than my buddy, Bob. One minute, he was standing next to me, and the next... well... he took the worst of it...” For a moment, there was a far-away look in Alan’s eyes, and then he seemed to refocus. “Bob didn’t make it.”

“Wow.” He had never lost anyone close, and he didn’t know what else to say. He wondered if he was being too intrusive. “I’m sorry about your friend.”

“Thanks.”

“What about this other one, is it older?”

“Yeah. That one’s from ten years ago. A bullet. Also close to the heart.”

“You’re really are a lucky guy, aren’t you?”

“When I remember to think about it that way, yeah, I am.”

He reached down and popped open the top button of Alan’s jeans. “Feel like getting luckier?”

Alan leaned back into the sofa and murmured, “Oh, yeah.”

He slid to his knees, turning to face Alan. Alan arched his back and lifted his hips as Cade slid the jeans down past his knees, revealing a black jockstrap. He pulled aside the pouch, releasing Alan’s cock and balls from their cotton confinement. Alan’s dick fit perfectly into his hand, as unique as the guy it belonged to.

And you should know. He winced, internally, thinking about the several dozen dicks he had seen over the last eight months—in bathrooms, alleys, hotel rooms... an airplane lavatory—and he considered how fortunate he was that Alan seemed to be willing to set all of that aside.

Alan’s dick was long—definitely longer than his own seven inches. Other dicks he’d seen that were this long, were usually quite thick. Alan’s dick was, well... a bit on the slender side. He circled his thumb and middle finger around the rigid base, and the tips just met. But it wasn’t just the girth that struck him as unusual, it was the shape, as well. It was... tapered—thick at the base, and gradually narrowing toward the tip. The head was unique, too. Alan’s slit was wide, and deep, and the little crevasse it lay in extended partway around onto the top of the head, instead of just underneath. It made the whole head look heart-shaped. As he gazed at the wonder in his hand, a random thought about length-to-width ratios came to mind. *Really? Math? Now?*

His other hand was resting on Alan's leg, and he felt Alan clench his thigh muscles. As Alan squeezed, his already rock-hard cock swelled and throbbed. He clenched again, and the head flared in concert. With each of Alan's squeezing pulses, the dusky lavender hue took on crimson highlights. Cade was mesmerized. It occurred to him that while he had seen a lot of cocks, he had never actually taken the time to appreciate one. Right now, he felt he'd never seen anything quite so magnificent.

The next ridiculous thought that popped into Cade's mind was, *not too skinny, not too fat... this one is just right!* He smiled—almost laughed—when he realized that he was carefully studying a penis while thinking about *Goldilocks*.

Cade looked up to see black eyes studying his face with equal intensity. He was relieved when he also registered a smile that matched his own.

“Are you okay with this?” Alan asked.

Alan was so sweet. And so considerate. He deserved to be rewarded. “I'm good. But, I'll get better.” He lowered his lips and kissed the crown of Alan's cock.

“Oh. Mmm,” Alan murmured, letting his head drop back against the cushions.

Cade rolled his tongue around and around the engorged head, tasting him and luxuriating in that soft texture that was unlike anything else in the world. Maintaining his grip on the base, he ran his tongue slowly down the underside. He took a deep sniff and reveled in the heady aroma. Then, he licked his way further down and sucked Alan's left nut into his mouth.

Alan gasped and brought both hands to the sides of Cade's head. He didn't try to grab hold, just brushed his fingertips over Cade's temples, and then traced the outlines of Cade's ears.

Cade circled his tongue several times around the ball in his mouth and then sucked a little harder as he pulled his head away, stretching Alan's sac tight. Alan let out a whimper as his ball popped out of Cade's mouth, and Cade immediately went to work on the other one. He finally released Alan's right nut when the whimpers grew urgent, and he saw that Alan's fingers were digging into the sofa cushions.

It was oddly thrilling that he was able to give Alan so much pleasure, when he was enjoying this so much himself.

He slowly licked his way back up the shaft, and took the head in his mouth.

“Oh, Cade!” Alan cried out. “Oh, God! Suck me!”

He sank down, taking in as much of Alan's length as he could without removing his hand from the base. Then, he started a steady up and down motion, sliding his hand up and down along with his mouth.

Alan started groaning, and ran his fingers through Cade's hair, muttering something Cade couldn't quite make out, but wished he could.

He stopped at the top of his stroke and squeezed the tip of Alan's cock between his lips. Holding the head firmly in his mouth, he started working his hand up and down the shaft, going faster and faster until Alan started groaning again.

When Alan called his name again, he took a deep breath, released his grip, and then plunged down, pushing until his face was buried in Alan's crotch—the head of his throbbing cock lodged deep in Cade's throat.

Alan gasped. Cade could feel the tension mounting in Alan's body even as he did his best to relax his own muscles where they wrapped around the hot intruding shaft. He stayed down as long as he could, and as he came up for air, he put his hands on the sofa, on either side of Alan's knees and shifted his weight to his arms.

He resumed bobbing up and down on Alan's dick. Before long, he felt Alan begin thrusting his hips upward, meeting each stroke, driving the head a little deeper with each thrust. He lost all sense of time and space, aware of nothing but the sensations of heat and hard and soft and Alan ramming into his mouth over and over.

Alan growled and took Cade's head in his hands again. “So close,” Alan moaned as his thrusts intensified. Cade stilled his own motions and let Alan fuck his mouth.

The moans turned into a series of deep grunting gasps that accented each thrust. Alan stretched his arms out across the back of the sofa and arched his back. His whole body went rigid, and a sound came out of him that was like nothing Cade had ever heard before—a sort of long, low growl.

Alan's body jerked in a powerful spasm, and Cade felt the heat of his load as the first spurt shot down his throat. Alan's body rocked and trembled as wave after wave of his orgasm ripped through him. Eventually, the spasms

began to subside, and Cade let himself move again, squeezing with his lips and sucking out every last drop.

As he relaxed back into the cushions, Alan made adorable little sighing, whimpering noises. Cade pushed himself up from the floor, and crouched on Alan's knees gazing down at this amazing man. His own hard-on strained against his jeans, but he didn't care. The look of spent satisfaction on Alan's face, and the taste of Alan on this tongue were enough.

He leaned down and rested his forehead against Alan's. Then he pressed their lips together and felt Alan's mouth forming into a smile. He pulled away just far enough to get another look at Alan's face. The sparkle he saw when Alan opened his eyes made his heart beat faster.

"So..." Cade grinned, using a finger to dab primly at the corners of his mouth, "...that was, okay?"

Alan's head dropped back against the sofa as he laughed.

Burn

Friday, April 24, 2010

11:53 p.m.

I'm alive.

I open my eyes and look around... then let them fall closed.

I must have blacked out.

How long?

So many places hurt, I can't tell where. Oh, God! My jaw! Fuck! When I try to wiggle it, the throbbing turns to a jolt. Is it broken?

I open my eyes again. I can see and hear... but when I try to move, my limbs barely respond. Being conscious is clearly not all it's cracked up to be! I should try to pass out again.

Why am I on the floor... on my side?

Oh, fuck. Eric!

I hear him now. I try to turn my head to see where he is. He saves me the trouble, using his foot to roll me over onto my back.

He looms over me, swaying, grinning.

He squats beside me and squeezes my crotch.

Suddenly, he yanks my sweats down to my thighs. He moves to my feet, grabs the cuffs, and pulls them off. I try to kick him, but my leg won't move.

Why does he want my pants off? He was never that into my dick—what the fuck?

He stands up, unzips his tux pants, and pulls out his massive cock. He spits in his hand and rubs the saliva over the head.

Now, he looks down at his hardening dick and uses both hands to cup it—it's that long, it takes two hands. A shiny string of spit stretches slowly down from his mouth as he dribbles and drools. He uses both hands to slather it up and down his length.

His attention snaps back to me. His grin becomes maniacal.

He kicks me, and uses his feet to roll me over onto my stomach.

Oh, fuck!

He knocks one of my feet aside, and then the other. Stepping between my legs, he shoves my knees farther apart.

I hear him hock a loogie and spit. It lands on my left butt cheek, cooling as it slides down.

A twitch shoots through me when I feel him kneel between my thighs.

He spits again.

I shiver and gasp when he starts sliding his cock back and forth in the slick of his spit, in and around my crack.

He leans forward and rests his hands on the floor, on either side of my shoulders. Then he leans down closer. The stench of beer and cigarettes hits me again. His breath is hot and wet on the nape of my neck. I squeeze my eyes tight.

I'm trembling.

This isn't happening. Please!

He presses his chest to my back and his lips brush my ear as he hisses, "Since you won't give me what I want, I'll just have to take it."

"Eric. No."

My back is suddenly cold when it loses the heat of his chest. He uses his arms to raise himself—like a push-up gone horribly wrong.

I hear him hock and spit one more time, and I feel it inching down into my crack.

He pushes the tip of his cock against my hole.

I weep.

No.

Please—

With one shattering thrust his pelvis crashes into my ass. A jolt of white-hot pain rockets up my spine and explodes in my head. My eyes fly open as I scream!

I claw at the carpet and my eyes dart desperately around the floor in front of me, looking for... something... anything...

The lights dim...

Please! PLEASE!!!

This can't be happening...

HELP!!!

Help me...

...it's dark...

...help...

Chapter Nine

Sunday, May 11 2014

5:00 p.m.

The first thing Alan noticed as he closed the door and set his keys and phone on the side table, was that the condo was silent. After a month of spending most of their free time together, he was well aware that silent was not Cade's normal state. Alan had gone out before noon to meet his sisters at the nursing home for a Mother's Day lunch. Cade said he was going to hang out, so they could have dinner together. Maybe he'd changed his mind and gone back to his place. He walked across the great room and stopped in the bedroom doorway when he saw what was waiting there for him.

The last rays of an early evening sun angled through the windows casting a warm glow across Cade's naked body, where he lay draped across the bed. His eyes were closed; his breathing was slow and regular. Alan thought the sight was more beautiful than any painting or photograph he'd ever seen.

He'd expected to be home earlier than this, but there was still plenty of time for a little recreation before starting dinner. Cade's clothing was strewn haphazardly around the floor near the bed, and he decided to give his inner neatnik the day off—instead of picking up Cade's clothes, he quietly pushed off his loafers, stripped out of his slacks, dress shirt, and boxer briefs, and smiled to himself as he tossed each garment, letting it land wherever. The feeling was delicious, almost like he was being naughty. He wondered if this was what they meant by “throwing caution to the wind”?

Once he was naked, he stood at the foot of the bed and watched Cade a little longer.

Cade's eyes opened at the tilt of the bed as he climbed on, kneeling at Cade's feet.

They smiled at one another.

He watched Cade's eyes trail slowly down his chest, and linger when they got to his crotch. He looked down, too, as he felt his cock beginning to swell in anticipation. He looked back up when Cade spoke. “Now there's a sight for sore eyes!”

He couldn't help chuckling a little. "After this morning, I'd think it would be more like a sore jaw." Cade didn't laugh. "A sore throat?" Still no laugh, and he was afraid he saw pity in Cade's eyes.

Cade shook his head and said, "You really are going to have to get a day job if I'm going to have to keep reminding you not to quit it."

Alan pointed at the bed to Cade's left, where Cade's dick—which was now standing straight up—was casting a long, angled shadow across the cream-colored comforter. "Looks like you could get a job as a sundial."

Cade glanced over at the shadow and then winked at Alan, "Goodness! Is it really that late?"

"I'm not sure," Alan said, as he walked his knees forward to straddle Cade's calves. He reached down and grasped the base of Cade's cock. "This may be running a little slow. Maybe I should wind it up."

He kept a firm grip as he slowly stroked up and down a few times. A translucent liquid bead formed in Cade's slit, glistening in the sunlight. Their eyes locked as Alan slowly sank down and whisked the drop away with the tip of his tongue. He paused to savor the salty taste. Then, he ran his tongue up the underside from the base to the tip, where he stopped to kiss and lick the spot just below the slit. Cade's head arched backwards, pointing his chin toward the ceiling and stretching his neck muscles taut. A low moan escaped him.

Alan kept up his assault on that sweet spot, adding a few delicate nibbles which made Cade roll his head from side to side and call Alan's name. He used the hand holding Cade's cock to rub the underside of the head back and forth across his tongue, and felt it swell as Cade clenched and groaned.

He wrapped his mouth around the head and then released the base as he swallowed Cade's length. He lowered his chest till he was lying on Cade's thighs. Then, he sucked as hard as he could as he slowly drew his lips back up to the tip.

He maintained a steady suction as he began to slowly bob up and down on Cade's dick. With his weight resting on Cade's legs, Alan's hands were free to roam. Cade groaned again when Alan grabbed his hips on either side and squeezed hard.

Without missing a beat of the rhythm he'd established, Alan slowly trailed his hands up Cade's sides to his chest. He used his fingers and the heels of his hands to knead Cade's pecs, and then rubbed them in a circular motion with open palms.

Alan stopped bobbing at the top of a stroke, and waited a moment before going down slowly, gently gliding his bottom teeth down the underside of Cade's rock-hard cock. Cade whimpered when Alan was down as far as he could go, his nose pressed into Cade's curly brown pubes. Alan felt the stretch of Cade's dick pushing into his throat, and he stilled himself long enough to let the muscles relax. Then he growled and pinched both of Cade's nipples and bit down gently on the base of Cade's dick.

Cade gasped.

Alan started a new, slower rhythm, sliding his mouth up to the very tip, and then plunging down again as far as he could go. Each time he bottomed out, he paused and repeated his bite at the base and the squeeze on Cade's nipples.

Cade joined Alan's rhythm, arching his back and thrusting his hips to meet each plunge.

"Alan, I... unghh..."

Alan didn't falter.

"If you... ahhh... I..."

Alan loved it. He was certain that nothing would ever delight him more than moments like this, when Mister Smarty-Pants Bishop was unable to form a complete sentence!

He sped up a little, and pinched a little harder at the bottom of each stroke. Then, he gave up the pinching and maintained a steady pressure with Cade's nipples between his thumbs and forefingers.

Another whimper escaped Cade's lips.

He bobbed up and down a little faster, sucking as hard as he could. Cade kept up with him, his thrusts increasing in urgency.

"If you... Oh, fuck!"

He felt Cade's legs begin to tremble, where they were pressed between his knees.

"Oh, God!" Cade screamed.

Alan held on for dear life as he felt the first jolt of climax thundering through Cade, convulsing his whole body. Alan sank as deep as he could, loving the heat as spurt after spurt of spunk shot down his throat.

Ever so slowly, he relaxed his grip as Cade's spasms grew less intense.

Cade let out a long sigh.

He eased himself up, so that only the head of Cade's cock was in his mouth. He grabbed the base and squeezed a long, slow upward stroke, milking the remaining fluid and setting off a new round of jerky spasms and grunts from Cade. He started a second stroke, licking at the head, but Cade flinched, and pushed him away, turning on his side and laughing.

Alan rolled over and collapsed, lying on his back and running his tongue around the inside of his mouth, savoring Cade's unique flavor.

Cade struggled to his knees, bent down, and brushed his lips lightly over Alan's. "That was so good," he murmured. "What would you like?"

"Seriously? I wasn't kidding about this morning—the way you worked me over... I'm good for now." Cade pursed his lips into a pout that got a smile from Alan.

"Actually," Alan said, "I'm a little hungry. I didn't eat much at lunch. Why don't I make us some dinner?"

"In that case," Cade looked around, "I guess I'll get cleaned up."

"Not much left to clean up here," Alan said, squeezing Cade's shrinking cock. He rubbed his thumb across the slit, capturing the last drop of pearly liquid, and then licked his thumb.

Cade groaned and slid off the bed, bending down to gather his jeans and socks and shoes. He sat on the edge of the bed, putting them on, as Alan came around the other side, picking up his own clothes and tossing them over the back of a chair.

He grabbed Cade's polo, and brought it over to him, looking at the tag. "Here's your... um... Fackenable?"

Cade rolled his eyes. "That's FAH-soh-NAH-bl."

"Ooh-Lah-Lah," Alan mocked. "How hoity-toity! What is that, French for 'fashionable'?"

"No, I mean, not in the sense we use that word in English. The literal translation is *formable*."

"Okay, ya got me. What's *formable*?"

"You know, like something you form, or shape. Like wood to a carver, or stone to a sculptor."

“So, who’s the carver, here...” Alan asked, as he leaned down and rubbed Cade’s dick through the jeans, “...and who’s the wood?”

Cade closed his eyes and leaned his head back.

“Mmm,” Alan hummed as he kneaded the soft mound of flesh, “FAH-soh-NAH-bl.”

Cade opened his eyes and smiled at Alan, a little twinkle in his eye. “Very good!” Then he swatted the hand away, playfully, and stood up, pulling on the shirt. “But we’ve got to see what we can do about that one-track mind of yours.” Cade gave him a peck on the cheek, then turned and left the room.

As he straightened and smoothed out the comforter, he thought about the question he’d just put to Cade. He realized that over the weeks he’d been getting to know this young man, he had been thinking of him as just that— young. And, didn’t that mean *formable*, to some extent? Cade had mentioned something the other day about having not “*gone out*” since they’d met, and Alan had taken that to mean he was no longer... but, they hadn’t actually talked about that since their first night at Cade’s place.

His mind reeled at the contradictions he saw in Cade. He was such a sweet and tender soul; but Cade was also quick to anger—condescending and harsh when faced with something he couldn’t understand, or wouldn’t accept. Cade could also be really high-strung at times, though lately, he seemed a lot calmer. He hoped that all these things might be *formable*, at least, maybe over time. Still, he was sure there was some major piece of the puzzle that Cade hadn’t shared with him yet.

He tried to think about things from Cade’s point of view. There were so many areas where Alan was naïve and Cade was knowledgeable. If he was honest with himself, he had to admit that Cade probably saw *him* as formable, too. He’d looked really delighted when Alan had pronounced that French word right.

Alan rummaged around in the closet and pulled out an old pair of dark blue sweatpants—perfect for lounging on a lazy Sunday evening. Then he went to the other closet and took out his favorite pair of classic ASICS. They had to be at least fifteen years old by now, but they were in showroom condition and he loved the way they made his feet feel. He went over to the dresser for a *Semper Fi!* T-shirt in the same dark blue as the sweats, and then dug around in the bottom drawer till he found the right jockstrap. It was a regulation issue, plain white Duke, only not so white anymore. He had worn this one all through high

school. It was the one he'd been wearing the day he and Elliot had lost their virginity to one another. It was a little yellowed with age, and the elastic wasn't as stretchy as it had once been but, to Alan, it was a treasure.

He sat down on the edge of the bed and started dressing. He had his shirt on and the jock and sweats up to his knees when a blood-curdling scream from the other room sent a jolt up his spine. He bolted off the bed, hauling his pants up as he shot through the door.

"Oh, my God!" Cade shrieked, as Alan strode to his side.

"What?" He was shocked to see a look of abject horror on Cade's face. He put a hand on Cade's shoulder. "Cade! What's wrong?"

Cade's voice trembled a little as he said, "This CD. It's... it's..." Alan's look of concern deepened. "...it's out of alphabetical order!" Cade squealed with laughter, poking at Alan's stomach with out-stretched index fingers.

He grabbed those fingers and pulled Cade close, doing his best Three Stooges, "Oh! Wise guy, eh? Why, I oughta..." He reached up to give Cade a playful slap, but when his fingers brushed lightly over Cade's cheek, they lingered. He stroked his thumb across Cade's chin and, as his laughter trailed off, Cade looked up into Alan's eyes.

He pulled Cade into another hug and chuckled a little. "You almost gave me a heart attack."

"Nah, with all the shit you've put your heart through, I'm sure it's stronger than that."

Alan laughed again. "You're probably right." He loosened his grip on Cade's waist. "Maybe I should see about rustling up some grub?"

Cade shook his head with a teasing grin. "I love it when you go all cowboy, or caveman, or whatever that is."

He planted a smooch on Cade's forehead, then turned and went around the island—he had finally decided to call it an island—and into the kitchen area. He started poking around in the fridge.

"Cheeseburgers okay?" he called, raising his voice so it would carry across the room to where he'd left Cade standing. He jumped at the sound of Cade's, "Sure!" and turned to find him a few feet away, stretching up from one of the barstools, leaning on his arms and looking over the counter. It was pretty clear he'd been enjoying the view. Alan knew his cockney accent was for shit, but he tried it anyway, "Were you lookin' at me bum?"

Cade joined in the fun and lowered his eyelashes, playing bashful. "Maybe."

"Bum Looker!" Alan scowled, then smiled.

They both turned toward the foyer at the sound of Rosemary Clooney belting out the opening lines of "Sisters", from *White Christmas*.

Cade's boyish grin crept across his face, "That'd be Rachel," he said as he hopped off the stool and raced out of the room. As Cade came back with the phone, Alan's mock scowl returned, and he shook his head. "I have got to keep that thing somewhere you can't find it!"

Cade tapped the screen and handed the phone over.

Alan said, "Hey, Sis. What's up?"

Cade pulled his own phone out of his pocket, and waved it to catch Alan's eye. He raised his other hand to the side of his head, making the international sign for *phone*, as he silently mouthed "Call my mom." Alan nodded, and Cade went into the bedroom and closed the door.

He turned his attention back to the phone when Rachel said, "I just wanted to thank you for coming to lunch today. You have no idea what a difference it made, you being there."

"Well, it *is* Mother's Day. It wouldn't have been right for me to be anyplace else."

"Still... I could see how hard it was for you."

He recalled the shock that had hit him a month before, when he had walked into the room at the nursing home and seen his mother for the first time in years. She was like an empty husk where she had once been a force of nature. "I know I'll get used to it, eventually, but... it's kind of uncomfortable being with her when you can't really tell if she understands what's going on."

"Yeah, it seems like the dementia is destroying her mind the same way the Parkinson's is destroying her body."

"It broke my heart when I couldn't tell if she even recognized me."

"I know, Alan, I know... but at least you were there. Sarah made some excuse about her mother-in-law, and you saw how quickly Ruth ducked out. Mary seems to handle it pretty well, but even she's not around like she should be. I end up being the one stuck with Mom Duty."

He could understand Rachel's resentment, but considering how just being in the same room with what was left of their mom had made his stomach churn to the point he felt like he was being turned inside out... he could also understand why his other sisters had a rough time being there. He also knew that now was not the time to try and explain all that to Rachel. "I'm here to help you from now on, Rach."

"Little brother, you are truly a Godsend!"

"So, when are we going over there again?"

"I try to go for lunch two or three times a week. I was thinking about Tuesday."

"That works for me."

"They usually come with her tray right at noon, so I try to get there a little before. Bring a bag lunch, and we'll feed her like we did today."

"Okay, sis. I'll see you then."

"Thank you, Alan. This is going to be so much easier with someone to share the load."

"Take care, Rach."

"You too. Bye."

"Bye."

He tapped the red icon to disconnect. He thought about how drained he'd felt after a few hours at the nursing home. Then he thought about the man in his bedroom. He heaved a sigh and turned to wash his hands before ripping open the package of ground beef and dumping it out on the cutting board.

As he broke off a hunk of meat and started forming it into a ball, his mind wandered again to Cade. Despite their differences, and his concerns about Cade's emotional health, there seemed to be so much that fit. Alan wanted to see the world—from some perspective other than a military vehicle. Cade had been to more countries than Alan could count and knew enough languages to get around wherever he went. Alan liked beer, but he only knew the brands his jarhead buddies in the Corps always ordered. Even though Cade wasn't much of a drinker, he'd already introduced Alan to a dozen different microbrews—a lot of them local. Some were awful, but the ones that were good were really good. They'd had a lot of fun sampling brews together, complimenting or insulting, whichever fit. Cade was great at both.

He started to wonder about what *he* really had to offer Cade, but the bedroom door opened and Cade strolled in. “Marilyn—sorry, my mom—says, ‘Hi.’ She said she’s disappointed she didn’t get to meet you this weekend.”

“Yeah, you seemed kinda surprised they weren’t coming for Sabrina’s graduation this morning.”

“I was. I mean, you know how Sabrina and I are joined at the hip. Our folks are kind of the same. They play bridge every other weekend, and our dads golf, and her mom chairs the PFLAG meetings when Marilyn’s out of town. Anyway, Dad has a business meeting in Geneva tomorrow morning, and Mom decided to spend the weekend in Florida with Grandma.”

“From everything you’ve told me, they sound like great folks. I’m looking forward to meeting them. I’m glad I got to meet the Tuckers, though, and Sabrina. She’s every bit as lovely as you said.”

“Yeah, she’s the only person I know who can make a cap and gown look good. I should probably warn you, the Tuckers will give my folks a full report on you.”

His biggest worry jumped to mind. “Will they think I’m a cradle robber?”

“I don’t think that’ll be an issue. You and Dad’ll get along fine, and Marilyn? She is going to adore you! I swear, the two of you are cut from the same cloth.”

“Really?” This was news to him. He felt warmed by the thought, but tried to deflect it. “I never wanted to be an actress!”

“You know that’s not what I meant, silly.” Cade took a breath, and his expression turned a little serious. “You’re both just so... I don’t know, like... giving.”

Alan turned away to wash his hands again. He hunched his shoulders and soaped up a bit longer.

Cade didn’t seem to notice his embarrassment at the compliment. “While we were on the phone, I remembered how she used to help me with my schoolwork, and that reminded me to thank you again for your help with my math. I ended up with a sucky grade, but it was a passing sucky grade.”

“I’m just relieved you passed all your classes, and don’t have to repeat anything.”

Cade wandered over to the window-wall. “Speaking of school, did you know you live right across the street from the School of the Arts?”

“Yeah, Elliot told me about that.”

“They’re doing the last show of their season next weekend. We should go see it.”

“Why?” His memories of high school didn’t make him exactly eager to go back there.

“It’s called *An Evening of Romantic One-Acts*.” Cade waggled his right eyebrow a few times and then winked.

Alan decided this was the right moment for the gift he’d gotten Cade. “While I finish dinner, could you get something for me? There’s a little box, with a ribbon, in the dresser.”

Cade looked a little uncertain. “You bought me something?”

“It’s a surprise.” Now, Cade started to look worried. “It’s no big deal. Jeez. Stop overthinking and just go get the box.”

Cade smiled and went toward to bedroom. He returned a minute later, holding the little wooden box with the glass lid. Inside, there was a bronze medallion shaped like a cross hanging from a blue and white striped ribbon. “Is this what I think it is?”

Alan wasn’t happy when he saw what was in Cade’s hands. He came out of the kitchen and took the box. “Sorry. This isn’t the box I was talking about.” He took it and started to step around Cade, into the bedroom, but Cade stopped him with a hand on his shoulder.

“Is that a Purple Heart?”

“No.” Alan looked into Cade’s eyes. He wasn’t sure what he saw there. He was absolutely sure that he did not want to talk about this now. “It’s the Navy Cross... look... it’s a long story.”

“I’ve got all evening.” Cade looked defiant.

“Oh, Cade,” Alan sighed, slumping against the door frame. “I’ll tell you all about it, okay? I promise—just, not right now?”

He didn’t know if it was his embarrassment showing, or what, but Cade released his shoulder, and Alan went into the bedroom and got the right box. “Sorry. I should have said, *second drawer*.” He handed Cade a small, slim white cardboard box tied with a red ribbon.

Cade slipped the ribbon off and opened the box, taking out a gray plastic card. “A key to your condo?”

He wasn't sure how to read Cade's raised eyebrow. "It's really not such a big deal." He heard himself say the words as he looked at the way he'd wrapped it. So, yeah, he had meant it as kind of a big deal. But it felt right. He didn't want Cade to freak, though. "I mean, you're here a lot... and I want you to be here whenever you want. It's just... practical—like today, when we had to split up for lunch, it would have been easier if you could have just come back here whenever you were ready."

Cade was looking down at the key in his hand, and nodding his head.

He cupped Cade's chin, and gently raised it till their eyes met. "I also want to be sure you know that I trust you." He had given this a lot of thought. He'd decided weeks ago that whatever had happened to Cade, it almost certainly involved some kind of violation of trust. And, if Alan wanted Cade to trust him, he thought that a demonstration of his trust in Cade would be a good place to start.

Cade nodded again, and smiled, maybe a little weakly. "Thank you, Alan. This means a great deal to me."

He looked into Cade's eyes, hoping to see some kind of green light there. He couldn't be sure, but as he gazed at Cade his heart sped up, and his breath came short. Somehow, it took Alan by surprise, over and over again, what an intoxicating effect Cade had on him. One minute, he was in charge of his world, knew what he was doing, knew what he wanted and how to get it. Then, one look from Cade and he was a blubbering idiot. A love-struck, blubbering idiot. He knew it was too soon, but he was thirty years old and didn't want to waste any more time... and this feeling was stronger than...

Cade looked worried again, but Alan couldn't stop himself. He rested his hands on Cade's shoulders. "Cade... I want you to know... I... I think I'm—"

"Whoa!" Cade stiffened and stepped back. His gaze darted around the room for an instant, and then he looked down at his watch. "I just remembered... I've got a thing..." He turned toward the door.

"Cade, wait." Alan couldn't believe how foolish he'd been.

"I have to go." Cade didn't look back as he walked toward the door, but he held up the key card and waved it, saying, "Not sure how long I'll be... but I'll be back." He opened the door and stepped through. "Don't keep dinner for me." He pulled the door shut.

Alan's heart was pounding in his chest, and in his ears. He stood, staring at the door, not knowing what to do, sure that he couldn't take watching Cade run

down the hallway again. He was also sure that going after Cade right away would be a mistake. He had taken the key with him, and said he'd be back.

He went to the kitchen and put the hamburger patties and the cheese back in the fridge, chewing himself out for pushing too hard, too fast. He had thought he could count patience as one of his virtues, but Cade had this stunning ability to make Alan want everything all at once.

As his heart slowed, he started thinking about Cade's defenses, how quickly they came on, and how running away seemed to be a major strategy. He wondered how many times his heart could take watching Cade disappear. He wanted to help Cade work through whatever it was that was making him so unhappy, but without knowing what it was... *Oh, God...* he felt helpless!

The moment he heard that word in his head, things started clicking into place. He *hated* feeling helpless! Both times he was wounded, that had been the hardest part... and now... He had worked so hard the last few years to learn how to deal with strong emotions, but helplessness still made him crazy, almost panicked, like he had to do something—anything—to feel strong.

It occurred to him that Cade's sudden loss of control looked strangely familiar. Not that Alan had ever run away from anything, but that feeling of having to do something *right now*... He wondered if maybe Cade was feeling helpless... or something like it... Or, probably, Cade was avoiding feeling... whatever it was.

Alan resigned himself to the fact that the "*whatever it was*" would have to wait. All he could do now was be here, waiting, whenever Cade came back.

Chapter Ten

Sunday, May 11, 2014

6:00 p.m.

Cade concentrated on running. He deliberately focused on the sensations, the solid jolt as each foot hit the concrete sidewalk, and the burn in his chest each time he gasped in another lungful.

He didn't know what he was running from, or where he was running to. He didn't care. He just needed to run.

Halfway down the hill, he spotted the roof of The Bar a couple blocks over. The sight snapped his attention away from his focus on the moment. He was filled with memories of the place, the smell of hot men and alcohol, the pounding music, and the heady rush of strutting through a crowd of admirers, picking one out. It had always been intoxicating. It made him feel powerful.

He couldn't run much longer, and he still needed desperately to keep moving. He remembered that it was Sunday afternoon... well, evening now, but early enough that some of the crowd from the afternoon Tea Dance would still be hanging around—especially *this* Sunday—the ones whose relationships with their mothers were on the rocks. Any one of them ought to be an easy mark—something to keep him from thinking about whatever the fuck was going on with him.

Just as he rounded the corner, his breath gave out. He doubled over at the waist and hung his head as he gasped to fill his chest. When he was able to stand again, he looked around the street and was relieved to see that he wasn't being observed. There was a space between the two buildings on his left, and he stepped into it, leaning against a painted concrete block wall. The solid bricks held the lingering warmth of the sun that was now sinking to the horizon. He leaned his head against the wall and closed his eyes, taking slow, deep breaths. His knees felt wobbly, so he checked out the gravel around his feet, and then slowly slid his back down the wall till he was seated on the ground.

His heart still pounded, and he felt heat and moisture collecting in his eyes. His throat was tight. He was *not* about to cry! He took in as deep a breath as he could, and held it. Then, he pushed it out as hard as he could, clamping down with his chest muscles.

He stared at the wall opposite him, and tried to figure out why he was such a wreck. He thought he knew what he wanted—what he'd always wanted. And he was damned sure Alan was about to offer it. So, why was he freaking out? Why was he always in such a goddamned turmoil? What was it that made his life so... so tempestuous? Why hadn't two years of therapy fixed him? That ought to be enough to fix anybody. There must be something inherently broken and wrong about him!

He thought back on his last two years of high school. When he and Eric had been together, he'd been expected to provide regular blowjobs, but Eric rarely reciprocated, so he usually jerked himself off while he was blowing Eric. By their senior year, the sex had become pretty mechanical—almost mundane in its predictability.

After he'd gotten out of the hospital, he hadn't had sex of any kind for about a year. When the wet dreams started, he'd resorted to whacking off again, but not very often. In his second year at home, he'd found that he couldn't even get hard on the nights after he and Marilyn had spent the day in court, watching Eric's trial proceedings. After the day he'd testified, it had been weeks before he could get it up again.

By the time he'd started college—two years late—he was back to a pretty regular regimen of beating his meat, and that seemed to suffice. But, by the start of his second year at Duke, he was itching for something more.

Not sure exactly what he wanted, or how to go about finding it, he'd gone out to a bar and had started up a conversation with a nice-looking guy. They'd ended up in a bathroom stall with Cade on his knees. Having a hot, hard dick in his mouth after such a long time made Cade feel like he'd found an oasis in the middle of the desert. The silky smooth skin, the blistering heat, the guttural sounds emanating in concert with his ministrations—he'd actually been surprised by just how good it all felt, or, maybe more like, surprised that he'd forgotten.

He had managed to swallow most of the guy's load, and he wiped his chin on his sleeve as he stood up. He was about to ask for a phone number, but before he could, the guy was holding out a couple of twenty dollar bills and thanking him for a good time. It was one of those moments where everything changes, suddenly.

Now, eight months later, he could feel that man's sperm tingling on his tongue as if it had been only moments ago. And, he could feel the bizarre sense of power that had washed over him in the moment of taking the man's money.

A solitary tear rolled down his cheek. He swiped it away immediately, then wrapped his arms around his legs and rested his chin on his knees. A shiver ran through him.

He took a few more deep breaths. That was enough thinking. Thinking never got him anywhere, except into deeper shit. He told himself that Alan deserved better than a fucked-up jerk who couldn't keep his shit together. Someone who couldn't even face his problems, let alone share them. He doubted he could ever open up to Alan. Even a guy that patient wouldn't wait around forever. Better to stop hoping for that. What if he crashed and burned—totally lost his mind? Alan was too good to be dragged into that kind of shit storm.

Cade knew how to survive. He pushed up off the wall, and reached around to dust off his butt.

He gave his polo a tug to straighten it, and wiped his eyes with the backs of his hands for good measure. Scared? Hopeless? Broken? Fuck that shit! The one-and-only, original Cade Bishop had a way to fix this.

He stepped out of his concrete and gravel refuge, then strode across the street, and into The Bar.

As his eyes adjusted to the dim blue and purple lighting inside the club, he scanned the room. The crowd was sparse, as he'd expected, but the stale odor of beer and hot bodies lingered in the air. There was a guy sitting at the bar by himself, his back to Cade, wide shoulders in a painted-on shirt. That looked like as good a place to start as any.

He hadn't done this in over a month, but he'd lost none of his customary swagger. He walked right up to the guy and leaned on the bar next to him. "Hey, good-lookin', wanna have a good time?"

Cade's lascivious grin was met by an equally lewd smile on a face that Cade suddenly knew had probably not been called good looking in a very long time... if ever.

But, the guy was smiling, and nodding his head. "Whadyuh have in mind, suguh?" Cade found some southern drawls enchanting, like Sabrina's. This guy's twang was nothing like that. He couldn't even be sure if the slurring was due to alcohol, or if the guy just talked that way all the time.

"The alley out back is pretty private." He turned toward the door, indicating with a nod that the man should follow. As the man stood, Cade remembered the

consequences of making assumptions. He rested a hand on the man's chest. "Forty bucks for the best blowjob you've ever had."

"Yeah, fine... let's go."

He led the man out of the club and around the side to the alley, checking carefully as they went to make sure there was no one lurking in the gathering shadows. Satisfied that they were alone, he turned to face the stranger. The man somehow looked even less appealing in the dimmer light of the alley. There were sagging creases beside his eyes, and it looked like he was in the early stages of developing jowls. He tried to remind himself that faces didn't matter. This wasn't about the guy's face—wasn't about *this* guy at all. This was about what Cade wanted. Still, he didn't feel the usual rush.

"I been needin' this a long time," the man drawled as he dug a rather smallish penis out of his pants.

Cade shuddered and felt a lump forming in the pit of his stomach.

The man took a step closer, gripping the base of his cock with one hand and reaching out to grab Cade's wrist with the other, guiding it toward his hardening dick.

Cade flinched at the touch and tried to pull away, but the man held tight. "Where you think you goin' suguh?"

"I can't... look, I changed my mind, okay?" He tugged at the man's grip again, but it tightened.

"I don't think so. We have a deal, 'best blowjob *evuh*', didn't you say, suguh?"

"Stop calling me that, and let me go."

The man squeezed Cade's wrist and released his dick, grabbing at Cade's shoulder with his free hand and pulling him closer.

"I said let me go right now!"

"No way, boy," the man growled, digging his fingernails into Cade's wrist and pulling Cade's hand to his crotch. "You're gonna give me what I want, or I'm gonna take it!"

With those words, something snapped inside of Cade. It was like he no longer needed to put two and two together. All at once, everything made sense. He knew where he wanted to be, and it wasn't struggling in some dark alley.

He knew who he wanted to be with, and it wasn't the horny old bastard twisting his arm.

He yanked as hard as he could and wrenched his wrist free from the man's grip. He staggered backwards, stumbled, and then sat down, hard, on the concrete as he pulled his phone free from his pocket. As the man took a step toward him, he held the phone up and pushed a button.

The bright flash stopped the man in his tracks, and he put a hand up to his face. "What the fuck are you doin' you little sumbitch?"

Cade's fingers were flying over the touchscreen. "Sending your picture to my boyfriend, the ex-Marine!"

The man shook his head. "You are one crazy motherfucker."

He hit *Send*, then held the phone up again, pointing it at the man as he slowly rose to his feet. His hand trembled slightly and his eyes darted around the alley as an image flashed through his mind of the last time he'd looked into eyes burning with rage. *Please let this work!* "I'm walking away. And you don't get to touch me!"

The guy must have had a few brain cells to rub together, because his face softened and he raised both hands in a gesture of surrender. "I don't need no trouble," he said, as he backed away. After a few steps backward, he turned and kept walking. "Crazy sumbitch," he heard as the man disappeared around the corner.

He checked his wrist. It hurt, and he could see where the fingernails had bitten, but there was no blood. He turned and walked the other way out of the alley.

Chapter Eleven

Sunday, May 11, 2014

7:00 p.m.

Alan sat half sideways in the old leather chair, his right leg slung over its arm, his foot bouncing, as he thought about how much his life had changed. Of course, the last few months had been nothing but change, with all the “*big*” changes—the ones others could see—like his injury, and leaving the service...

But that wasn't what mattered to him now. It was more like... how his *heart* had changed.

He thought back over the last five weeks since he'd met Cade Bishop.

As little *moments* flickered through his mind, it struck him how most of them included laughter... funny things Cade had said, or done... funny things Alan had said and done that wouldn't have happened if Cade hadn't been there... times that might have been annoying, or embarrassing, but being with Cade somehow turned them into fun.

Those few *moments* that were confusing, or painful—or both—they only underlined the one thing Alan couldn't get away from... and didn't want to. This young, arrogant, beautiful, self-centered, brilliant, sexy, young... very young man had stolen Alan's heart.

He had known the risks, and he'd taken them. Given the chance, he would do it all over again. Now, it seemed like only time would tell how those risks would be rewarded. He'd opened his heart, his life, his home. He had no regrets, but he couldn't make the man accept what he wanted to give. Would Cade Bishop be the great love of his life... or another painful lesson he'd have to figure out what the hell he was supposed to learn from?

He imagined how it would feel if Cade came back and handed him his key. Or, worse yet, dropped it in the mail. He blinked a few times, thinking of lessons he'd learned, some of which had been deeply scarred into him with physical pain. He wondered why this one threatened to hurt even worse. A tear slid down his cheek.

His heart leapt when the phone on the table next to him started playing “Getting to Know You”, from *The King and I*—another one of Cade's little jokes.

He picked it up and tapped the screen. A photo appeared of a big man with an angry look on his face. It occurred to Alan that maybe he wasn't the only one whose jokes fell flat sometimes, because there was nothing funny about the guy scowling up at him.

The phone vibrated and Alan tapped to get Cade's text.

>this fukr bugng me at th bar

>comng home now

Near-panic at the thought of Cade being in danger got mixed up in his head with the fact Cade had used the word "home" and he sat, frozen, for several seconds while he got the wires uncrossed. He sprang up from the chair and shot out the front door, not stopping to close it behind him. He flew down the hall and grabbed the top of the handrail to catapult himself around the corner into the stairwell. He almost took flight a couple of times as he bolted down the stairs two and three at a time. He slammed his way through the heavy front door and into the parking lot.

Dark thunderheads gathering in the night sky barely registered as he zig-zagged between cars to cut a diagonal across the lot and toward The Bar. He'd only gone a few more strides when Cade appeared around the corner at the bottom of the hill, heading Alan's way at a speed-walker's pace. Alan was about to call his name, when Cade looked up and, even from a hundred yards away, he felt their eyes lock. Cade started running, too.

He slowed down as Cade reached him, and he captured Cade in a strong embrace. Cade wrapped himself around Alan and sobbed. Alan held on tight and waited patiently until the crying stopped and Cade's breathing became more regular. He squeezed a little tighter. "Talk to me, Cade."

Cade heaved a sigh, but didn't move, his head lying heavily against Alan's shoulder. Finally, he said, "It feels so... so safe here."

He waited some more, then gave Cade another squeeze and said, "I may not have known you very long, but I'll bet there's never been a time when Cade Bishop was speechless."

Cade gave a weak laugh. He placed one hand on Alan's chest and leaned back a little, wiping his eyes with the back of his other hand. Then he made what looked to Alan like a brave attempt at a smile. "I may have done a little growing up tonight."

“Really?”

“Really.”

Cade just stood there, looking into Alan's eyes, so he thought he'd better prod a little more. “You gonna tell me about it?”

Cade turned his head to the side and looked out over the old ball field. Alan waited patiently for him to gather his thoughts.

“Four years ago...” Cade looked back at Alan, “...my boyfriend raped me.” Cade swallowed—hard—and took a deep breath. Alan felt his heart break a little. “It kind of brought my world to an end. Everything I had known... it was just gone. That's a big part of what hit me tonight. When that guy started messing with me, demanding, pushing, the very first thought that came to my mind was... this time, I had you!

“I knew—*knew*—you'd be there for me if I called. I knew I could trust you. When I heard that word in my head—*trust*... it was like, the last four years went flashing by on fast-forward. I realized that it's been four years since I trusted anybody, other than my folks, of course, and Sabrina... oh, shit!”

“What?”

Cade wiped his eyes again. “Sabrina. Now that I think of it, I guess I haven't trusted her... in some ways.”

Alan couldn't help smiling. “Like, trusting her to pick the right boyfriend?”

“Ouch!” Cade gave him a playful shove. “Okay, that's enough scrutiny for now.” Cade returned his head to Alan's shoulder, and Alan pulled him in a little tighter again... and waited.

“Although... um, actually, there's more...”

Alan almost laughed. He'd figured that once Cade got started, there'd be no stopping him.

“I realized tonight how important trust is. Trusting you... needing you... didn't make me weak. It made me strong.” A small sound escaped Cade. Alan thought it might have been a laugh, but he wasn't sure. “It helped me see that I can trust myself—that maybe I can take care of myself.

“You went through a war... well, I guess, two wars, and...” Cade looked up. “Look at you! You're this amazing, wonderful, generous, kind person. You actually seem to be happy! After what I went through... I don't know... I... it was like I didn't want to go on. I didn't know how.

“My mom and dad... Sabrina, they were there for me. They took such good care of me. It was like... I couldn't let them down, you know? I guess I just did the best I could, but it was for them. I knew they'd worry if they thought I wasn't okay, so I put all my energy into looking like I was.

“It's like I've been... numb, for the last four years... or frozen. I haven't really felt anything, except... well...” Cade laughed, “...worried—there's been *plenty* of worried.

“That Navy Cross got me thinking... I know they don't hand those out unless some pretty fucked-up shit happens to you. I mean...” Cade reached up and laid his palm lightly over Alan's heart. “These scars...” Alan brought his hand to Cade's wrist and squeezed gently, pressing Cade's hand to his chest. Cade's voice quivered a little. “They're permanent.” Leaving his hand there, Cade turned and looked out over the empty ball field again. “Bad shit happened to both of us, but—”

“Cade, it wasn't—”

“No.” Cade looked back. “I'm not comparing. There is no comparison. It's more of a...” Cade chuckled, “I guess it's a *contrast*.” Cade turned to look at a car that was driving slowly up the hill. Then, he turned back and gazed into Alan's eyes. “I'll never know what you went through over there, but whatever it was, however bad it was, it made you stronger.”

Now it was Alan's turn to look away. He didn't feel strong. He felt like this slender young man held his future in trembling hands. He desperately needed to know where Cade was going with all this, and the question must have shown in his eyes, because Cade said, “I can't even begin to imagine being in a war. I mean, what happened to me was bad... but... look, this isn't even about *what happened*. It's about what comes after the '*what happened*'.”

Cade stood straighter. “I learned a life lesson tonight, Alan... what happened to me, years ago... I let it win. Yeah, it was awful at the time, but afterward, I let it take over and run the show. I just couldn't face it... couldn't take it on. It didn't dawn on me till tonight, but I must have decided back then that I needed to keep everyone at a safe distance... maybe, if I didn't let anyone get close, then no one would be able to hurt me again.”

A gentle rain began to fall. Cade turned his face up into it and took a few deep breaths before returning his gaze to Alan. “When I look at you, I know I don't have to be this way. I know I can be strong too. But *strong* doesn't mean being the person I would have been if it had never happened. I always thought I

was supposed to... you know, just ‘*get over it*’ or something. Now, I think maybe I’ll never get over it, just like you’ll always have these,” Cade softly rubbed up and down Alan’s chest. “Now, I’m thinking maybe I don’t even need to get over it. I just need to figure out how to keep it from stopping me. I’ve missed out on four years of my life. If I’m not careful, I’ll miss out on you.”

Alan slipped his hand upward to cover Cade’s, where it rested on his chest. A thousand thoughts and feelings swirled in his head and his gut. His heart ached. He wanted to know more. He wanted to help Cade—to reassure him—to convince him nothing bad would ever happen to him again. He felt a crazy need to kill the motherfucker who had put this sweet, beautiful man through hell. But what he needed most was *this* Cade. The Cade who was strong enough to stop running. He had so many questions. There was so much he wanted to say. But he knew this wasn’t the moment—there’d be time later for all of that. He bent and pressed his lips lightly against Cade’s. Leaning back a little, he said, “We’ll just have to make sure that doesn’t happen.”

Then he intertwined their fingers and brought their hands down between them as they turned up the hill and headed toward home.

Chapter Twelve

Sunday, May 11, 2014

7:30 p.m.

Cade got to try his new card key on the big glass door, because Alan hadn't grabbed his as he'd rushed out.

They walked up the stairs in silence, still holding hands.

Alan stepped aside at the door to the condo, nodding his head and motioning for Cade to precede him. When they were both inside, Alan closed and bolted the door, then turned and wrapped his arms around Cade's waist. He pushed him against the wall as he pushed his tongue urgently into his mouth.

Cade was relieved that nothing fell this time. Within moments he was lost in the passionate heat of the kiss. But then Alan eased up and pulled away, taking a deep breath. "Can we sit and talk for a while? You said a lot, but there's more I'd like to understand."

"We both know I love to talk, and I promise I'll tell you anything you want to know, but..." he reached out and started rubbing the heel of his hand up and down the front of Alan's sweatpants. "There's something I need from you first."

Alan gave a gentle shake of his head and then smiled. "In that case, how 'bout some music to set the mood?"

"You wouldn't happen to have the Pearl Bailey cast of *Hello Dolly*, would you?"

Alan shook his head. "I might have the movie soundtrack from *Peter Pan*."

"Seriously?"

"No."

Cade laughed. "Well, you know what you've got over there. You pick." He felt a spark from the way Alan was looking at him.

"I think I can find something appropriate." Alan went over to the shelves and ran a finger along a row of CDs. He pulled one out and slipped it into the player. The music started as he walked over to the window wall, grinding his

hips with the rhythm of a heavy bass beat. He set about drawing the heavy burgundy drapes across the windows.

Cade didn't recognize the song. At first he thought it might be Barry White. But, no, the voice wasn't low enough. Maybe it was that guy whose father killed him... Cade snapped to attention when it hit him how utterly irrelevant the conversation in his head was, given what was happening right in front of him!

Alan turned from the windows and locked eyes with Cade. Cade couldn't help smiling as Alan slowly peeled his T-shirt, from the waist, up, over, and off. Alan tossed the shirt aside, without even looking to see where it landed.

Cade stood in the center of the room, transfixed.

Alan came around from behind the sofa and sat down on the arm, facing Cade. He crossed his right leg, placing a white leather ASIC with red and blue stripes atop his left knee. Alan looked up and riveted Cade's gaze. Then, he looked back down at his foot. He took hold of the end of one lace and pulled ever so slowly, tugging inch by inch until finally the knot gave way and he let both laces dangle, swinging.

For a moment, Cade didn't know if was Alan was trying to be sexy, or funny, but watching Alan's movements made Cade feel sexy, so he went with that.

Alan looked back up at Cade, then down again as he used both hands to slip the shoe ever so slowly from his bare foot. He wriggled his toes and flexed his foot a few times. As he raised his eyes to Cade's again, he raised the shoe as well, so that they were looking at one another just over the top of it. Without breaking eye contact, Alan flicked his wrist and sent the shoe sailing through the air. A big grin broke out across Alan's face and Cade felt his knees go weak.

Alan began to repeat the process with his left shoe, glancing up from his foot and locking eyes with Cade periodically, as if there could be any question that Cade's attention might have wandered. He had never witnessed anything like this. He had seen some grainy videos of male strippers on YouTube, but he'd never imagined his own private floorshow! Before Alan, the only person he'd ever gotten naked with was Eric, and there had been nothing the least bit creative about the way Eric undressed.

Once Alan was barefoot, he rose slowly to his feet and then slipped his sweats down over his hips, revealing all his perfect curves and bulges,

beautifully framed and accented by a white jockstrap. Alan wiggled the rest of his way out of the sweats, then kicked them aside.

He sauntered slowly toward Cade. With each step, his hips swayed in time to the music. Cade thought he might pass out before Alan even made it over to him, but as Alan drew near, he managed to hook an index finger into the waistband of Alan's jock, steadying himself.

Alan put both of his hands behind his head, his biceps bulging, and he thrust his pelvis forward, grinding his crotch into Cade's. Alan closed his eyes and let his head sway gently back and forth as his hips bucked and rolled, rubbing against Cade. He could hardly believe his eyes. Here was this... this earthy Adonis... but he wasn't a God, he wasn't some fevered fantasy, he was hot flesh and coursing blood, writhing against Cade—his for the taking.

His attention was momentarily yanked away from the man before him when the refrain of the song started, and he realized it was Marvin Gaye singing about "Sexual Healing". He leaned in and ran his tongue slowly down the length of Alan's bicep, and kept going, all the way into the furry armpit. He paused there and inhaled deeply. The scent and taste of Alan was almost too much, and he began to feel dizzy.

He held his grip on Alan's waistband, and with his other hand, slowly rubbed the pouch that seemed to be stretched to its very limit. His palm and fingertips swept over the nubby texture of the fabric, the sensations intensified by the heat emanating from within. Alan moaned, and looked down, biting his lower lip.

Cade gave a squeeze to the pouch and a tug to the waistband. "Can I take this off you?"

Alan looked up—a gleam shimmering across the surface of two black pools. He nodded.

Cade hooked a thumb under each side strap where it met the waistband and then slowly slid his thumbs down the straps towards Alan's ass. Midway, he sensed the hollow depression formed where Alan's glorious glutes met his rock-hard thigh muscles. Alan's cheeks were dimpled on the sides, with the promise of power! Cade bit his own lip because he was afraid that if he didn't distract himself somehow, he might come in his pants.

He pulled both leg straps away from Alan's thighs as far as they'd go. Then he released them and they snapped against Alan's thighs. It drove Cade just a

little wild to hear this gorgeous hunk of man meat whimper. He snapped the straps again, to draw that sound.

He slipped the fingertips of both hands into the wide, white waistband and pushed it down. The beautiful cock he'd been learning to love sprung out and slapped against the much-too-tight fly of Cade's jeans. He released the strap, and it slipped to the floor. Alan kicked it aside.

Alan undid the top button of Cade's 501's and then looked up. "We don't have to go any further tonight than we already have." He tugged on the sides of Cade's fly and the second button popped open. "To me, sex is best when there's no plan, when there aren't expectations." The third button separated. "Just go with the flow..." the fourth, "...do what feels good in the moment. I've loved everything we've done. I don't need more." As the last button popped free, Alan looked into Cade's eyes.

Alan pulled Cade's T-shirt over his head, and pushed his pants down. They both realized at the same time that Cade's shoes were in the way. They laughed as Cade seated himself in the armchair and let Alan finish stripping him off.

When they were both naked, Alan pulled Cade up from the chair, knelt before him, and started nuzzling his crotch.

Cade took Alan's chin in his hands and tipped his head up until their eyes met. "Uh-uh. We've done plenty of that." Cade tugged gently upward on Alan's chin, and steadied him as he stood. Then he leaned in close and whispered, "I want to know what you feel like inside me, Alan."

"You don't have to prove anything to me. I mean, there's no need to rush this. We could even try it the other way around first." Cade arched an eyebrow. "Don't get me wrong, Cade. I want you, but only if you're sure you're ready."

"How will I know till I try?"

Alan stepped back and looked Cade up and down, seeming to take in every inch of him. "Don't move." Alan turned and walked to the bedroom. He returned with lube and a condom. He placed them on the table beside the armchair.

Alan sat down, and Cade stepped before him.

Alan reached up and took hold of Cade's cock, saying with a playful pout, "It's too bad you don't want me to suck you tonight. I've only been doing it for a month, but it's like my tongue already knows every detail of you. Sometimes,

when you're not here, I think about how you feel in my mouth. I imagine slipping the tip of my tongue up this long vein on the side..." he ran his index finger along the vein, "...and licking circles around this crease between your head and your shaft." Alan traced the line as he described it. "Then, I picture flicking my tongue back and forth across this little ridge on the underside."

Cade was startled by how hot Alan's dirty-talk was making him. When Alan said that last bit about flicking the ridge, Cade's cock actually twitched in response to Alan's words alone. Cade didn't want to break the mood, but he couldn't resist the temptation. "Are you trying to say that your tongue knows my dick like the back of its hand!"

Alan's explosion of laughter knocked him against the back of the chair. He held his sides and rocked back and forth. Every time he appeared to be recovering, another wave would hit him... After a full minute, he was able to sit up straight again, and he wiped the tears from his eyes.

"Okay, so, my tongue is best friends with your dick... but, it hasn't even met your backside. What say we introduce them?"

"I've always liked making new friends," Cade said as he turned and bent over, playfully wiggling his ass at Alan.

"Not like that, Cade. Come a little closer and stand up." Cade complied and Alan slowly stroked him from his shoulders, down his sides, caressing his legs all the way to the ankles, then all the way back up, then slowly down again.

Alan fondled Cade's cheeks and then used his thumbs to spread them open. Cade would have given anything to be able to see what was going on back there, but it all felt so good, he closed his eyes instead and concentrated on sensations he'd never felt.

Alan pressed a finger to Cade's opening. Cade gasped. He clenched down and felt his hole beginning to wrap itself around the tip of Alan's finger. He gasped again and relaxed as Alan continued to knead his cheeks with one hand and finger his butt with the other.

Even with his eyes closed, there was no mistaking the difference between a finger and the hot, wet tip of Alan's tongue when it flicked across Cade's opening. Cade felt himself falling forward, but there was nothing he could do to arrest the motion.

Alan wrapped his arms around Cade's waist and held him tight. "I've got you, Cade."

Alan kept a firm hold on Cade's hips until he'd steadied himself.

"Turn around so I can see you." Alan gently guided Cade's hips as he pivoted. He reached over for the lube and squeezed a small drop onto the tip of his middle finger. "Are you sure you want this?"

Cade didn't hesitate. "Sure as sure."

Alan reached between Cade's legs and pressed the slippery fingertip against Cade's hole. Cade moaned as Alan pressed inside. "How is that, Cade?"

"It's good." Cade let his eyes fall closed and licked his lips as his head tipped back. As Alan's finger began to move slowly in and out, he squirmed his ass, loving the feel of the penetration. "Mmm. Very good."

Alan added a second finger, and Cade felt a tiny twinge. He stopped squirming as an unwanted, "urmph," escaped his lips. Alan stopped. Cade opened his eyes and looked down into Alan's.

It was obvious that Alan was worried about hurting him, and Cade wanted nothing more than to convey that Alan was blowing his fucking mind, and he didn't ever want it to end. "Really, really good, Alan... please."

Alan smiled. "Trust me with a little multi-tasking?"

Cade couldn't imagine what might be next, but he nodded. He knew he could trust Alan with whatever he wanted to try. He felt Alan resume the two-fingered pressure on his hole, but just as he thought the twinge was returning, Alan's mouth engulfed the head of Cade's cock. Cade looked down and was dumbstruck by the image of his dick slowly disappearing into Alan's mouth as teasing fingers twisted inside him.

It didn't even seem intrusive when Alan worked a third finger into Cade's butt. He could feel all three digits as they worked around one another, stretching him open until they were in as far as they'd go.

Alan stilled his hand as he slipped his lips up to the very tip of Cade's cock. He took a deep breath. Then, those three fingers pressed deep inside, pulling Cade forward into his mouth and rubbing a spot Cade had heard about but always assumed was overrated. Suddenly, Cade felt like his dick was a mile long, and he could feel each and every glorious inch of it, from the tip, twitching in the tight heat of Alan's throat, all the way down, deep beneath what he'd always considered the base, right down to where Alan's finger rubbed... rubbed against what felt to Cade like the very foundation of his being.

Alan came up for air and then started a gentle rhythm, using his embedded fingers to pull Cade into his mouth and then guide him slowly out. Cade closed his eyes again and gave himself over to a new world of sensation. He began rocking back and forth, matching Alan's motions. It didn't take long before he knew those sensations were about to overtake him. Cade could picture his entire body flying apart as every molecule exploded in a different direction.

He rested one hand on Alan's shoulder and with the other he tapped Alan under the chin. Alan looked up, without releasing Cade's cock from his mouth. "I'm ready, Alan." Cade whispered. "I've got to feel you inside me."

Alan slowly pulled off Cade's cock, trying to swipe the tip with his tongue as it bobbed away. He eased his fingers out of Cade's ass, and Cade felt a strange mixture of emptiness combined with the phantom sensation that something was still there. Alan slid out of the chair and sat on the floor in front of it. "You should ride me the first time. It gives you the control. If it hurts too much, or you decide you don't like it, you just stand up, and it's over."

Alan tore open the condom wrapper and sheathed his dick. He reached up with both hands and guided Cade's palms to the arms of the chair, showing him how to steady himself and control his descent. Then he squirted lube onto his cock and used one hand to spread it up and down.

Cade looked down into Alan's eyes. There was so much he wanted to express... but there just weren't words...

Epilogue

Sunday, May 11, 2014

8:30 p.m.

He's looking up at me. I gaze down into his eyes and any vestige of hesitation I may have felt vanishes in an instant.

I place my feet on either side of his hips and grasp the arms of the chair for support as I squat.

I feel the pressure of him, pressed against my hole. I pause, and relax.

Then I squeeze, pushing against it slightly, and the tip slips inside. I pause again to learn how this feels.

It's hot.

And hard.

And a little strange.

And very intense.

And very right.

I nudge myself down by degrees and feel it getting thicker—the same way it feels when it pushes into my mouth.

I feel it stretching me open.

It burns, but it's a good burn.

I take my time.

Little by little, I work my way down.

I tighten my grip on the arms of the chair as I try to sense all my other muscles and relax them.

It's odd, but the hardness of his cock inside me makes me feel strong.

I slide down farther.

At last, I feel his balls, tight against my crack. It's almost like they're trying to squeeze their way in, along with the rest of him.

I lower my eyes to find him studying me intently.

I wish I could know what he sees.

I wish I could tell him what I see.

A new feeling washes over me! Or, maybe it isn't new. It's like what I felt for Max so long ago. Or even what I thought I felt for Eric... Damn! I actually did feel it for Eric once... before everything got twisted beyond recognition.

Without warning, he clenches his muscles. It makes his cock swell inside me, and sets off a tingling that starts in my ass and runs straight up my spine.

His cock throbs deep within me.

"Alan..."

I want to say it.

Those bottomless black eyes draw me in.

I know he wants to hear it, but our gaze is too intense.

I turn my head aside and bend forward, my chest leaning against his. I rest my chin on his shoulder.

"What is it, Cade?"

His solid hands cradle my back.

We embrace in silence.

Our chests pressed tight together, I feel our heartbeats—his and mine—distinct, but inseparable.

I gaze at his shoulder until I find the courage to murmur, "I know what you wanted to say before... before I panicked."

He nuzzles the side of my neck with his nose. "Don't worry about that now, Cade."

"No, Alan... I need to tell you..."

In my heart, I know the day will come when I'll look him in the eye and say so much more.

"Alan... I think I'm falling for you, too."

FIN?

Author Bio

Jonathan grew up in The South and, while this is his first work of fiction, he has been inventing tales for at least fifty years. He was probably also making stuff up during the two years prior to that but, as this was his pre-verbal period, there's no evidence one way or the other. An armchair linguist, he has taught himself to ask, "Where is the bathroom?" in seven languages. ~~He enjoys gardening,~~ He gardens, and enjoys red wines, cooking, theatre, and, of course, writing. Jonathan reminds himself every day how fortunate he is to have shared the best and worst of the last thirty-three years with the man of his dreams.

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